



# Secure Beginnings:

What is  
Infant and Early Childhood  
Mental Health?





# What is infant and early childhood mental health?

Does the term “infant and early childhood mental health” make you think of a baby on a couch telling his problems to a psychiatrist? So what is infant mental health?

Infant and early childhood mental health reflects social and emotional capacities and the primary relationships in children birth through age five. Because young children’s social experiences and opportunities to explore the world depend on the love and care they receive, children’s relationships are central to “infant and early childhood mental health.”

It is essential to ensure that first relationships are trusting and caring, as early relationships provide an important foundation for later development.

# Why is infant and early childhood mental health important?

The first years of life create the foundation—Secure Beginnings—for children to have positive relationships, self-confidence, and the ability to meet change and challenges successfully. Healthy social and emotional development is necessary for success in school and in life.

To grow and learn, children need good mental health as much as they need good physical health. Mental health is tied closely to relationships the child has with parents and significant caregivers. Children learn how to effectively express emotions, make friends, and explore the world around them through these relationships.

# What are potential signs that a child or parent may need some help?

Intensity and frequency of the following signs may indicate that a child or family needs assistance. They do not indicate definite mental health concerns and are to be used only as “red flags” or warning signs.

## Infant (birth-12 months)

- Unusually difficult to soothe or console
- Limited interest in things or people
- Consistent strong reactions to touch, sounds, or movement
- Always fearful or on guard
- Reacts strongly for no reason
- Evidence of abuse or neglect

## Toddler:

- Displays very little emotion
- Unable to comfort or calm self
- Limited interest in things or people
- Does not turn to familiar adults for comfort and help
- Has inconsistent sleep patterns

## Preschool child:

- Consistently prefers to not play with others or with toys
- Goes with strangers easily
- Destructive to self or others
- Hurts animals
- Limited use of words to express feelings

## Parent:

- Known mental illness
- Substance abuse
- Limited coping skills
- History of traumatic events
- Frequent moves or lack of friends and support





## What can happen if a child does not have healthy early childhood relationships?

Healthy social and emotional growth promotes a range of positive behavioral skills which develop during early childhood and grow over time. These skills build on one another and have a life-long impact on a person's relationships. Key developmental skills for young children include the following:

- Ability to manage impulses and regulate their own behavior
- Learn to identify and start to understand their own feelings
- Learn to manage strong emotions and express them in a constructive manner
- Learn to recognize emotions and emotional cues in others
- Learn to develop empathy for others
- Ability to establish and sustain close relationships and friendships
- Learn to develop confidence, cooperativeness, and the capacity to communicate

Researchers believe that children with underdeveloped social and emotional skills are at risk for later problems in school, work, and adult relationships.



## If I am concerned about a child or family, what should I do?

- Talk with the parent and get more information about what may be happening
- Encourage the parent to talk with the child's pediatrician
- Recognize cultural differences
- Talk with your supervisor or another professional in a way that is respectful of child and family
- Be alert for child abuse/neglect.

## Where do I go if I want to help?

Contact KAIMH for more information and to find a local early childhood mental health contact person to learn more about your community's efforts and resources.

Consult with health care providers and children's mental health professionals.

Attend trainings on social and emotional development to learn more and implement relationship-based services. Check these web sites for training information:

- [www.kaimh.org](http://www.kaimh.org)
- [www.childcareaware.org](http://www.childcareaware.org)
- [www.kccto.org](http://www.kccto.org)

Check out web sites with developmental and infant and early childhood mental health information:

- [www.kaimh.org](http://www.kaimh.org)
- [www.talaris.org](http://www.talaris.org)
- [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

## Should I wait until the child can talk before I refer for mental health services?

No. Research on brain development shows that the first three years of life are critical. During the first few months of life, pathways multiply in the brain. As the infant develops trust and attachment, the foundation for lifelong success in relationships and school is established. Often mental health treatment for the parents or parent/child joint therapy has a positive, lasting impact.

## How is infant and early childhood mental health nurtured by relationships?

Loving, nurturing relationships enhance emotional development and mental health. When infants and toddlers are treated with kindness and encouragement, they develop a sense of safety and emotional security. A nurturing caring relationship provides a “secure base” from which a child can begin exploring the world, frequently checking back for reassurance. The more children explore and try safe new things, the more they experience and feel good about themselves.

## How does stress affect parenting?

A pregnant woman experiencing chronic stress or depression may carry those feelings even after the baby is born. Studies have shown that chronic emotional and physical stress can increase the release of certain hormones that may result in the baby being born smaller. Ongoing stressors can impact the mother or father’s ability to care for, and interact with, the baby.



# Helpful messages or tools to give parents and caregivers about nurturing children's mental health.

- Surround children and yourself with nurturing relationships.
- Create a trusting environment.
- Provide stable and consistent caregivers at home and in child-care settings.
- Learn about and respond to children's cues.
- Learn about child development to have realistic expectations.
- Spend unhurried time together.
- Comfort and reassure children when they are scared, angry, or hurt.
- Develop routines to promote predictability and security.
- Model good relationships and healthy ways to manage conflict.
- Consider whatever you're doing or going through may affect a child.
- Identify early signs of emotional or mental problems.

For more information, contact Kansas Association for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health at [www.kaimh.org](http://www.kaimh.org) or [info@kaimh.org](mailto:info@kaimh.org).

## Acknowledgements

This information was developed from the Florida State University Center for Prevention & Early Intervention Policy: *What is Infant Mental Health* by Joy Osofsky, PhD. Idaho adaptation written by Carrie Mori, PhD.,OTR/L and Carolyn F. Kiefer, M.S.

Kansas adaptation through KAIMH ([www.kaimh.org](http://www.kaimh.org))





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