

*What is*  
**Infant Mental Health**  
*and why is it important?*



**RELATIONSHIPS MATTER**



*About Building Connections  
for young children and their families*

## *What is Infant Mental Health?*

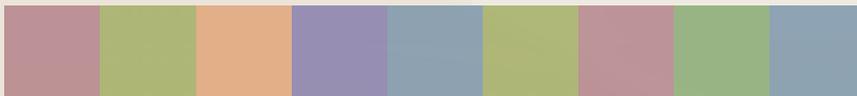


“Infant Mental Health” refers to an infant’s ability to experience emotions, develop relationships and learn. An infant’s world is usually pretty small. Infants grow up among family, friends and community. They learn about themselves and the world around them through the relationships they have with the people in their lives.

Babies who are made to feel loved and cherished learn that they are lovable. They then grow up feeling good about themselves and develop friendships more easily.

## *How can I nurture my baby’s mental health?*

By helping your baby feel loved and protected you help to nurture your baby’s mental health. You can help your baby feel protected by creating a stable and predictable environment. You can do this by providing daily routines for your baby and acting in predictable ways.





## *What do we mean by “emotional development?”*

In the first few years of life, babies grow and change very quickly. As they grow, their feelings and relationships become more complex. Babies need parents and other important people in their lives to help them manage their feelings.

For example, a baby who is scared, angry, or hurt needs help from an adult to understand, calm down, and be comforted. Parents naturally help their infants to relax by holding them, speaking softly, reassuring them or gently rocking them. When families create safe and loving homes, their children have an easier time learning to manage their feelings.

Adults’ emotional health, level of stress, and life circumstances can affect their relationships with babies. If you are dealing with a great deal of stress or difficulty or know a parent or other adult in such circumstances, it can be extremely helpful to seek help from a mental health professional.





### *What does “mastery” mean?*

Babies are like little explorers. They are born with a desire to explore, understand, and “master” their surroundings. Of course, they learn more easily with the help and encouragement of their parents or caregivers.

Your baby probably explores new objects and surroundings every chance he or she gets. When parents encourage their babies to explore, while also making sure they don’t get hurt, babies learn to feel good about learning and enjoy new experiences.

Although all babies go through a stage where they are frightened of strangers and unfamiliar places, babies who learn how to manage feelings from their parents are better able to overcome their fears and enjoy new things as they grow older.

## *What can I do to support a child's emotional development?*

- Surround the child with nurturing relationships.
- Be happy – smile and laugh.
- Create a trusting and loving environment.
- Provide stable and consistent caregivers at home and in childcare.
- Understand and respond to the child's cues.
- Spend unhurried time together.
- Comfort and reassure the child when he or she is scared, angry or hurt.
- Develop routines to promote predictability and security.
- Learn developmental stages and have appropriate expectations.
- Model good relationships and healthy ways to manage conflict.
- Consider how whatever you're doing or going through may affect your child.
- Identify early signs of emotional or mental problems.





## *Warning Signs*

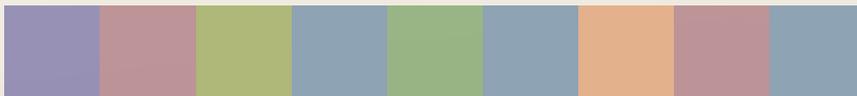
If your infant or toddler shows the following behaviors, you should consult with an infant mental health professional.



- Excessive fearfulness
- Excessive fussiness
- Sleep problems
- Feeding problems
- Failure to thrive
- Aggressive behaviors
- Defiant behaviors
- Impulsive and hyperactive behaviors
- No response to consequences or overly compliant with requests
- Unusually quiet or uninterested in other people
- Overly active
- Withdrawal
- Extreme sadness
- Excessive clinging or dependent behaviors
- Long and frequent tantrums
- Interference with normal developmental tasks

## *Healthy babies grow into healthy children.*

Infant mental health specialists focus on infant's and toddler's relationships with their parents or caregivers because there is good evidence that early intervention can prevent later problems such as delinquency, criminality, school problems including failure and dropping out, teen pregnancy, violence, and other risk factors.





*About Building Connections  
for young children and their families*

[www.ProjectABC-LA.org](http://www.ProjectABC-LA.org)

Project ABC is designed to create change at the beginning of children's lives. Even as infants and toddlers, children need support to optimize their healthy social and emotional development. Our goal at Project ABC is to ensure that families, professionals and community organizations work together to support every child's healthy development through awareness of the central role that relationships play in building healthy lives.

Project ABC is a six-year federally funded project to help Los Angeles County design an integrated early childhood System of Care service network that is based on family needs and includes families as partners in planning and service delivery. For further resources visit:

- [LAcountyhelps.org](http://LAcountyhelps.org)
- [211.org](http://211.org)
- [First5LA.org](http://First5LA.org)
- [Fussybabynetwork.org](http://Fussybabynetwork.org)

### Acknowledgments

This brochure was developed by Project ABC – *About Building Connections for Young Children and Their Families*, under a grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), June 2008. Content was adapted from *What is Infant Mental Health and Why is it Important?* by Dr. Joy Osofsky, Director, Harris Center For Infant Mental Health, Department of Psychiatry, Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center.

Project ABC is a collaboration of:

- Children's Institute, Inc. – [www.childrensinstitute.org](http://www.childrensinstitute.org)
- University of Southern California University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities at Childrens Hospital Los Angeles – [www.uscucedd.org](http://www.uscucedd.org)
- USC School of Social Work – <http://sowkweb.usc.edu>
- Los Angeles County Department of Child and Family Services – <http://dcfs.co.la.ca.us>
- Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health – <http://dmh.lacounty.gov>

