

# The World Today with Eleanor Hall

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## Experts call for more investment in infant mental health

Lucy Carter reported this story on [Thursday, October 31, 2013](#) 12:26:00

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ELEANOR HALL: Economists estimate that mental illness is costing Australia \$190 billion a year and that this will increase with one in every five Australians now suffering from a mental illness.

Federal and state governments focus their mental health spending on teenage and adult mental health programs, but experts in the field are calling for that focus to be shifted to babies and toddlers.

They say that half of all mental health problems in adults could be prevented through treatment during childhood.

As Lucy Carter reports.

LUCY CARTER: When most parents think about the health of their baby, they think in terms of weight gain and milestones like walking and talking.

But according to some experts in childhood development, the mental health of an infant is just as important.

The national president of the Australian Association for Infant Mental Health, Anna Huber, says it's something that isn't talked about enough.

ANNA HUBER: Maybe it's a cultural thing, maybe for our society doesn't like to think of a baby as having a mind. But also I think maybe there's some sort of fear that maybe if we think about babies having mental health then we have to think about them as also the possibility of them having mental health problems.

LUCY CARTER: She says addressing any potential issues should start as early as possible.

ANNA HUBER: If we get in early when problems first emerge, when problems in the parent/child relationship first emerge or when a very young child is showing behavioural or emotional difficulties. We can actually prevent some of these things ballooning into what then become mental health problems as the child gets older.

LUCY CARTER: Today the Australian Association for Infant Mental Health and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, are releasing a joint communiqué that calls on the Federal Government to rethink the way money is invested in mental health.

The Alliance's Dr Lance Emerson says the Government is currently too focussed on treatment, rather than prevention.

LANCE EMERSON: We know in a recent Medical Journal of Australia article that while we've done quite well to treat and improve access to mental illness services, particularly in young people and adults. There's actually no evidence that we've improved the prevalence of mental health.

So we may have stabilised it but we're certainly not reducing the rates of mental illness that we're seeing. So what we really need to do is focus more on prevention.

LUCY CARTER: The communiqué calls for more government investment in strategies that build social and emotional wellbeing for babies and toddlers, like playgroups.

Anna Huber says looking after infant mental health doesn't mean taking toddlers to psychologists, but rather ensuring that the child's caregivers have access to well-informed support networks.

ANNA HUBER: Childcare workers, teachers, maternal and childhood nurses, GPs - all these people at the front line. If they have an understanding of what it looks like when things are going well, what it looks like when things

aren't going well, then they can be responsive to parents saying look, I'm really struggling being a parent of this child, I don't really know what to do or I'm tearing my hair out. So if they can pick up those signs, then they can, and know where services are and try and connect those parents with those sorts of services. Then things can get dealt with much earlier and they don't become you know, the big problems, the child doesn't get thrown out of preschool or childcare.

LUCY CARTER: Mental illness currently costs the Australian economy \$190 billion a year, but Dr Lance Emerson says increased government investment could halve that.

LANCE EMERSON: 25 to 6 per cent of mental illnesses are preventable. It's about supporting parents supporting their children, to improve their social and emotional development. Very early on, even starting before birth. There's some very good evidence based programs that are available to parents to assist them in very early child development, to get them off to a really good start. So that we don't see these rising rates of, for example, conduct disorder occur in Australia.

LUCY CARTER: What's conduct disorder?

LANCE EMERSON: Well, it's the children that you see really acting out in school and very difficult behavioural management, about 5 to 10 per cent of kids with conduct disorder and of course they constitute around 30 per cent of people in adult prison at the moment.

So we know that we can prevent a lot of mental health issues if we start very early on.

LUCY CARTER: The communiqué is being launched at a conference in Canberra today.

ELEANOR HALL: Lucy Carter reporting.

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