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What Is Infant Mental Health?

developed by the ZERO TO THREE Infant Mental Health Task Force

Infant mental health is the developing capacity of the child from birth to age 3 to:

- experience, regulate, and express emotions;
- form close and secure interpersonal relationships; and
- explore the environment and learn —

all in the context of family, community, and cultural expectations for young children. Infant mental health is synonymous with healthy social and emotional development.

Additional Clarification:

- The phrase **"developing capacity"** reminds us of the extraordinarily rapid pace of growth and change in the first three years of life. Both a newborn and a 3-year-old experience intense feelings and are active partners in their relationships with adults, but the differentiation and complexity of a young child's emotional and social development increase markedly over time. Because every child is a unique blend of characteristics, infants' and toddlers' developmental pathways will reflect their individual constitutional differences, as well as the contributions of their caregiving environments.

- Infants and toddlers **come to experience the full range of human emotions**. Initially, they depend heavily on adults to help them **regulate their interaction, attention, and behavior** as they experience emotion. Increasing self-monitoring by the young child contributes to the emotional regulation that is a sign of mental health.

- Through **relationships with parents and other caregivers,** infants and toddlers learn what people expect of them and what they can expect of other people. **Nurturing, protective, stable, and consistent relationships are essential to young children's mental health**. Thus, the state of adults' emotional well-being and life circumstances profoundly affects the quality of infant/caregiver relationships.

- The drive to **explore and master one's environment is inborn in humans.** Infants' and toddlers' active participation in their own learning and development is an important aspect of their mental health, as is their ability to adapt to and cope with the environment.

- Infants and toddlers **share and communicate feelings and experiences** with significant caregivers and other children. A developing sense of oneself as **competent to engage in relationships and to act in the world** is an important aspect of infant mental health.

- **Culture influences every aspect of human development**, including how infant mental health is understood; adults' goals and expectations for young children's development; and the childrearing practices parents and caregivers use to promote, protect, or restore infants' and toddlers' mental health.

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