

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS OF INFANTS AND TODDLERS

# EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH

Infant mental health is an important aspect of a baby's ability to learn, grow and explore the world. It is closely linked to the relationship babies have with their parents or caregivers. Most children nurtured in the warmth and safety of their parents' arms will grow and thrive. Within the context of their family, culture and community they will explore and learn, form secure relationships, and experience and regulate their emotions.

During the first few years of life the brain undergoes extraordinary changes. Millions of synapses in the brain begin reaching out and connecting to each other. Connections made during the sensitive periods directly influence specific learning; an infant's repeated exposure to language helps his brain build the neural connections needed to learn words. Sensitive care giving and responsive, loving parenting are the foundation for healthy social emotional development and the scaffolding for language and intellectual development.

Children with disabilities are more likely than other children to develop social, emotional, and behavior difficulties. Perhaps even more than other children, they need interactions with caregivers to shape their ability to learn; give and accept love; feel confident and secure; and demonstrate both empathy and curiosity, the attributes most closely associated with success in school. Without

close, responsive relationships children are at extreme risk for further developmental delays.

Developmental interventions and family supports can contribute greatly to increasing capacities in vulnerable children and lessening the risk of later maladaptive behavior.

## What Are Signs of Infant Mental Health Issues?

Depending on their intensity and frequency, the following signs may indicate the need for assessment. EI/ILP staff can help family members decide if signs warrant concern.

### Infant (birth to 12 months)

- Unusually difficult to soothe or console
- Limited interest in objects, exploring the environment or interacting with people
- Consistent strong reactions to touch, sounds, or movement
- Always fearful or on guard
- Evidence of abuse or neglect
- Sleep disturbance, prolonged screaming or crying at night, nightmares

### Toddler

- Displays very little emotion, sad, withdrawn, somber
- Difficulty self-regulating emotions, prolonged tantrums



This parent guide is based on the *Service Delivery Guidelines for Alaska: Early Childhood Mental Health*. The complete guidelines are available online at [earlyintervention.alaska.gov](http://earlyintervention.alaska.gov)

- Hyper-vigilant, anxious, fearful
- Limited interest in interacting with people, difficult to engage
- Does not turn to familiar adults for comfort, help, or shared pleasure
- Has inconsistent sleep patterns

## Mental Health Assessment

Developmental evaluations address the multiple factors that affect a child's social-emotional development. See the *Service Delivery Guidelines for Alaska: Early Childhood Mental Health* for more about assessment and eligibility for early intervention services.

## How Can EI/ILP Help?

Children are best served when their families can meet their emotional needs, and EI/ILP can help families struggling with economic, physical and mental health issues. EI/ILP offers support, assistance, and advice to families on how to best meet their child's unique needs, including access to a wide variety of information and resources.

EI/ILP supports a team approach for providing evidence-based, family centered services that take into account the child's and families unique strengths and needs. By providing early intervention services within the child's natural environment and continuing to listen to the family throughout the process, the intervention techniques can be designed and modified according to the child's and family's needs.

## What Does Early Intervention for Mental Health Issues Look Like?

The results of a social-emotional assessment will suggest the specific areas of intervention and support needed by a particular child and family. The following are some examples of strategies for designing an effective system of services and supports to target specific goals:

- Enhance the emotional and behavioral well-being of infants and toddlers, particularly those whose emotional development is compromised by poverty or other risk factors
- Help parents be more effective nurturers
- Expand the competencies of non-familial caregivers to prevent and address problems
- Ensure more seriously troubled young children get appropriate help

For the very small percentage of young children with diagnosable mental health conditions, the goal is to design a program to alleviate the symptoms and support the return to healthy development and behavior. In addition, the intervention team will develop strategies to improve the quality of family life and child development.

These services should be provided by a qualified mental health provider or certified Infant Parent Mental Health (IPMH) specialist trained to work with young children under age three.

## For More Information

**Alaska Early Intervention/Infant Learning Program**..... [earlyintervention.alaska.gov](http://earlyintervention.alaska.gov)  
(877) HSS-FMLY. (907) 269-8442. TT Relay (800) 770-TYPE

**Fussy Baby Network**.....[www.erikson.edu/fbn.aspx](http://www.erikson.edu/fbn.aspx)  
Parent Warm Line (888) 431-BABY(2229)

**Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children (TACSEI)**..... [www.challengingbehavior.org/communities/families.htm](http://www.challengingbehavior.org/communities/families.htm)

**Zero to Three**..... [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)