

What is
Infant Mental Health
and why is it important?



PROJECT



About Building Connections
for young children and their families

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

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 your baby feel protected by creating a stable and predictable environment. You can do this by providing daily routines for your baby and acting in predictable ways.





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.

If you or someone you know is parenting and dealing with a great deal of stress or difficulties, it can be very helpful to find help from a mental health professional.

What does “mastery” mean?

Babies are 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
- ◆ Defiant behaviors
- ◆ Impulsive and hyperactive behaviors
- ◆ No response to consequences or overly compliant with requests
- ◆ Unusually quiet or uninterested in other people
- ◆ Overly active
- ◆ Withdrawal
- ◆ 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 an infant's or toddler's relationships with 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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www.ProjectABC-LA.org

Project ABC is designed to create change at the beginning of children's lives. Even as infants and toddlers, children need support to optimize their healthy social and emotional development. Our goal at Project ABC is to ensure that families, professionals and community organizations work together to support every child's development through awareness of the central role that relationships play in shaping healthy lives.

Project ABC is a multi-year federally funded project to help Los Angeles County design an integrated early childhood System of Care service network that is based on family needs and includes families as partners in planning and service delivery. For further resources visit:

- ◆ LAcountyhelps.org
- ◆ 211.org
- ◆ First5LA.org
- ◆ Fussybabynetwork.org

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Project ABC is a collaboration of:

- ◆ Children's Institute, Inc. – childrensinstitute.org
- ◆ For The Child – forthechild.org
- ◆ Pacific Asian Counseling Services – pacsla.org
- ◆ TIES for Families
- ◆ Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health – dmh.lacounty.gov
- ◆ Los Angeles County Department of Child and Family Services – dcfs.co.la.ca.us
- ◆ USC School of Social Work – sowkweb.usc.edu