



Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health: Feeding Challenges

Infant and Childhood Early Mental Health Ages 0-5

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) is the developing capacity of the child in early years to:

- Form close emotional relationships with caregivers.
- Experience, express, manage all ranges of emotions.
- Explore the environment and learn.

All of this within the context of their family, community and culture.



Buffering role of relationships

- Stress/toxic level: child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity without adequate adult support
- Brain development in the context of relationships
- Buffering role of early relationships

Feeding Challenges Within the Mental Health Diagnostic System

Infant/child risk factors:

- Prenatal: Exposure to substances, prenatal stress, malnutrition
- Children with medical complexities
- Children with neurodevelopmental differences
- Children with sensory difficulties

Parent/family risk factors:

- Parent mental and physical health
- Early relationships disruption between parent and child
- Family stress
- Socioeconomic barriers

Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health and Developmental (DC: 0 to 5) - recommended to use in the State of Minnesota.

- The Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health and Developmental Disorders of Infancy and Early Childhood (DC: 0 to 5)
- DC: 0 to 5 emphasizes the role of caregiver-child relationships in mental health and supports early diagnosis and intervention

Early Identification of Children is Critical: Who Will Benefit from the IECMH Support

Things to consider sharing IECMH resources with parents

- Consider risk factors
- Parent history including:
 - Parental mental and physical health
 - Little to no community support
 - Economic barriers
- Early stressors for child including:
 - Medical complexity, history of hospitalization and painful procedures
 - Transition in care, loss of a parent or foster care placement
 - Neglect, physical and sexual abuse
 - Exposure to violence

Helpful questions to identify if parents need additional support

- How do you feel about being a parent? And your relationship with your child?
- Do you have resources for support at this time?
- How do you as the parent view your child's challenges? How concerned are you about your child's mood, behavior, and/or development?



If combination or risk factors and presenting problems are present, the parent and/or child need additional support.

IECMH Resources and Information for Parents

Helpful information to share with parents at time of referral about early mental health interventions focus and goals

Infant (0 to 12 months old)

- Focusing on co-regulation and attachment for infants (0-12 months).
- Infant interventions are sensory-based, focusing on soothing and "serve-and-return" for example.

Toddler (1 to 3 years old)

- Building on attachment co-regulation and adding autonomy and emotional labeling for toddlers (1-3 years).
- Toddler interventions use language, play, and boundary-setting to help manage more complex emotions, such as fear and blame.

Additional Resources



Example of Integration WIC and IECMH

Warm Connections is an integrated behavioral health program within WIC, grounded in infant and early childhood mental health. The program was designed to support families with limited access to traditional mental health services.

- Provides preventive behavioral, social-emotional, and developmental support.
- Conducts screening for perinatal mood symptoms and connects families to early childhood system-of-care resources.

Learn More

