



Mental Health in Infancy and Early Childhood

Public Policy Brief Summary

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The preschool years are vital in laying the foundation for emotional development and for future social and cognitive development. Paying attention to mental health needs in these formative and dynamic years is critically important, and new research sheds light on how to do that.

Mental health, like physical health, is an essential part of who we are. Yet the pervasive stigma about mental health problems continues to contribute to the lack of prevention, early identification and adequate services for all children, especially the very young.

Young children who display severe behavioral and emotional problems have a 50% greater chance of continuing to struggle with mental health problems into adolescence and even adulthood.

Assets or protective factors for the very young include: good prenatal care, a healthy birth, a secure attachment to a primary caregiver, high quality care and education, and nurturing, love and freedom from violence.

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For infants, toddlers and preschoolers, the influences of their parents, extended family, child care staff and others with whom they have regular contact profoundly impact their emotional, cognitive and social development.

Policy Recommendations From Research

- β Public policies, programs and family interventions should focus on the strengths of the child and family and be driven by the family to the greatest degree possible.
- β Parents need a variety of opportunities to learn about the growth and development of children. Schools, community organizations and businesses can partner in providing educational opportunities and supports for all parents.
- β Easily accessible screenings and assessments in childcare and health care settings, along with appropriate community-based services to respond to identified needs, help foster good mental health and well-being in children.
- β Research shows that prevention and early intervention make a difference in achieving and maintaining good mental health.