

# Promoting the Healthy Social and Emotional Development of Our Youngest Children

## The Minnesota Thrive Initiative



What happens in the early years affects the course of development across one's life span.

### FAST FACTS

- *Infants can experience real depression as early as four months of age.*
- *Maternal depression, anxiety disorders and other forms of chronic depression affect approximately 10% of mothers with young children.*
- *An Illinois survey revealed that 62% of infant and toddler programs lacked adequate mental health services.*
- *This same study also found that 42% of child care programs asked families to withdraw their infants and toddlers because of social-emotional problems.*
- *Over 39,000 infants enter foster care each year, nearly 80% are prenatally exposed to substance abuse, 40% are born prematurely and/or low birth weight.*

### What is Early Childhood Mental Health?

**Early childhood mental health is synonymous with healthy social and emotional development.**

It is the capacity of the child from birth to age five to experience, regulate and express emotions; form close and secure interpersonal relationships; and explore the environment and learn.

#### It's about relationships

- Promoting and supporting nurturing relationship for all infants and small children.
- Having the first relationship be a solid base for the next one and all the ones in the future.
- Learning to trust that physical and emotional needs will be met.
- Being able to use those trusting relationships to become healthy, productive adults.

### Why Is It So Important?

New research on the developing brain suggests the importance of early experience not just for cognitive development, but for emotional development as well. During this period, brain development occurs at a rapid pace and is shaped by infants' experiences and early relationships.

"Emotional growth, patterns of attachment and increasing competency in the ability to form relationships, and the emergence of self-confidence are as crucial to overall

development as are physical growth, cognitive or motor skills. The physical, mental and emotional health of the very young child provides the foundation for further development" [Jane Knitzer, National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia School of Public Health, 1998].

**Because infants are so dependent on their parents or primary caregivers, whatever affects the adult has an effect on the child.**

**MINNESOTA  
THRIVE  
INITIATIVE**

*Promoting the Healthy Social and Emotional  
Development of Our Youngest Children*

MINNESOTA INITIATIVE FOUNDATIONS



School readiness depends upon the characteristics that enable children to learn: curiosity, confidence, the capacity to set a goal and work toward its accomplishment, and the ability to communicate and get along with others.

## Why Should We Pay Attention?

In Minnesota and across the U.S., there is a rising number of young children who have mental health issues. Their needs are becoming apparent through challenging behaviors in school and child care situations, and their families are often finding that educational and human services systems are inadequately prepared to provide necessary supports and services.

The goal of ensuring that all children are “ready for school” has become a national priority. As a result, programs that support children’s school readiness are becoming more and more important to policy makers and parents alike. It is becoming very clear that efforts to improve school success cannot begin at kindergarten, nor focus exclusively on academics.

Healthy social-emotional development is strongly linked to success in elementary school. It is just as important as literacy, language and number skills in helping young children be ready for school. A child who cannot calm himself or be calmed enough to tune into teaching will not benefit from early educational experiences. The emotional, social and behavioral competence of young children is a strong predictor of academic performance in elementary school.

## What are Early Childhood Mental Health Services?

Since the very young child’s development occurs within the context of their family and other primary relationships, mental health services are provided within the context of these relationships. Mental health services are provided in a collaborative manner with the parents, establishing a trusting relationship by listening and learning from each other as they all seek to provide what is best for the child (Minnesota Infant Mental Health Services Feasibility Study, 1998). The goal of early childhood mental health services is to strengthen the relationships between the parent and child. A mental health service provider works to draw the child and parent together by being a support to the parent and providing a voice for the child.

Early childhood mental health services are multidimensional and include providing emotional support for the parent and child; access to concrete resources such as food, clothing, transportation and housing; and developmental guidance in order to allow the parent to understand their child’s needs and development.

### Early Childhood Mental Health Continuum of Care

#### Promotion/prevention

Information and services available to families with young children with or without mental health concerns.

#### Early intervention services

Services for families with young children who present behavioral concerns but do not qualify for diagnosis.

#### Interventions

Services for families with young children who have a mental health diagnosis but continue to function in the community.

#### Intensive Interventions

Services for families and their young children with severe mental health issues who qualify for mental health diagnosis and who do not function well in the community.