



Infant Mental Health: What is it? Why is it Important?

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Definition of infant mental health What is it?

- *The developing capacity of the child, birth to 3 years to experience, regulate, and express emotions
- *The ability to form close and secure relationships
- *The ability to explore the environment and learn

Infant Mental Health Task Force, Zero to Three



Definition (cont')

- *All occurs within the context of family, community, & cultural expectations for young children
- *Focus is on healthy social and emotional development rather than psychopathology

– Infant Mental Health Task Force, Zero to Three



Assumptions

- *A baby functions in a relationship
- *We must understand both the baby and the relationship to optimize social and emotional functioning



What do we mean by “developing capacity”

- *Rapid growth and change occurs in the first years of life
- *The differentiation & complexity of a young child’s emotional and social development increases markedly over time



What do we mean by emotional development?

- *Infants depend upon adults, initially, to regulate their interactions, attention, and behavior
- *With a “good enough” environment, gradually, the young child begins to learn how to regulate their emotions through self-monitoring that increases over time



How is infant mental health nurtured by relationships?

- * Infants learn what people expect of them and what they can expect of others
- * Nurturing, protective, stable, and consistent relationships are essential
- * The adults' emotional well being and life circumstances profoundly affect the quality of infant/caregiver relationships



What is meant by interaction?

- * Infants and young children share and communicate feelings and experiences with caregivers and other children, often with limited language in the first two years
- * Through interaction with others, infants and young children develop a sense of competence to engage in relationships and to act in the world



What is meant by mastery motivation?

- * Mastery motivation is the inborn drive to explore and master one's own environment
- * Mastery is facilitated by active participation in learning and development
- * Mastery is facilitated by the ability to adapt to and cope with the environment



Cultural influences on infant mental health are important

- * Refers to how infant mental health is understood
- * Reflects parents' and other adults' goals and expectations for young child's development
- * Reflects childrearing practices used to promote, protect, and restore infants' and young children's mental health



Other components of infant mental health

- * It is a relational construct
- * Usually IMH is understood theoretically as developmental using psychodynamic and family systems perspectives
- * Awareness of internal working models of relationships and sensitivity to attachment issues is crucial



What is important for training in infant mental health?

- * Training is usually designed for advanced practitioners in infant mental health fields – licensed or licensable as mental health clinicians
- * Training is designed for professionals who teach and consult to infant programs (such as childcare/early intervention) and for those who conduct direct intervention/clinical services



What is done after training?

- * Trainees are expected to work in academic and training settings, to teach, to supervise, to consult, and pursue clinical research and/or practice
- * Highly trained infant mental health specialists are needed to provide services to programs that serve infants, toddlers and their families



Critical risk factors for poor outcomes and early interventions

- * Witnessing violence
- * Abuse and/or neglect
- * Caregivers with mental illness
- * Substance Abuse
- * Lack of Prenatal Care



More Critical Risk Factors

- * Low socio-economic status-poverty
- * Teenage parents
- * Marital discord
- * Child welfare involvement
- * Parent criminology



Setting for Interventions

- * Child welfare system
- * Foster Care
- * Child Care/Infant Care Centers
- * Pediatric Settings
- * Range of Special Needs



New Trends

- * Inclusion in natural settings
 - Training and intervention that is community and center-based such as child care centers, early intervention program, first responders (police, fire fighters, emergency medical personnel), juvenile court personnel (especially dependency and domestic violence courts)



New Trends (cont.)

- * Use of Assessment Data for Informing Interventions rather than for Collecting Normative Information about Children
- * Engaging parents more fully in the intervention process
- * Empowering parents and jointly planning with them programs that will be created for their children
- * Training practitioners to work with infants, toddlers, and families
- * Overlap of training, intervention, and treatment models and approaches



Public Policy Issues

- *There is an urgent need to protect children, particularly those at high risk
- *How to support infant mental health programs
- *The importance of prevention – how to communicate that message effectively



Little policy is designed to nurture the relationship

- *Family leave
- *Family preservation
- *Child protection
- *Safety Bills
- *Early Intervention Services
- *Quality Child Care involving parents



“It’s a little bit like having God on your side.” –Selma Fraiberg

