

FOCUS

on Early Childhood Mental Health



*Pennsylvania Key
Early Childhood Mental
Health Consultation
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Early Childhood Mental Health Matters

The first *FOCUS on Early Childhood Mental Health* factsheet, published in 2009, briefly answered the question, “What is early childhood mental health?” It defined early childhood mental health as “healthy social and emotional development in young children,” and provided tips for how to promote it. This 75th edition of the factsheet returns to the basics.

What we know:

- Our experiences as very young children are built into our bodies.
- Significant early adversity and stress (from poverty, neglect, abuse, violence, etc.) interfere with the normal development of our stress response systems and affect the brain, heart, and immune system.
- These disruptions can last into adulthood and result in lifelong physical and mental health problems.
- Estimates are that 9-14 percent of children ages 0-5 have an emotional or behavioral problem.
- Knowledge about the impact of early experiences on lifelong mental health should inspire everyone to continue and increase efforts to ensure that young children grow up in nurturing environments surrounded by people who love and care for them.

What we need to do:

- Keep educating parents, caregivers and early care and learning professionals about social and emotional development
- Recognize that from the day they are born, babies are developing a sense of who they are and rely on the adults in their lives to respond to their emotional and physical needs promptly and lovingly
- When young children do experience adversity and stress, help them develop the tools they need to bounce back and thrive
- Provide resources to parents for early intervention when problems arise
- Integrate attention to healthy social and emotional development in all settings serving young children, such as pediatricians’ offices and home visitation programs
- Support parents who have their own mental health issues and/or who are experiencing stress related to such things as poverty and violence
- Support and strengthen programs like Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, Project LAUNCH, and Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (all currently operating on a relatively small scale in Pennsylvania)

Resources

- **Related FOCUS on ECMH factsheets:** “What is early childhood mental health?” (#1); “What parents need to know about social and emotional development” (#16); “Stress, trauma, and early brain development” (#26); “Developing resilience in young children” (#74); http://www.parecovery.org/services_child.shtml#focus
- “The Foundations of Lifelong Health Are Built in Early Childhood,” Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University; http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/reports_and_working_papers/foundations-of-lifelong-health/
- “Babies’ Mental Health Matters” and “How to Prevent Mental Health Matters,” Huffington Post; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-melmed/babies-mental-health-matters_b_7213290.html