



What is Infant and Toddler Mental Health?

By Michelle Pievsky, PhD

According to the World Association for Infant Mental Health, between seven and 16% of children three years old and younger suffer from a mental health disorder. These include trauma and violence, family disruption, and disturbances in caregiving. Moreover, about 25% of children are at risk for a developmental delay, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Because infancy is such a crucial developmental period, the effects of these disorders can have lifelong consequences. The good news is that early intervention can be extremely effective and can prevent the development of serious medical and psychological problems later in childhood and beyond. It can also support individual and family strengths and promote wellness.

I work at a consultation center for infants and young children. In my role there, I do a lot of play therapy with infants, toddlers, and their parents. You might wonder what play therapy looks like with an infant, and so do a lot of the parents. The truth is, there are a lot of ways to play with infants, to look where they look, make funny noises with them, smile at them, follow their rhythms, and develop a close bond that goes beyond meeting their physical needs. For many parents, this is incredibly difficult to do for many reasons. Some parents have histories of trauma or substance abuse that interfere with their ability to interact in that way. Others are just plain sleep deprived and overwhelmed (small wonder why!). And of course, there are many social and environmental barriers that prevent so many parents from being able to simply play with their infants. Ultimately, babies are wired from birth to seek out relationships and attachment, and when disruptions on these relationships emerge then difficulties often subsequently follow. My role is to identify relational or developmental difficulties early on, and then intervene in treatment as early as possible in order to help address these concerns. My job is part case manager to help parents get the resources they need, part teacher to educate parents about developmentally appropriate behaviors, and part coach to help them incorporate the skills they learn into their lives in a useable and meaningful way that works for them.

A large part of my job involves developmental assessment. I do brief screenings of an infant or toddler's gross motor, fine motor, language and communication, cognitive, and social-emotional development, as well as aspects of their relationship with their caregivers. If any concerns emerge, I perform more in-depth assessment that can include a full cognitive battery, adaptive functioning, mental health and wellbeing. I also assess for specific disorders, especially autism. With infants and toddlers, a lot of this assessment is done through play, by having the child manipulate toys, solve puzzles, and engage in interpersonal exchanges with me and with their caregivers. By observing them in a variety of situations and seeing how they take on fun challenges, I can learn if they are significantly delayed in any areas or if they meet criteria for a developmental disorder. Often times we can provide treatment at the Institute, but we also provide recommendations and referrals when necessary. I also do periodic follow-up assessment to see how the child and family are progressing in therapy.

Infant and mental health is so important, because it presents an amazing opportunity to intervene early and really strengthen family relationships as well as promote individual strengths and overall wellness. If you or someone you know is interested in learning more about infant and toddler mental health, you can go to: <https://www.zerotothree.org/>. If you have personal concerns, it is also important to talk to your child's primary care physician.

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