What is Infant Mental Health?

“Infant Mental Health” refers to an infant’s ability to experience emotions, develop relationships and learn. An infant’s world is usually pretty small. Infants grow up among family, friends and community. They learn about themselves and the world around them through the relationships they have with the people in their lives.

Babies who are made to feel loved and cherished learn that they are lovable. They then grow up feeling good about themselves and develop friendships more easily.

How can I nurture my baby’s mental health?

By helping your baby feel loved and protected you help to nurture your baby’s mental health. You can help by providing daily routines for your baby and acting in a predictable environment. You can do this by providing daily routines for your baby and acting in a predictable environment.

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

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What do we mean by “emotional development?”

In the first few years of life, babies grow and change very quickly. As they grow, their feelings and relationships become more complex. Babies need parents and other important people in their lives to help them manage their feelings.

For example, a baby who is scared, angry, or hurt needs help from an adult to understand, calm down, and be comforted. Parents naturally help their infants to relax by holding them, speaking softly, reassuring them or gently rocking them. When families create safe and loving homes, their children have an easier time learning to manage their feelings.

Adults’ emotional health, level of stress, and life circumstances can affect their relationships with babies. If you are dealing with a great deal of stress or difficulty or know a parent or other adult in such circumstances, it can be extremely helpful to seek help from a mental health professional.

What is Infant Mental Health and why is it important?

The California Early Start Central Directory of Early Intervention Resources lists over 800 state and local resources with complete contact information. Early intervention and related services and resources include the following:

- http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/ECCS/Pages/IST-Homepage.aspx
- http://www.dds.ca.gov/EarlyStart/
- California Department of Developmental Services
- Regional Centers
- Family Resource Centers and Networks
- California Department of Education, Special Education, Child Development, and State Special Schools and Services Divisions
- Special Education Local Plan Areas
- California Department of Social Services and county departments
- California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs and county programs
- State Interagency Coordinating Council on Early Intervention
- Training and Technical Assistance Resources
- Early Head Start
- Community College Personal Preparation Program Training Programs
- Advocacy Organizations

Resources

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What does “mastery” mean?
Babies are like little explorers. They are born with a desire to explore, understand, and “master” their surroundings. Of course, they learn more easily with the help and encouragement of their parents or caregivers.

Your baby probably explores new objects and surroundings every chance he or she gets. When parents encourage their babies to explore, while also making sure they don’t get hurt, babies learn to feel good about learning and enjoy new experiences.

Although all babies go through a stage where they are frightened of strangers and unfamiliar places, babies who learn how to manage feelings from their parents are better able to overcome their fears and enjoy new things as they grow older.

What can I do to support a child’s emotional development?
- Surround the child with nurturing relationships.
- Be happy – smile and laugh.
- Create a trusting and loving environment.
- Provide stable and consistent caregivers at home and in childcare.
- Understand and respond to the child’s cues.
- Spend unhurried time together.
- Comfort and reassure the child when he or she is scared, angry or hurt.
- Develop routines to promote predictability and security.
- Learn developmental stages and have appropriate expectations.
- Model good relationships and healthy ways to manage conflict.
- Consider how whatever you’re doing or going through may affect your child.
- Identify early signs of emotional or mental problems.

Warning Signs
If your infant or toddler shows the following behaviors, you should consult with an infant mental health professional.
- Excessive fearfulness
- Excessive fussiness
- Sleep problems
- Feeding problems
- Failure to thrive
- Aggressive behaviors
- Olfactory behaviors
- Impulsive or hyperactive behaviors
- No response to consequences or overly compliant with requests
- Unusually quiet or uninterested in other people
- Overly active
- Developmental delays
- Extreme sadness
- Excessive clinging or dependent behaviors
- Long and frequent tantrums
- Interference with normal developmental tasks

Healthy babies grow into healthy children.
Infant mental health specialists focus on infant’s and toddler’s relationships with their parents or caregivers because there is good evidence that early intervention can prevent later problems such as delinquency, criminality, school problems including failure and dropping out, teen pregnancy, violence, and other risk factors.

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