

May Declared Mental Health Month

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Caregiver Connections: a program of CCR&R Social Emotional Learning Facilitation

Congress has designated May as Mental Health Month. As we consider supporting wellness through positive mental health, let's give attention to the youngest members of our community - those children from birth to age 3.

Many people are not familiar with the phrase "Infant Mental Health". Its meaning is often misunderstood and the term can be confusing to people. One person once said to me "Infant mental health, I did not think infants had mental health." On another occasion a woman looked very confused after asking me about my educational background and work experience with young children. She asked, "Now, what is an Enfamil certificate?" I must admit that I was struggling with allergies at the time so my pronunciation may not have been the clearest, but I found myself thinking that if infant mental health was talked about more frequently, she would not have been so confused even if I was congested.

I did find the mix up intriguing, however. Enfamil helps provide nourishment for the baby's physical development, while infant mental health focuses on nourishment of the baby's social and emotional development. Enfamil's slogan is "*For the only reason that matters. Because it's your baby*". Sounds like a great slogan to promote infant mental health. Enfamil's website also has multiple articles on bonding, relationships, maternal depression and interactive activities for parent's and babies. Once again, all are aspects of what we focus on to promote infant mental health.

So what is infant mental health? The national organization Zero to Three defines "Infant mental health as the healthy social and emotional development of a child from birth to 3 years; and a growing field of research and practice devoted to the:

- Promotion of healthy social and emotional development;
- Prevention of mental health problems; and
- Treatment of the mental health problems of very young children in the context of their families."¹



Something that may seem obvious to you, and is one of the key concepts in Infant Mental Health, is that an infant's development does not happen in isolation, but instead occurs in the context of the infant's family and of all his or her close relationships. Winnicott, a psychiatrist, emphasized this by saying that there is no such

thing as a baby, only the infant/parent relationship, emphasizing how critical the connection between the two is. Babies are so dependant, they literally cannot survive without relationships. In the work of Infant Mental Health, the focus is on supporting everyone involved in this relationship with the baby or toddler to provide what is needed for optimum growth, learning and healthy development to occur.



So, despite the tendency to think about *mental illness* when the words *mental health* are heard, it is important to remember that the work of Infant Mental Health is about creating a sense of and supporting the development of the following: .

- A feeling of safety and security (I am well taken care of).
- Comfort in connecting with trusted others (I am developing a sense of trust in people).
- Confidence in one's developmental trajectory (I am capable and can be successful when I try).
- An expectation that dependency needs will be met (I can count on others to take care of what I need because I am too little to do it myself).

- Assumption of one's right to move, explore and communicate ² (I am given opportunities to explore, learn, play and be curious.)

Think of the impact on future generations, if every baby had these things available at the start of life!

During the month of May, Mental Health Month, consider being intentional in thinking about ways to provide nourishment to an infant's social emotional development. Be supportive of parents with young children. Take time to be playful and interact with all the young children with whom you have relationships. Building and supporting these relationships with infants helps them to explore, learn and grow. We have to start early because babies don't wait. They grow up very quickly.

¹ This is a definition of infant mental health developed by ZERO TO THREE's Infant Mental Health Task Force.

² Lally, J Ronald, Peter L. Mangione & Catherine Tsao, "Helping Infant Care Teachers Nurture Early Childhood Mental Health", Chicago, NAEYC, November 8, 2007 WestEd, The program for Infant Toddler Care.