

Healthy Brains from the Start: Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health

A baby's brain grows faster in the first three years than at any other time in life. If babies receive the care they need during this time, they're off to a strong start, but if babies experience stress, abuse, or other disruptive events, the effects can be felt for a lifetime.

By intervening early, we set babies up for the strongest start in life.



“ My experiences with infant and early childhood mental health services have set the tone for my journey to be a better mom to every foster child that comes through our doors.

-Kim Young, Florida
Strolling Thunder 2023 Parent

Babies' Mental Health Matters

More than 1 in 10 children under the age of five experience diagnosable mental health conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder or anxiety. When a family faces hard circumstances - like a natural disaster, loss of a loved one, financial struggle or a parent's depression - babies feel it. Stress at home can disrupt the stable relationships and steady brain growth young children need, leading to emotional and behavior problems and learning delays that show up later in school and life.

Early Help Pays Off

The payoff is big: for every **\$1** invested in early childhood mental health programs, as much as **\$17** is saved by preventing the need for further interventions later in life.

Addressing mental health conditions and supporting healthy parenting in the first years of a child's life lowers family stress, prevents abuse and neglect and keeps kids healthier.

What federal programs support Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health?

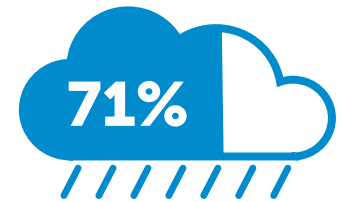
Many federal programs support parents' and babies' mental health. Essential programs include:

- **Medicaid**, including its powerful Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment (EPSDT) benefit, helps nearly half the country's young children access medical and therapeutic services and is especially effective in addressing chronic conditions.
- **SAMHSA's Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Grants** fund community-based mental health services for our youngest children, including screening, prevention, early intervention and other services.
- **SAMHSA's Project LAUNCH** supports state and local infrastructure to increase access to infant and early childhood mental health services, including by integrating mental health services into primary health care and early education settings where parents are most likely to seek support.
- **HRSA's Screening and Treatment for Maternal Depression and Related Behavioral Disorders Program** helps women experiencing maternal mental health conditions access the care they need, supporting both their own and their babies' mental health.
- **Head Start and Early Head Start** integrate infant and early childhood mental health specialists into care settings and connect families with wraparound services.



What is Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health?

Infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) is the developing capacity of infants and young children to form secure, close relationships, experience and express a wide range of emotions and engage with their surroundings.



The mental health of parents and their young children are intertwined. In 2025, **71% of parents** with children under 6 report:

- Directly experiencing emotional distress
- Their children experiencing emotional distress



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

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