Infant Mental Health

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• As many as 10 percent of our nation’s population of children ages 0-5 have “clinically significant” social-emotional challenges.

• As many as 2.5 million preschool children meet the criteria for a mental health diagnosis.

• Behavioral and emotional problems often manifest in early care and education settings.

Extent of Mental Health Needs

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• Between 80 and 97 percent of children ages 3 to 5 with identified behavioral health needs do not receive services.
• Children from rural areas are less likely to receive services for mental health issues. Rural families spend more time coordinating care for their children.

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**Extent of Mental Health Needs**

• Parents of children with social, emotional and behavioral problems are less likely to discuss these problems with a health care professional than parents of children with other developmental problems (20% vs. 80%).
  – When these parents did report problems to their health care providers, they were still less likely to access needed services than parents of children with other developmental problems (38% vs. 91%).
• 38% of children in foster care are younger than age 6. Children, ages two to five years old, in child welfare (including those in foster care) have a greater proportion of social, emotional, and behavioral problems than children in the general population, and within child welfare, compared to older children, young children are less likely to receive mental health services.

• 1/3 of children ages 2 to 5 in child welfare need mental health services and related interventions.

What Students in ECE Need to Know about Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health

✓ What is Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health?
✓ What are signs of Mental Health problems?
✓ What can be done in the classroom to support healthy social and emotional development?
✓ What can be done in the classroom to prevent and address challenging behavior?
✓ How can we work with families?
✓ When and where to make referrals and get support?

What is Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health?

• Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health encompasses all aspects of social and emotional development and the behavior that it affects.
• We often examine this within two contexts: the parent-child interaction and the classroom.
Both psychodynamic (attachment) and cognitive-behavioral approaches are used to promote positive development and intervene when difficulties arise. Other approaches are also used but these are the most common.

We must also recognize that genetics plays an important role in mental health problems. However, environment can buffer or exacerbate some of these genetic vulnerabilities.

Positive stress is needed to keep us alert and motivated to grow and change. Increased physiological and hormonal responses.

Tolerable stress includes serious stressors that are buffered by nurturing, positive relationships.

Toxic stress includes chronic, prolonged or other serious trauma that occurs without protective relationships. Results in prolonged activation of stress response systems. This leads to change in brain architecture and function.

ACEs include a variety of experiences like:
- Parental depression
- Poverty
- Parental substance abuse
- Child maltreatment
- Domestic violence

The more ACEs a child has, the poorer the outcomes. A significant increase when a child moves from 0 to 1 and then another when they move from 3 to 4 or more.
Risk Factors: Child Characteristics

- Temperament
- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FADS)
- Prematurity
- Low Birth Weight
- Multiples: often premature and low birth weight

These risks can increase stress in the parent-child relationship resulting in less sensitive and responsive caregiving interactions.

What are Signs of Mental Health Problems?

- Young children can show signs of a variety of mental health problems. The most common are ADHD, ODD and CD, anxiety, and depressive disorders. In addition some children are diagnosed with bipolar, eating disorders and ASDs.
- Infants can show signs of these problems but they are most commonly reported after the age of 2.

What are Signs of Mental Health Problems?

- Early childhood teachers need to pay attention to potential symptoms including:
  - Consistent problems or changes in sleeping or eating routines (outside typical early childhood variations).
  - Depressed mood, sadness, excessive worry, fear, anger, lashing out behavior.
As faculty, we need to emphasize the importance to social and emotional development to the child’s life and academic achievement. Students need to understand the relationships between brain development and emotional experiences.

Specifically, we need to emphasize the relationships between early experiences and children's self-regulation skills and mental models, and how these relationships impact the child’s ability to learn and their behavior in the classroom.

Early childhood teachers need to understand that foundational classroom experiences are relationship-based. Teacher-child relationships that are secure and nurturing are critical. Positive peer relationships are also increasingly important as children become toddlers and preschoolers.

They also need to understand how predictable and consistent caregiving routines provide security for children’s emotional health.
Building Blocks for a Health Future

- [http://www.bblocks.samhsa.gov/educators/lesson_plans/default.aspx](http://www.bblocks.samhsa.gov/educators/lesson_plans/default.aspx). Sponsored by US Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration. This link goes to the section for lesson plans for educators. There is other great information at other sections of the overall website.

What Can Be Done in the Classroom to Support Healthy Social and Emotional Development?

- Teachers need a variety of resources and information on communicating with family members and why this is so important.
- They need to know how to effectively communicate with diverse families about difficult topics.
- They also need to know multiple vehicles for communication and how to individualize communication strategies for families.

What Can Be Done in the Classroom to Prevent and Address Challenging Behavior?

- With increasing importance, effectively addressing behavior problems in early childhood classrooms is essential and most teacher report that they do not feel confident in this area.
- A tiered system approach can provide the structure for sharing this information. The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) has some wonderful resources for us to use in our classrooms.
Supporting teachers to engage in self-reflection is important for addressing challenges and for improving responses to children. Teachers need to systematically engage in self-reflection and be provided with reflective supervision in their coursework. Any practicum experiences should contain reflection on relationships with children beyond “academic” activities. They should include reflection on social and emotional development and relationship skills.

Many ECE teachers do not feel comfortable addressing issues with families, especially families with multiple risks. Training students how to approach families about difficult topics is essential. As mentioned earlier, communication techniques and guidance is important. Working in teams with co-workers, supervisors and other mental health professionals can support teachers in their efforts to partner with families. Using case-studies in classes around mental health issues.

Resources for Partnering with Parents

- NAEYC has several on-line and print resources. One example is:
- ISU Extension offers a course on Partnering with Parents. This course has 11 modules designed to strengthen core competencies of parenting educators. This course may be helpful to students but also to ECE faculty if they have not had training on working with parents.

When and Where to Make Referrals and Get Support?

- When teachers feel overwhelmed or incapable of helping a child, they need to look for support and understand that there is much they can do to promote the child’s development despite family stressors.
- Teachers need to understand the “red flags” that indicate a child may need extra support for mental health.

IMH Red Flags Handout

- Although this was created for home visitors, it applies to teachers as well.
Where Can We Go for Help?

• We must promote a culture of support around Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health. We need to cross boarders between Dept. of Ed and Dept. of Health. Early Childhood Iowa.
• Iowa Association for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health – Launched June 2013. promotementalhealthiowa.org
• Mental Health Consultants
• Home Visiting Programs

Where Can We Go for Help?

• Early Access
• Iowa Project Launch (funded through SAMHSA)
• CSEFEL
• Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children (TACSEI)
• American Academy of Pediatrics
• Mental Health Clinicians

The Referral Process - What Teachers Need to Know

• Referral and follow-up by the teacher
• Behind the scenes
  – Agency goals
  – Agency process
• Confidentiality