

Introducing It:

# Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health

Center for Early Education  
and Development

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

This tip sheet, created in partnership with the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare at the University of Minnesota, provides an overview of infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH). It explores the importance of child-caregiver relationships in child development. It also discusses how professionals in fields like education, healthcare, and social work can support these relationships.

Infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) is a growing field of both research and practice. It pulls from the science of early brain development as well as from research on attachment, school readiness, and trauma, among other areas of study.

## WHAT IS IECMH?

Infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) has been defined as, “The developing capacity of the infant/young child to form close and secure relationships; experience, manage, and express a full range of emotions; and explore the environment and learn—all in the context of family, community, and culture.”<sup>1</sup> Essentially, IECMH is a child’s social and emotional learning and capacities. Most importantly, this learning happens within key relationships.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF KEY RELATIONSHIPS

Donald Winnicott, a British pediatrician and psychoanalyst, famously said “there is no such thing as a baby,” only a baby and their caregiver.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to other mammals, human infants require care for many years and are fully dependent on their caregivers until they can learn to care for themselves. This means relationships with their caregivers are the primary context and environment for young children’s growth in the early years.

## THE “GOOD ENOUGH” CAREGIVER

Infants and young children need attuned, sensitive care within these primary relationships. What does this mean? Attuned care means that the caregiver “tunes in” to the child’s verbal and nonverbal cues, since babies and toddlers have limited language. The caregiver notices if the child is distressed and tries to determine the cause. Sensitive care means that the caregiver does a “good enough” job of accurately figuring out the child’s needs (e.g., they are hungry, sleepy, bored, uncomfortable). It also means that they are able to meet those needs in a way that soothes the infant.

“Good enough” is an important concept because, as Winnicott noted, no caregiver is perfect 100% of the time.<sup>3</sup> Children and their caregivers do the best they can to communicate with each other and—importantly—the caregiver remains committed to trying different ways to soothe the child even if initial efforts didn’t work. The relationship between child and caregiver is strengthened as they figure each other out over time.

Infant and early childhood mental health recognizes the importance of these primary relationships. Professionals who use IECMH principles and practices in their work aim to strengthen these bonds to promote more optimal health and growth.



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## WHO USES IECMH THEORIES AND PRACTICES IN THEIR JOB?

Many professionals working with infants, young children, and families can benefit from understanding IECMH theories and principles. Preschool teachers, child care providers, child protection workers, home visitors, early intervention specialists, pediatricians, IECMH consultants, and many others bring IECMH knowledge and skills into their work in order to better support children's development. How do they support children's development? By supporting the health of children's primary relationships as well as providing their own attuned, sensitive care to both the child and the caregiver.

Child care providers and preschool teachers primarily work with children but have opportunities to interact with primary caregivers each day at pick-up and drop-off. Child protection workers support children and families during times of acute stress and trauma. Home visitors come into the home to be compassionate witnesses to the emerging relationship and to provide support and developmental guidance so that caregiver and baby can learn each other's cues. Early interventionists teach caregivers and children developmental skills all while supporting the primacy of the child/caregiver relationship.

## HOW DO IECMH PROFESSIONALS SUPPORT CHILD/CAREGIVER RELATIONSHIPS?

Pioneering IECMH practitioner and educator Jeree Pawl famously said, "How you are is as important as what you do."<sup>4</sup> To do IECMH work, we need to know how to support children's primary relationships both through the words we use and also through our way of being—as Pawl would say, through "how we are." Psychotherapist Salvador Minuchin called this "joining" with families. He described joining in family therapy as "letting the family know that the therapist understands them and is working with and for them."<sup>5</sup>

These ways of being or "joining" require professionals to be sensitive and attuned to the needs of the families they work with, so that trust can develop.<sup>6</sup> Relationships are complicated, and there is no "one size fits all" way to bring IECMH into our jobs, or even into our work with an individual child or family unit.



## SUPPORTING PROFESSIONALS WITH REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION/CONSULTATION

A best practice in IECMH is for professionals to regularly receive reflective supervision/consultation. Infant and early childhood mental health-informed reflective supervision/consultation is a model of professional development aimed at providing a "relationship for learning."<sup>7</sup> Within this relationship, professionals can hone their skills in providing attuned and sensitive care and developmentally and culturally appropriate interventions.

During a reflective supervision/consultation session, professionals discuss their work with a trained supervisor or consultant. They reflect on the relationships between the children and caregivers they work with, as well as the relationships that they have built with those families. They consider multiple perspectives and wonder about behaviors or dynamics within their clients' families. They hold the developmental needs and current experiences of the baby or child in mind.

## DEFINING IT

### Caregiver

Any person who provides care for an infant or young child.

### Primary Relationship

A person or people responsible for an infant's or young child's development and well-being; most often this is a parent or parents, but this can be grandparents, kin, foster parents, or anyone with whom the child lives and who holds responsibility for that child.

### Attachment

A neurobiological, relational system and way of communicating between a primary caregiver and a child that develops over the first one or two years of life in order to keep the child safe.<sup>6</sup>

### Reflective Supervision/Consultation

A model of professional development, support, and growth for people working with infants, young children, and their caregivers. Reflective supervision/consultation focuses on the emotional impact of the work and places attention on the primary relationships in a child's life and on that child's development.

## REFERENCES

The sources referenced in this tip sheet can be found at: [z.umn.edu/introducing\\_iecmh](https://z.umn.edu/introducing_iecmh)



## DIVING INTO IT

For additional information on this topic:

Please visit our website: [ceed.umn.edu](https://ceed.umn.edu)

Please visit our Child Development for Child Welfare resources: [cd4cw.umn.edu](https://cd4cw.umn.edu)

For more child welfare resources, visit the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare: [cascw.umn.edu](https://cascw.umn.edu)

To learn more about reflective supervision/consultation download our free e-book: [z.umn.edu/rsc-ebook](https://z.umn.edu/rsc-ebook)

Check out our courses on reflective practice: [ceed.umn.edu/content-areas/reflective-practice](https://ceed.umn.edu/content-areas/reflective-practice)

Explore the following websites:

Zero to Three: [zerotothree.org](https://zerotothree.org)

Harvard Center on the Developing Child: [developingchild.harvard.edu](https://developingchild.harvard.edu)

Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health: [allianceaimh.org](https://allianceaimh.org)

World Association for Infant Mental Health: [waimh.org](https://waimh.org)

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