



Australian Association for
Infant Mental Health Inc.

Infant Mental Health

What does good infant mental health look like?

Infant mental health refers to your baby's social and emotional development up to when he is 3 years of age. It is the building block for your baby's future relationships, managing feelings and successful learning and living.

If you are nurturing, responsive and caring towards your baby and provide a safe and supportive environment, your baby will learn to trust others and develop the ability to form healthy relationship within your family and with future friends. When we respond in a calm, caring manner to babies when they cry and help them to manage their feelings, they learn how to do this for themselves as they grow older.

Good infant mental health will provide your baby with self-confidence to explore his environment and learn at home and when he starts school.

Helping your baby become secure and confident

From the moment babies are born, they are ready to connect with us. Secure, trusting relationships with their parents and closest carers are crucial to babies and lay a strong foundation for their later development. [The NSPCC video *The Social Baby*, (preview on YouTube) shows you how even new babies are active learners and can start making relationships.]

When caring for babies we usually focus on keeping them warm, physically safe and well fed, and we also need to care for the baby's social and emotional wellbeing. Babies need you to respond sensitively to them, in a consistent and predictable way, showing understanding of their needs. (At first you might not be able to work out why your baby is crying, but even if you can't make sense of the crying you can give your baby a feeling of comfort and safety by holding and soothing). These earliest relationships and experiences influence early brain development and make a difference to babies' long term mental and emotional health, which affects everything else they do. If we are nurturing and responsive to our babies in the first three years of life, they are more likely to develop secure attachments (feel safe with us and in the world) and become confident and independent adults.

What would babies tell us if they had words?

- From the moment I was born I was ready to connect with you
- Respond kindly to me when I cry as my cry is my way of communicating with you.
- Hold me, cuddle me and look into my eyes

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- Talk to me and pause so I can respond in my own way. Copy my little sounds and gestures so I know you have heard me. Take turns – it is the beginning of conversations.
- Read to me each day; sing to me; show you enjoy me
- Play with me each day giving me your full attention and sharing enjoyment with me. (See Early Childhood Australia: Connecting with babies for ideas about play with babies)
- Remember that I am new to this world and everything is strange. Tell me when you are going to do something with me and I will learn to recognise what you are telling me. “I am going to pick you up now”. “Nappy time.” Take new experiences slowly if I seem uncomfortable.
- Help me to get the sleep I need to grow and learn by having a good sleep routine.

What experiences can harm your baby’s mental health?

No parent is perfect, and babies can tolerate mistakes and missteps in a loving environment. However, there are some things that we know are harmful for babies’ development:

- High levels of stress in the home which can result in higher levels of stress-hormones and impact on the developing brain.
- Unpredictability which may result from parental substance abuse, or a parent who is too unwell physically or mentally to be able to respond to the infant.
- Hearing and/or witnessing domestic violence or experiencing direct abuse, where the person who is supposed to be reliable becomes the source of harm.
- Neglect of the infant when he/she is sometimes responded to but often ignored. The baby’s experience of this unpredictability and a sense of not being heard often result in protest from infants but in time they may give up trying.
- Any stress on the family which causes ongoing distress for parents can impact on the baby e.g. living in a dangerous situation, severe family problems and anger, parents being isolated without any support from family or friends.

When you need to get help

As infancy is a critical time in setting the foundations for life long mental health it is important to get help early if you are experiencing difficulties.

It is good to seek advice if your baby is:

- Crying excessively
- Failing to thrive (that is, your baby is not growing as well as you expect)
- Going backwards in some skills they have learned
- Not responding happily to you (for example, when you smile)
- Not playing, or just playing repetitively
- Not making eye contact with you
- Not getting upset when you would expect them to

- Not feeling comforted by you (after the first couple of months)

It is normal for babies to be fearful when away from their parents, and some babies are more fearful or more excitable or more active than others due to differences in temperament.

If parents have any concerns about their babies it is important to seek advice and have them checked out.

Some tips

Sleep

Sleep is often a big concern for parents. Infants need a lot of sleep, but it is in short bursts, especially at first, because they have small stomachs and need to be fed often. Also, depending on temperament many infants find it hard to settle into sleep without the help of rocking or holding. As infants get a few months older they learn that there are safe people who will care for them and they may cry at bedtime because the dark is scary and the safe person isn't there. There is emerging evidence that the feeling of disconnection from a loved one is similar to actual physical pain. (www.aaimhi.org – *Time Out*) There are many programs around that offer to solve parents' problems with infant and toddler sleep. It is important to check that the programs do not encourage parents to leave children to cry, as this can produce stress and impact on developing confidence and trust. (www.aaimhi.org - *Controlled Crying*).

