



Interventions

There are some interventions that have been shown to be successful in improving early childhood emotional and behavioral health. These include:

Child Care Programs

62% of children under the age of 6 have working parents and spend up to 50 hours a week in care outside of the home.ⁱⁱ

Unfortunately, many child care professionals are ill-prepared to deal with children with emotional and behavior problems. Teachers should be trained to work with families to seek appropriate interventions when emotional and behavioral problems are demonstrated in the child care setting. Providers can also offer mental health consultation services, parenting classes and support, and high quality care in non-traditional hours, including sick child care and inclusive therapeutic child care for children with disabilities.

Home Visitation Programs

High quality home visitation programs effectively address social and emotional risk factors in families. Services and supports include assessment and evaluation, crisis intervention, education and support for families in the context of their homes and communities, and developmental and preventive approaches to care.

Early Childhood Mental Health -- Ensuring Healthy Social-Emotional Development of Infants, Toddlers and Pre-School Age Children

The years between birth and age five are crucial for the well-being of children. Without positive early emotional development, young children risk academic and social failure. They may enter school unprepared to listen to teachers, to interact with others, and to follow instructions. All young children are at risk if their early needs are not met.

What Children Need

- Secure attachment to primary caregivers
- Nurturing relationships
- A positive and unique sense of self
- Ability to communicate wants and needs
- A sense of safety
- Increasing ability to regulate and express emotions
- Growing ability to control impulses
- Ability to engage in positive social interactions

It is essential to support children and families by providing and promoting healthy, stimulating, stable and safe environments, both at home and in child care and pre-school education settings.

Emotional and Behavioral Health

Some children may experience emotional problems due primarily to risk factors in their environment. Research shows that over 32% of young children are affected by at least one risk factor such as family poverty, low maternal education or single parent status and 16% are in families with two or more socio-demographic risks.ⁱ

Other children have biological and environmental (such as lead poisoning) circumstances that further add to their need for early and comprehensive treatment.

Helping families to nurture effectively and designing interventions that build on their strengths and abilities are important to achieving success.

Assessment

Often, children are not assessed for emotional problems until they are in school – and then, only if they exhibit deep and persistent problems. Without consistently used assessment tools and an interagency system of care to strengthen early childhood emotional development, we will continue to see children in need of more complex and expensive interventions in later years.

Opportunities for Advocacy and Change

Local Strategies

- Develop interagency systems of care that are essential for the healthy emotional development of young children.
- Educate the public on the importance of early social and emotional development.
- Develop and support culturally competent services that are accessible to families including parenting classes, parent hotlines, public libraries with parenting centers and provide other resources and training for parents.
- Use multiple strategies to fully engage all families in increasing their ability to promote strong social-emotional development and relationships between young children and their families, teacher and caregivers.
- Build on parent and family skills, support their natural relationships and respect and value their cultures and communities. Assess progress and track indicators of social-emotional development and its relation to school readiness and academic success.

State Level Public Policies

- **Provide opportunities for early childhood teachers to get the training and resources they need to maintain emotionally positive and cognitively enriching classrooms.**
- **Teach parents and childcare providers skills necessary to provide safe, emotional and cognitively enriching environments.**
- **Develop a state-wide assessment program to screen young children for emotional and behavior problems.**
- **Utilize mental health and child development consultants who can help children, families and teachers implement evidence-based preventative and early intervention strategies.**
- **Focus special attention on children and families experiencing cumulative and multiple risk factors.**
- **Invest at state and community levels in strategies to ensure the timely dissemination of “research to practice” knowledge about how to promote social and emotional resilience in young children.**
- **Provide resources for funding and training in early mental health to develop capacity of programs and to increase the supply of trained personnel (e.g., child psychiatrists and counselors) to address these needs.**
- **Improve the quality of child care and increase compensation and benefits to the child care workforce so that children experience sustained relationships with caregivers.**
- **Reassess income support policies to ensure that no child suffers from deep and persistent poverty.**ⁱⁱⁱ

In Conclusion

There is a need for rigorous evaluation, strength-based early intervention, and increased use of assessment tools in early childhood mental health. Community and family partners can work together to engage in planning and training for service providers; build family partnerships; collaborate across systems; identify and use evidence-based models of treatment; and change policies and systems. All children are at risk if we do not.

Endnotes

ⁱ Knitzer, Jane (2001), *Building Services and Systems to Support the Healthy Emotional Development of Young Children: An Action Guide for Policymakers*, National Center for Children in Poverty, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University.

ⁱⁱ Voices for Virginia's Children, *Early Learning Left Out*, 2005.

ⁱⁱⁱ This includes information from: Shonkoff, Jack P. and Phillips, Deborah A., eds. (2000), *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

For Further Information

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