


What is
Infant Mental Health



and
Why is it Important?

Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center

New Orleans



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What is “ infant mental health”?

Infant mental health refers to an infant’s ability to experience emotions, develop relationships and learn. An infant’s world is usually pretty small. Infants grow up among family, friends and community. They learn about themselves and the world around them through the relationships they have with the people in their lives. Babies who are made to feel loved and cherished learn that they are lovable. They then grow up feeling good about themselves and develop friendships more easily.



How can I nurture my baby's mental health?

By helping your baby feel loved and protected, you help to nurture your baby's mental health. You can help your baby feel protected by creating a stable and predictable environment. You can do this by providing daily routines for your baby and acting in predictable ways.



What do we mean by “emotional development”?

In the first few years of life, babies grow and change very quickly. As they grow, their feelings and relationships become more complex. Babies need parents and other important people in their lives to help them manage their feelings. For example, a baby who is scared, angry, or hurt needs help from an adult to understand, calm down, and be comforted. Parents naturally help their infants to relax by holding them, speaking softly, reassuring them, or gently rocking them. When families create safe and loving homes, their children have an easier time learning to manage their feelings.

Adults’ emotional health, level of stress, and life circumstances can effect their relationships with babies. If you are dealing with a great deal of stress or difficulty or know a parent or other adult in such circumstances, it can be extremely helpful to seek help from a mental health professional.



What does “mastery” mean?

Babies are like little explorers. They are born with a desire to explore, understand, and “master” their surroundings. Of course, they learn more easily with the help and encouragement of their parents or caregivers. Your baby probably explores new objects and surroundings every chance he or she gets. When parents encourage their babies to explore, while also making sure they don’t get hurt, babies learn to feel good about learning and enjoy new experiences.

Although all babies go through a stage where they are frightened of strangers and unfamiliar places, babies who learn how to manage feelings from their parents, are better able to overcome their fears and enjoy new things as they grow older.



Warning Signs



If your infant or toddler shows the following behaviors or symptoms, you should consult with a mental health professional:

excessive fearfulness

excessive fussiness

sleep problems

feeding problems

failure to thrive

aggressive behaviors

defiant behaviors

impulsive and hyperactive behaviors

withdrawal

extreme sadness

excessive clinging or dependent behaviors

extreme tantrums

language delays

interference with normal

developmental tasks

Healthy babies grow into healthy children

Infant mental health specialists focus on infant and toddler's relationships with their parents or caregivers because there is good evidence that early intervention can prevent later problems such as delinquency, criminality, school problems including failure and drop-outs, premature pregnancy, violence, and other risk factors.



