

# facts on

## Nurturing Early Childhood Mental Health (Birth to Age Six)

### WHAT IS IT?

Early childhood mental health refers to children's capacity to experience, regulate and express emotions, form close and secure relationships, and explore their environment and learn. All of these capacities are best accomplished within the context of a positive caregiving environment. A child's community also plays a significant role in her mental health. Developing these capacities contributes to healthy social and emotional development.

### WHY IS EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH IMPORTANT?

Young children need to develop skills that will help them be mentally and physically healthy throughout their lives. Studies have shown that mental health in infancy and early childhood can prevent chronic physical illness, behavioral problems, learning problems, and mental health issues later in life. Young children with good mental health also develop skills that will help them adapt to changes in their lives, including school. For good mental health young children need to be able to:

- Make sense of and control their emotions
- Control their impulses
- Understand other people's emotions and expressions
- Form secure attachments with their caregivers
- Actively explore their environment
- Develop a sense of curiosity
- Learn social skills
- Learn how to communicate with others
- Feel safe in their homes
- Cope with changes and new environments
- Understand and accept differences among people
- Develop resilience (skills to cope with change and stress)

### HOW CAN YOU HELP TO NURTURE EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH?

Every person who comes in contact with young children, regardless of their role, can help to promote childhood mental health. You can speak to parents about the importance of their child's mental health in the early years. You can show caregivers through example and by teaching some techniques and strategies that can help young children to form secure attachments and grow up healthy. You can also form healthy, nurturing relationships with children in your community. A child developing a number of human relationships beyond his immediate family helps to build resiliency and mental health in children.

### WHAT MESSAGES CAN YOU GIVE PARENTS?

- Your child's mental health is very important
- Be consistent with your child
- Learn to read and respond to your child's cues
- Comfort your child when she is upset
- Look in your child's eyes
- Try to be fully present when you are caring for your child
- Protect your child and take an active role when an unsafe situation occurs
- Affectionately and appropriately touch your child often
- Encourage your child to explore his environment
- Teach your child about his emotions
- Let your child develop relationships with other safe adults in your community

### For More Information

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## WHAT CAN IMPACT EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH?

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### BIOLOGICAL

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**Brain Development:** Experiences in our early years impact brain development. For the first three to four years of life, our brain grows to almost 90% of its adult size. Not only does our brain grow in size, but neural networks, the pathways that allow us to take in, interpret and react to information and experiences are fine-tuned. When we are born and during our early years, we have thousands of neural networks. These are either reinforced through consistent experiences or they become inactive or are “pruned off” when not used (Perry & Sheridan, 2007; Sheridan & Nelson, 2009).

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**Physical or Cognitive Challenges and Illness:** Sometimes when a child has a physical or cognitive challenge or is ill, more focus is given to the child’s physical well-being than his/her emotional well-being. It can be hard for the caregiver-infant relationship to develop in healthy ways, especially if the child has difficulty communicating his needs to his caregiver. As well, certain medical procedures or symptoms may cause trauma to young children.

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**Genetics:** What a child inherits from his parents genetically has a direct impact on his mental health. If one or both parents have a mental health condition, a child may potentially inherit a similar mental health condition.

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**Temperament:** Temperament refers to the child’s instinctual reactions to people and the environment. Certain aspects of the child’s temperament may not correspond with the caregiver’s temperament. This mismatch can impact the relationship between the child and caregiver.

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### RELATIONSHIPS

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**Attachment:** Attachment is the deep and lasting connection that children form with the people they depend on for care. Children use attachment behaviors (e.g. crying, clinging, following, cooing) to show they need care. Children’s attachment needs require their caregivers to be available to help them feel safe, cared for and protected. Children form different kinds of attachment (e.g. secure or insecure) depending on how well their caregivers meet their attachment needs (Hughes, 2004; Hughes, 2009).

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**Parental Mental Health:** Sometimes caregivers who are experiencing mental health issues are not able to care for their child in sensitive and consistent ways and are not always emotionally present. This can impact the child’s ability to form a secure attachment to his/her caregiver. Parental mental health issues include unresolved trauma or loss, diagnosed mental illness, or addictions (Albertsson-Karlgren, Graff, & Nettelbladt, 2001; Lieb, Isenree, Hopleer, Pfisher, & Wittchen, 2002; Mantymaa, Paura, Luama, Kaukonen, & Salmelin, 2008).

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## ENVIRONMENT

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### ***Social Determinants of Health:***

It is important to remember that individuals and families can be impacted positively or negatively by a variety of factors, including family income and social status, social support networks, education and literacy, employment and working conditions, life skills, coping skills, health practices, health service availability, gender, and culture. These factors weave together and play a role in determining family and child health (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010).

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### ***Witnessing Abuse:***

Witnessing intimate partner violence undermines the home as a safe haven for the child. It also can cause internal conflict in the child between approaching a caregiver for comfort and protection and avoiding a caregiver to protect himself. Developing secure attachments, being provided with consistent care and brain development are all compromised when a child witnesses violence (Folson, Christensen, Avery & Moore, 2003; Cunningham & Baker, 2007; Perry & Szalavitz, 2007).

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### ***Trauma:***

Trauma occurs when an incident threatens our safety or feelings of safety. Adults and children interpret situations differently based on development, maturity, experiences and processing skills. Young children may not be able to engage in the typical human response to stress, a “fight or flight” process and, as a result may freeze. When children freeze, their bodies produce all of the chemicals that increase during a “fight and flight” response, including cortisol and epinephrine. These chemicals need to be released from the body through movement, crying, or some other mechanism. Young children do not have the skills or maturity to know how to intentionally “release” these chemicals and may have to depend on adults to help them do so. Adults can also help children release chemicals by allowing the children to express their natural reactions to trauma, e.g., crying. Unreleased chemicals in the body can build up over time and cause:

- Decreased brain development
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Physical illness, e.g., heart disease
- Hyper-vigilance
- Aggressiveness
- Behaviour problems
- Unexplained emotional reactions

Also, very young children store memories based on sensory input. As young children have limited language skills, memories will not be stored as verbal narratives of an event. When sensory memories have been created, the child can be triggered by related sensory stimuli (sights, sounds, smells), and the chemicals are released into the body again, without the child or anyone understanding why (Perry, 2006; Perry & Szalavitz, 2007; Levine & Kline, 2007; Berry, 2006; Riffen-Grabul, Borelli, & Bosquet Enlow, 2009).

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### ***Isolation:***

When children are young, a lot of their social interactions occur within their immediate family. However, it is important to include children in their broader social community in order to help them build resiliency and develop mental health.

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