Crying

Crying is best understood as the expression of a need for physical and emotional closeness with the caregiver. Babies become distressed if left to cry alone, and this can lead to negative long term psychological consequences if done repeatedly. Crying is a sign that they are upset and in need of something – pain, food, tired, afraid – whatever it is they also need comfort from a parent. Sensitive responsiveness allows for the baby's brain to release endorphins and opioids which bring relief and comfort to the child. When parents help babies to manage their difficult feelings, their babies learn how to do this for themselves as they grow older, thus they develop a healthy capacity for managing their feelings as they grow older. This is true even if the crying persists.

Many healthy infants have long periods of being unsettled, especially in the early weeks, and it is often not possible to work out what is the cause. Crying periods are common in infants for the first three months, and after this they usually reduce rapidly. Societies where infants are kept with a parent most of the time have children who cry less, however this is not practical in Western society. However, staying with and supporting a crying infant is important. A parent's kind presence helps babies feel less alone with their feelings, making them less overwhelming and easier to tolerate. You may not always be able to stop the crying, but the infant know that someone is there holding them. It is the someone there that counts.

Parents can be reassured that babies are resilient enough to cope with incidental or accidental lapses in responsiveness (for example, when a parent is caught in traffic while the baby is

crying). This resilience increases with age, (AAIMHI – *Responding to baby’s cues*, May 2016, Pg 3) and normal delays such as these can be repaired if followed by comforting.

Parents who have young infants who cry a lot need to get support for themselves if possible. If the crying is worrying you or if it is a very different kind of cry from other infants talk with a health professional about it.

Infant cues

From birth onwards, babies use facial expressions, vocalisations (little sounds) and body language to communicate their feelings (for example joy, delight, discomfort and distress) and to communicate their physical and emotional needs. Each baby is different, and it takes time to learn to read your own infant’s cues, but it is very helpful in knowing when your infant is tired and when they are overtired, when they want to play and when they have had enough for example. This is the beginning of conversations – when your infant is trying to tell you something and knows you have heard.

Sensitive responsiveness is crucial to the infant’s development of trust in their caregiver and in the world around them. Infants are well aware when their attempts to communicate – including their cries – are ignored by a caregiver, and can become confused, frustrated and sometimes very distressed if this occurs. If this happens consistently, infants may cease to express their needs in an open and healthy manner as their trust in their caregiver falters. Alternately, research indicates that responding sensitively to infants’ cues can have positive long term and even transgenerational consequences. (www.aaimhi.org – *Infant Cues*)

Toddler troubles

Sometimes troubles arise in toddlerhood when the infant’s world is widening but they have not yet achieved the confidence or self-management skills to really manage their feelings. Sometimes parents see toddlerhood as a time for battles. This is a misunderstanding of where the toddler is coming from. Toddlers want to be free, to explore – because they can walk and climb, to say “no”, because they can talk and have an opinion but most of all they want and need their parents’ love, support and approval. So if a toddler has a tantrum because a parent will not allow them to run on the road it is not a rally against the parent but an expression of overwhelming frustration.

(See Alicia Lieberman (1993) The emotional life of the toddler. NY: Free Press)

They need their parent to be on their side, telling them why they can’t run on the road, acknowledging their feelings of anger and frustration, and letting them know that they will stay with the toddler until the tantrum blows over so that the toddler is learning that feelings can be managed, they won’t be punished, and they won’t drive parents away.

Many toddler troubles can be avoided by being aware of the times they are most likely to be tired or frustrated and having a quieting activity such as a bath, or a walk or a story available at these times. Some can’t be avoided because toddlers are needing to show they are becoming

independent people. It helps to give opportunities for toddlers to choose and say 'no' where possible while keeping to your rules where they are important.

Most of all your toddler wants your approval and time and love.

Parent unwell or feeling unable to cope

Having a baby is one of the most exciting and rewarding times of life. However parenting infants is also demanding; and difficult if you are not feeling at your best. All parents need support. If you are in a relationship or married, take time to care for yourself and your partner as well because this helps you and them to care for your baby.

It is important to get help if you feel that you are struggling. Your infant needs someone who feels OK themselves to respond to and nurture them at this important stage of their life. If you are worried a first step would be to see your health professional or infant health service. Help from a friend can be a good support and another person whom the infant is close to, to help with the caring.

If you would like to know more

The references in the text above are all useful for further reading. In addition, these offer more information that is helpful for parents of infants:

Murray, Lynne and Andrews, Liz (2000) The Social Baby Richmond: CP Publishing. (About making a relationship with babies from birth on)

Siegel D, Bryson TP (2014). No-Drama Discipline: the Whole Brain Way to Calm the Chaos and Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind. New York: Bantam.

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What is Infant Mental Health <http://www.promotingmentalhealthiowa.org/pdf/WhatIsBro.pdf>