



Center for Early Education and Development

# Tip Sheets

## Minnesota Infant Mental Health Project

### Definitions of Infant Mental Health

The mental health of infants and toddlers, established and maintained by nurturing environments and interactions with their primary caregivers, is of crucial importance to all of us. It sets the stage for children to learn and to succeed in life. In a very basic way, infant mental and physical health is the foundation of each new generation. Infant Mental Health has been defined in varying ways.

#### Current Definitions

The following examples provide current definitions of Infant Mental Health:

- Infant mental health is the optimal growth and social/emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development of the infant in the context of the unfolding relationship between infant and parent. [Infant Mental Health Services Feasibility Study conducted by CEED]
- The Minnesota Infant Mental Health Feasibility Study Consultant Team recommended that infant mental health services be identified and organized as a continuum of activities divided into five broad areas:
  1. Public Awareness
  2. Education and Support
  3. Screening
  4. Assessment and Intervention
  5. Training and Consultation
- Infant mental health focuses on the social and emotional well being of infants and their caregivers and the various contexts within which caregiving takes place. Infant mental health, therefore, focuses on relationships; infant development is conceptualized as always embedded within emergent, active systems of relationships. By definition, the infant is born into a social world. (Bell, 1968; Rheingold, 1968).
- Infant mental health is rooted in the understanding that developmental outcomes emerge from infant



characteristics, caregiver-infant relationships, and the environmental contexts within which infant-parent relationships take place. From an infant mental health perspective, parents are looked at as interacting participants in the developmental process, which does not permit a dichotomization of nature and nurture (Shapiro, 1976, p. 4). Winnicott (1964/1987) captured the essence of the caregiver-infant relationship when reflecting upon his prior comment that there was no such thing as a baby, meaning that if you set out to describe a baby, you will find you are describing a baby and someone. "A baby cannot exist alone but is essentially part of a relationship" (p. 88).

(The Signal, 2000)

- The field of infant mental health may be defined as multidisciplinary approaches to enhancing the social and emotional competence of infants in their biological, relationship, and cultural contexts. Infant-caregiver relationships are the primary focus of assessment and intervention efforts, not only because infants are so dependent upon their caregiving contexts but also because infant competence may vary widely in different relationships." (Zeanah & Zeanah, 2001)



#### Principles that Define the Field of Infant Mental Health

Alicia Lieberman has suggested a set of principles that define the field of infant mental health. The first three principles look at external behavior as an expression of inner, subjective experience. The last two principles look at how we frame and carry out interventions.

1. Babies are by nature social creatures.
2. Individual differences are an integral component of babies' functioning.

3. Every individual exists in a particular environmental context that deeply affects the person's functioning.
4. Infant Mental Health practitioners make an effort to understand how behaviors feel from the inside, not just how they look from the outside.
5. The intervener's own feelings and behaviors have a major impact on the intervention.

(Lieberman, 1998)

**For additional information on this topic, please visit CEED's web site at <http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>.**

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