



## Secure Beginnings:

### What is Infant, Toddler and Early Childhood Mental Health?

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## What is infant, toddler and early childhood mental health and why is it important?

Infant, toddler, 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, the child and the child's relationships are central to their mental health. It is essential to ensure that first relationships are trusting and caring, as early relationships provide an important foundation for later development.

The first years of life create the foundation, or Secure Beginnings, for a child 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



## How is infant 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 children can begin exploring the world, frequently checking back for reassurance. The more they explore and try new things, the more success they experience. Good relationships help children feel valued. Kind, nurturing relationships also teach children how to treat others. Children watch adults and copy them. Children who feel loved and cherished grow up to be adults who care about others.

## 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 lifelong impact on a person's relationships. Key developmental skills in childhood include the following:

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



Children may respond to the lack of a healthy relationship in a variety of ways.

- Some children seem sad, rejected and lethargic. Because they lack a role model for smiling or happiness, they imitate a “flat affect” or lack of joy.
- Some babies may become depressed or develop eating or sleeping problems.
- Some children try to meet their own needs. They “self-stimulate” or rock back-and-forth trying to nurture themselves. They may be so starved for affection that they seek hugs from any willing adult.
- Some children get angry. They are aggressive and hostile without provocation. They won't allow comforting, even when they are hurt, because past relationships have not been nurturing

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/family to get more information about what might be happening;
- Recognize cultural differences;
- Encourage the family to talk with the child's pediatrician;
- Contact the Child Abuse Hotline if abuse is suspected:  
1-800-342-3720
- Contact The Mid-State Early Childhood Direction Center for the most current listing of Mental Health Providers in Onondaga County.



## Mental Health Screening Tool

Child's Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Today's Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Person Completing: \_\_\_\_\_

With this tool, please remember that it is critical to think about intensity and frequency of behaviors. As you fill out this tool, ask yourself:

- How severe is the behavior?
- How many weeks or months has this behavior been occurring?
- How long does the behavior last (ex: Minutes, hours)?
- How does the behavior compare with other children of the same age?
- Are there events at home or in child care that make the behavior better or worse?

**This tool is a screening tool not meant to diagnose.**

### Infant Screening (Birth-12 months)

- |  |        |           |       |
|--|--------|-----------|-------|
| 1. Is the child unusually difficult to soothe or console?                        | Always | Sometimes | Never |
| 2. Does the child have limited interest in people or toys?                       | Always | Sometimes | Never |
| 3. Does the child have consistent strong reactions to touch, sounds or movement? | Always | Sometimes | Never |
| 4. Is the child generally fearful or on guard?                                   | Always | Sometimes | Never |
| 5. Does the child react strongly for no apparent reason?                         | Always | Sometimes | Never |

### Toddler Screening (12-36 months)

- |   |        |           |       |
|---|--------|-----------|-------|
| 1. Does the child generally display emotion?                | Always | Sometimes | Never |
| 2. Is the child unable to comfort or calm self?             | Always | Sometimes | Never |
| 3. Does the child have limited interest in people or toys?  | Always | Sometimes | Never |
| 4. Does the child turn to familiar adults for comfort/help? | Always | Sometimes | Never |

### Preschool Screening (3-5 years)

- |   |        |           |       |
|---|--------|-----------|-------|
| 1. Does the child prefer to play with other children?         | Always | Sometimes | Never |
| 2. Does the child go with strangers easily?                   | Always | Sometimes | Never |
| 3. Is the child destructive to themselves or others?          | Always | Sometimes | Never |
| 4. Is the child intentionally hurt animals                    | Always | Sometimes | Never |
| 5. Does the child have limited use of words to express needs? | Always | Sometimes | Never |

If the majority of responses are always, consider a referral to an outside organization for a more thorough assessment.