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Infant Mental Health – What is it and why is it Important?

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What is Infant Mental Health?

According to ZERO TO THREE Infant Mental Task Force , “Infant Mental Health (IMH) is the developing capacity of the child from birth to 3 to experience, regulate (manage), and express emotions; form close and secure interpersonal relationships; and explore and master the environment and learn -all in the context of family, community, and cultural expectations for yo

- **Developing capacity** is a reminder of the of growth and change in the first 3 years c
- Infants and toddlers depend heavily on ac **experience, regulate, and express emot**
- Through close, **secure interperso** and other caregivers, infants and

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learning and development is an important health.

- The **contexts of family and community** toddlers learn to share and communicate experiences with significant caregivers and developing sense of themselves as competent individuals is an important aspect of IMH.
- **Culture** influences every aspect of human how IMH is understood, adults' goals and children's development, and the child rearing parents and caregivers."

Why is IMH important?

During infancy, a child's brain is rapidly developing for how the child will relate to others, manage and learn is being laid. Because of this, if mental health issues arise, interventions during this period have a powerful and lasting effect than interventions later in development. Therefore, it is important that parents know their child's mental health status, know what influences it, and recognize warning signs that the child might be struggling.

What factors affect IMH?

Attachment

An infant's relationship with their caregiver has a profound effect on their mental health. These caregivers include biological parents, adoptive parents, foster parents, grandparents,

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be emotionally responsive to them. When there is a variety of factors such as parental stress, depression, lack of knowledge of how to respond, illness, home environment, history of abuse, attachment challenges, and child vulnerability), the child becomes disturbed.

Because of this, a secure, responsive, predictable relationship with a caregiver can lead to overconfidence and the ability to effectively manage stress; and it is important for all other development – physical, motor, cognitive, and emotional. This is in stark contrast to an unhealthy relationship (e.g., caregiver responsiveness, harsh responses and inconsistent approach), which can lead to putting the child at risk for school failure, social difficulties, medical issues, and mental health issues (e.g., depression).

Infant Characteristics

Infants are born with their own personalities and individual differences in physiological responses. Infant responds emotionally to people and objects. According to theorists, Thomas and Chess, who extensively studied temperament in the late 1970s, the 3 main types of temperament follows:

- Easy children usually have positive moods and adapt to new situations. They adapt quite well to change and are somewhat predictable in their sleeping, eating, and activity patterns.

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non-adaptive to change.

- Slow-to-warm-up children may react to new situations in a slow but mild manner. They are low in activity and may withdraw in new situations. These children warm up when approached in a way which respects their individual traits.

When it comes to temperament, the factor that is most important in IMH is how well the child's temperament matches the caregiver's – otherwise known as their "goodness of fit." This is especially important when an infant's temperament is not respected. Therefore, a caregiver's natural temperament may fit quite well for one child while it may not for another. When this occurs, it is important to change the caregiver's approach so that the "goodness of fit" results and the child can reach their full potential.

What are the signs that my infant might be having health difficulties?

Since an infant or very young child cannot tell you if they have a problem, it is important that we keep an eye on them for signs such as:

- Not wanting to be held
- Not being able to be comforted when upset for longer than seems right
- Fussiness (e.g., screaming, whining, crying)
- Eating and sleeping difficulties

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- Not making noises very often, like cooing or babbling
- Not using language as expected for their age
- Losing skills they could once do
- Tantrums
- Aggression (e.g., hitting, biting, pinching)
- Anger, frustration, head-banging
- Separation anxiety or withdrawal from people
- Developmental concerns (e.g., autistic behaviors)

Who should I seek help from if my infant shows warning signs?

If any of these warning signs are present, consult your pediatrician or mental health provider who specializes in child development. Help should be sought out. Some specific programs are available:

Parent-Child Interaction Therapy with Toddlers (PCIT-T) is a research-based early intervention program for 12-24 months old children and their caregivers. It focuses on increasing emotional regulation, building self-esteem in toddlers through teaching and nurturing parenting practices.

Healthy Families New York – A home visiting program that provides parents with knowledgeable and caring workers who offer information and support during pregnancy and early childhood. Services include helping families access community resources, services, educating families on parenting and child development.

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...ance training, and more. Home visitors help young women who are pregnant with their first child. These vulnerable young clients achieve healthier pregnancies, stronger child development, and a path toward economic sufficiency.

The Incredible Years – A series of interlocking programs for parents, children, and teachers based on 20 years of research. The goal is to prevent and reduce behavior problems and promote their social and emotional competence. The programs are used worldwide in health centers, and have been shown to work in low socioeconomic groups.

In addition, the below resources may provide additional guidance:

<https://www.zerotothree.org/espanol/infant-mental-health>

<http://www.nysaimh.org/about-babies/>

Resources used for this blog include the following:

<https://www.healthyfamiliesnewyork.org/>

<https://www.nursefamilypartnership.org/locations>

<https://keltymentalhealth.ca/infant-mental-health/>

<http://www.incredibleyears.com/>

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