

Practice Note

Infant Mental Health

What is Infant Mental Health?

Infant mental health is the social, emotional and cognitive well being of infants and young children. This includes a young child's capacity to:

- experience emotions
- regulate emotions
- express emotions
- form close and secure relationships
- explore their environment
- learn

Why is Infant Mental Health Important?

The mental health experienced by an infant or toddler has the potential to impact short and long term developmental outcomes for a child. It is during these years that babies learn some aspects of their mental health such as the ability to regulate emotions, thoughts, behaviour, communications and relationships. Early adversity is a threat to an infant's mental and physical health especially when there is an absence of protective factors to buffer such adversity and stress. Relationships are what infants and toddlers depend on to buffer or protect themselves from the stress and support positive growth and development. Experiences gained through relationships during the first three years shape the architecture of the brain and create the foundation for short and long term health outcomes.

What Do Infants Need to Support Optimal/Positive Mental Health Development?

During the early years, mental health development is profoundly influenced by:

1. A secure attachment to a responsive caregiver
2. Relationships where the caregiver's response is based on child's developmental needs

What is the Relationship between Infant Mental Health and Brain Development?

In the early years of life there are 700 connections being made between brain cells every second. By 18 months of age, most of the brain is hard wired. The profound effect of this wiring for a young child results in:

- their understanding of who they can rely on in their world to be their champion
- their sense of belonging and being loved
- their ability to begin to regulate some emotions

Between the ages of 0 and 18 months care-givers must provide experiences that nurture and strengthen the security of attachment to avoid imbalance of the brain architecture which may lead to anxiety, fear, behavioural dysregulation, conduct disorders or learning problems (etc.). Due to the plasticity of the brain, these less desirable connections *may* subsequently be altered. However, it takes a considerable amount of time and corrective effort to do this and the outcome is not always favourable. This is because beyond 18 months of age, synaptic pruning and elimination begins and the brain connections that are being used, keep on getting stronger.

Can we Screen for Mental Health in the Early Years?

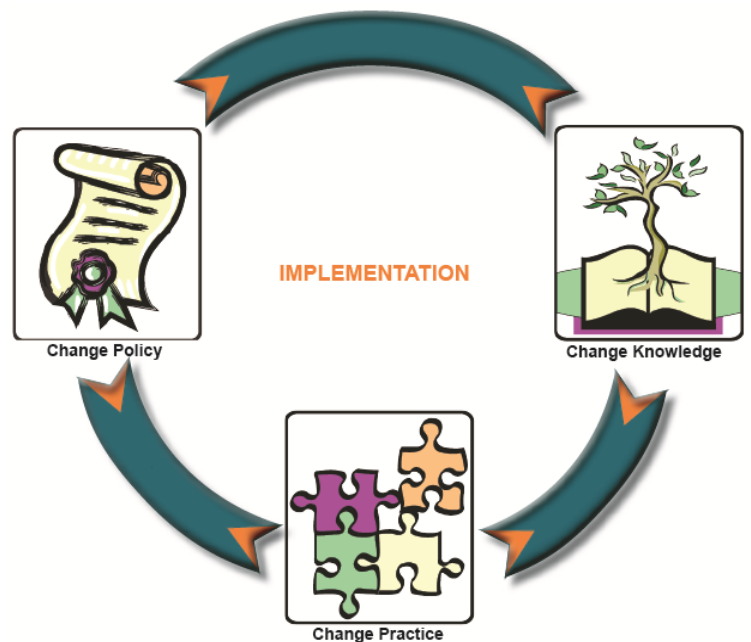
Yes. Screening for a child's development including mental health should include multiple sources of data. Infant Mental Health Promotion (IMHP) is available to train those within child welfare to use the following sources:

- Detailed observations of the child's behavior and development
- Use of a validated screening tool such as The Ages and Stages Questionnaire 3 and the Ages and Stages Questionnaire Social Emotional. Both are reliable screens and help the practitioner know when a child's development is vulnerable or delayed.
- Whatever tool is selected, it is strongly recommended that it includes a strong component, or a separate questionnaire to look at social emotional development.
- Parent interviews
- Other Caregiver/Teacher/Professional interviews or screens if applicable

When mental health is a concern, are there things that we can do?

To support the mental health of young children, a plan of action needs to be implemented which would enhance the knowledge in this field and change the associated policies and practices. System wide change is needed. But as we work through that process there are actions each of us can undertake:

1. Start using a developmental screening tool on all infants your agency serves
2. Create plans that will give parents some suggestions for managing the challenges their child may be facing as they wait for more intensive services
3. Build networks with community agencies and facilitate access for parents when needed
4. Provide training on infant mental health to staff
5. Adopt the Best Practice Guidelines developed by Infant Mental Health Promotion (they are free and online at www.IMHPromotion.ca in the Resources section)
6. Be an advocate with services and policy makers
7. Start collecting data about the infants and toddlers your agency serves



OACAS and IMHP at The Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids) will be working collaboratively to create an implementation plan that promotes training and understanding of infant mental health.

For more information on infant mental health please visit www.IMHPromotion.ca.