

For Early Childhood Professionals

Support Social and Emotional Development

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As an early childhood professional, you play a major role in the development of the infants, toddlers, and preschool children in your care. Research shows that the way you talk and play with children during these early years impacts a child's:

- Social and emotional development (mental health)
- Learning abilities
- Functioning later in life

Mental Health Matters

Children learn from their families, culture, friends, and communities and from all the people who nurture them. As an early childhood provider, you help children to:

- Cope with stress
- Build Self-confidence
- Develop self-worth
- Learn and master new skills
- Develop self-regulation and learn to control their impulses
- Develop trusting relationships with adults and other children

To grow and learn, children need these mental health abilities as much as they need good physical health.



Promote Mental Health and Well-Being in All Children

1. Learn the developmental stages of social and emotional development
2. Learn about and respect the cultures of children and their families
3. Talk with children about their feelings—help them put words to their feelings
4. Smile and laugh often—express joy
5. Encourage friendship and play among children
6. Help children learn to respect the feelings and possessions of others
7. Use a variety of positive guidance methods, e.g. listening, redirecting, (offering another activity), and reinforcing (praising good behavior)
8. Never threaten to harm, shake, or shame children, and
9. Teach problem solving and conflict resolution skills

Special Considerations for Infant Mental Health and Well-Being

- Hold, carry, rock, and touch babies often
- Respond promptly and calmly to crying or fussing
- Make caregiving routines enjoyable
- Repeat back the sounds a baby makes—take turns singing, listening, and talking
- Have schedules that respond to individual needs for sleeping, feeding, and active play
- Provide a variety of opportunities, places, and positions for active movement
- Never spank, threaten to harm, shake or shame infants

What Behaviors Indicate that a Child's Mental Health May Be "at Risk"?

Infants and Toddlers

- Displays very little emotion
- Does not show interest in sights sounds or touch
- Rejects or avoids being touched or held or playing with others
- Unusually difficult to soothe or console
- Unable to comfort or calm self
- Extremely fearful or on-guard
- Does not turn to familiar adults for comfort or help
- Exhibits sudden behavior changes

Preschool Children

- Cannot play with others or objects
- Absence of language or communication
- Frequently fights with others
- Very sad
- Extreme mood swings
- Unusually fearful
- Inappropriate responses to situations, e.g. laughs instead of cries
- Withdrawn
- Extremely active
- Loss of earlier skills (e.g. toileting, language, motor)
- Sudden behavior changes
- Very accident prone
- Destructive to self and/or others
- Extremely immature

Always Consider:

- How severe is the behavior?
- How many weeks or months has the behavior been occurring?
- How long does the behavior last (e.g. minutes, hours)?
- How does the behavior compare with the behavior of other children of the same age?
- Are there events in the early childhood education setting, or at home, that make the behavior better or worse?

If a child displays any of the behaviors described above and the answers to the questions make you think the behavior could be problematic, then:

- Talk with a colleague or supervisor
- Talk with the child's family
- Recognize cultural differences
- Get more information
- Seek professional help

Remember, it is always better to get more information and help when you notice behaviors that might be a risk to a child's healthy development.

Two other very important points!

Communicate with families
and work together.

Take good care of your own physical
and mental health.

