

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health



One in five children has a mental health disorder deemed diagnosable. Yet there is a national shortage of skilled infant and early childhood mental health workers equipped to provide the assessment, diagnosis, and treatment very young children need.

Healthy, nurturing relationships with parents and caregivers lay the foundation for a baby's social and emotional development, also known as infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH). While positive early childhood experiences promote strong emotional health and go hand-in-hand with strong cognitive development, negative experiences can adversely impact brain development, with serious lifelong consequences. When an infant or young child's emotional health deteriorates significantly, they can, and do, experience mental health problems. Approximately 9.5%–14.2% of children birth to 5 years old experience emotional, relational, or behavioral disturbance. Young children who live in families dealing with parental loss, substance misuse, mental illness, or exposure to trauma are at heightened risk of developing IECMH disorders. And the stressors of poverty can multiply these risks. If untreated, IECMH disorders can have detrimental effects on every aspect of a child's development and ability to succeed in school and in life.

The early years are a time to promote emotional health, to prevent emotional challenges from taking root, and to treat mental health problems before they can manifest into more severe problems later in life. But that all depends on the presence of a highly skilled clinical mental health workforce with specialized expertise in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of infant and early childhood mental health conditions, and far too many communities across the United States do not have access.

Congress has three critical opportunities to invest in the emotional health of our nation's babies:

- **Increase funding to \$50 million for the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Grant Program.** This grant program, administered by SAMHSA, supports the integration of infant and early childhood mental health into state systems, including child-serving settings. This program is one of the only federal initiatives to specifically target this national gap in the mental health system, but reaches only a fraction of the babies and families who could benefit.
- **Incorporate funding for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health in the Community and Mental Health Service Block Grant** through a 5 percent (\$37.8 million) funding increase designated for young children. These funds would be used for promotion, prevention, assessment, diagnosis, and treatment services for children ages 0-5 experiencing or at risk of developing mental health disorders.
- **Provide \$50 million in funding for an Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Clinical Leadership Program.** Such a federal clinical workforce development program would establish a national network of university-based Centers of Excellence to advance training and research in IECMH.

Support increased investments that build the infant and early childhood mental health system so that very young children have access to the prevention and treatment services they need.

For more information, visit <https://www.zerotothree.org/FederalAgenda2021> or contact Jim Bialick, Director of Government Relations, at jbialick@zerotothree.org.