

strengthening families

research in brief: infant mental health and social-emotional competence

The Infant Mental Health Task Force of ZERO TO THREE: National Center on Infants, Toddlers, and Families defined infant mental health as the healthy social and emotional development of a child from birth to 3 years.

Social-emotional competence in infants develops through warm, nurturing, consistent, and supportive relationships with parents or other primary caregivers. It includes the development of:

- Trust
- Secure attachment
- Self-confidence and self-efficacy
- Motivation
- The ability to identify, understand, and communicate, feelings
- The ability to manage strong emotions
- The ability to persist at tasks
- The ability to follow directions
- The ability to form effective relationships with peers and adults

Social-emotional competence develops gradually and is not as obvious as other developmental milestones such as walking and talking. Parents must tune in to young children's cues in order to understand what they may be thinking or feeling and to help children learn about themselves and connect with others.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

A child's social-emotional domain of development is as important as, and is related to, other domains of development, such as cognitive, language, and physical health. Social and emotional competence is described as a protective factor against child abuse and neglect. Some research suggests that a nurturing and supportive infant/caregiver relationship may even mitigate such child risk factors as a difficult temperament.

Unmet social-emotional developmental needs in early childhood can have persistent adverse effects. Early childhood problems can impede early school success and often precede "later conduct problems, antisocial behaviors, delinquency, and serious mental health problems" (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2009, p. 8).

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS AMONG YOUNG CHILDREN

The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) reports:

- Between 9.5% and 14.2% of children between 0-5 years old experience social-emotional problems that negatively impact their functioning, development, and school-readiness.
- Approximately 9% of children who receive specialty mental health services in the United States are younger than 6 years old.
- Almost two-fifths of 2-year-olds in early care and learning settings had insecure attachment relationships with their mothers.

Some mental health disorders experienced by young children are: (a) anxiety disorders, (b) simple phobias, (c) oppositional defiant disorder, (d) conduct disorder, (e) attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

FAMILY RISK FACTORS

Parents and other primary caregivers are crucial in supporting children's healthy social-emotional development. Family risk factors, in particular maternal risk factors, can impact parents' ability to be nurturing and supportive, "and may contribute to behavioral problems among young children as early as age 3" (NCCP, 2009, p. 4). Maternal risk factors include poor attachment to the child/insecure attachment to the mother, substance use, mental health conditions, and domestic violence exposure.

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SELECTED REFERENCES

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