Infant Mental Health

BUILDING A STRONG START FOR LIFE

What is Infant Mental Health?

Infant mental health is the emotional, social, and behavioral wellbeing of a child from birth to age five. It includes building close, secure relationships with adults, expressing a wide range of emotions, and exploring and learning about the child's world.[1]

In the first months of life, as parents learn their baby's cues, their baby is also learning to read their parent's emotions. Even very young babies can sense and experience a whole range of emotions including sadness and fear. This is why it is important for caregivers to manage their own emotions, which then helps children learn to regulate their own physical and emotional states.[1]

Why the First Year Matters Most

The first few years of life are when the most neural connections form in a child's brain. These pathways create a foundation that becomes more complex over time, shaping future learning, behavior, and health. During this period, a child's brain development is influenced more by their external environment. A secure, warm, and responsive relationship with at least one caregiver helps regulate stress and supports healthy development. When caregivers model healthy ways of coping with stress, a child learns to mirror those responses later in life.[1]

Signs of Good Infant Mental Health[2]

- Expressing a wide range of emotions
- Being engaged in play
- Calming down when needs are met such as by feeding or napping
- Eating regularly
- Exploring and being curious with caregivers

Laying the Groundwork for Future Success

Many new caregivers experience normal challenges with their infants, but it is important to seek support for strategies to reduce stress. **This means getting mental health support for yourself if you need it.** A solid social and emotional base is the launching pad for all other development. This includes development of your child's brain, body, and movement, which lay the foundation for success in school and life.[2]

How to Support Infant Mental Health

- Spend time with your baby, hold them, make eye contact, and smile to build your bond
- Build routines
- Make sure your home is safe
- Talk to your baby as much as you can about what you are doing and use a warm and gentle tone
- Try to keep conflict with your partner away from your child

How to Support Toddler Mental Health

- Create one-on-one time with your child that is technology-free
  - Start with five minutes which can be during daily activities such as walking to the park or cuddling after bath time
- Move down to your child's level when they want to show you something
- Say "I love you" often and show it with hugs, smiles, and eye contact
- Talk back to them when they try to communicate—for example, if they point to food, say "Are you hungry?"
- Communicate with your child's primary care provider (PCP) to stay updated on appropriate behaviors and needs as your child grows

Additional Resources For Support

The Power of Connection: Building Bright Futures is an online exhibit for families and community members to explore the complex emotional worlds of their babies and young children. Visit the online exhibit HERE.

The Youth Wellness Hub is a free, online tool if you are looking for mental and behavioral health resources for your child. Visit the Youth Wellness Hub HERE.

You can contact the Well Badger Resource Center for help in getting connected to parenting, mental health, or other related resources. You can also search our Online Directory for resources HERE.

TO CONTACT US AT WELL BADGER:

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1- Clinton, J., Feller, A. F., & Williams, R. C. (2016). The importance of infant mental health. Paediatrics & child health, 21(5), 239–241. https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/21.5.239
2- Stygar, K. (2021, April 20). Infants have mental health needs, too. Mayo Clinic Health System. https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/infants-have-mental-health-needs-too