

Infant Mental Health: Developing Life-Long Self-Regulation Skills in the First 45 months

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Why are healthy relationships so important?



To grow and learn, children need good mental health as much as they need good physical health.

Mental health is tied to relationships the child has with parents and significant caregivers.

When children are mentally healthy they:

- ▶ Manage & express a full range of emotions
 - Attunement & Self-Regulation
- ▶ Develop close, satisfying relationships with others
 - Attachment
- ▶ Actively explore environments and learn
 - Foundation for attending & motivating ourselves.

Manage & Express a range of emotions:

- ▶ Attunement
 - When one person is able to consciously focus his or her attention on the internal world of another.
 - Non-verbal cues
 - Present in the moment
 - Add meaning to communication
- ▶ Self-Regulation
 - DNA
 - Describe – noticing
 - Name – “You seem _____”
 - Acknowledge – the most heart-felt desires



Develop a close relationship with caregivers:



- ▶ Attachment:
 - The secure base we return to when life seems to be unraveling in front of us.

Think:
Who is the person you seek out during stress?
Who is the secure base offering safety?
What do they provide?

Actively explore environment & learn:

- ▶ Social Play:
 - The capacity to generate positive emotional states in our core relationships is key to healthy development and lifelong physical and mental health.
 - Positive, joyful social play between child and adult is key to healthy emotional development.



Self-esteem & success:

When children feel valued and understood, they are more likely to explore and learn.

Individual needs:

- ▶ Provide an emotionally safe environment.
- ▶ Narrate the infant or toddler's exploration.
- ▶ Provide an abundance of learning tools and opportunities.
- ▶ Provide a safe place to recover from frustration or other over-whelming feelings.

Mental Health vs. Mental Illness

- ▶ Mental health affects relationships, self-esteem, ability to meet and/or recover from challenges, and express feelings.
- ▶ Mental illness affects ability to regulate behavior, feelings, emotions, and/or relate to others

Without healthy early relationships a child...

- ▶ could struggle to regulate behavior.
- ▶ may not understand his own feelings.
- ▶ may not express his feelings appropriately.
- ▶ could struggle with learning.
- ▶ may be at risk for problems with future relationships.

Why is early identification & support so important?

Children who experience trauma and other chronic stressors are at an increased likelihood of experiencing:

- Diabetes
- Behavioral challenges
- Developmental delays
- Heart disease
- Depression in adulthood
- Other mental health concerns

Source: Watch Us Grow! Mary Mackrain, April 27, 2012

Supporting Home Environments

- Supporting families and other caregivers to promote development within natural routines and environments.
- Providing families and other caregivers with information, support, and new skills.
- Maintaining & supporting the parent-child relationship.
- Promote timely support.

How can you support parents?

- ▶ Talk with the parent and get more information about what may be happening.
- ▶ Encourage the parent to talk with the child's pediatrician or an Infant/Toddler Mental Health Specialist.
- ▶ Recognize cultural differences.
- ▶ Encourage parents to be the expert about their child.