# NATIONAL CENTER FOR INFANT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD HEALTH POLICY

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CLINICAL INTERVENTIONS TO ENHANCE INFANT MENTAL HEALTH: A Selective Review

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ASSOCIATION OF MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH PROGRAMS



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This and other reports related to infant mental health are available for download at www.healthychild.ucla.edu.

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# INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of research showing the profound impact of early caregiving experiences on a child's early and later social, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development has generated enormous interest in the development of interventions that strengthen the parent-infant relationship. Because parents and infants have a variety of needs, and service sectors vary in the types of services they provide (Zeanah et al, 2000), a continuum of infant mental health (IMH) services is necessary. Considerable variability in the current delivery of interventions exists, and includes:

- Intervention site (e.g., clinic, home, child care setting),
- Type of provider (e.g., nurse, paraprofessional, mental health clinician), and
- Severity of problem (e.g., no problem/prevention, parenting or family problems, severe child behavior/emotional problems).

Nevertheless, there are overarching goals across the continuum of services:

- 1. To enhance the ability of caregivers to nurture young children more effectively;
- 2. To expand the ability of non-family caregivers to identify, address, and prevent socialemotional problems in early childhood; and
- 3. To minimize or avert suffering, and ensure that families in need of more intensive services can obtain them.

The unique focus of infant mental health interventions is most often the caregiver-infant relationship, rather than the traditional approach of focusing specifically on the child or caregiver. Because a relationship approach to assessment and treatment is new, the development of evidence-based approaches is still in its own infancy. Furthermore, as described by Shonkoff and Phillips (2000), there are a number of challenges in developing the evidence-base for infant mental health interventions (Exhibit One). Few interventions approach state of the art methodology to determine their short- and long-term effects (e.g., randomized controlled trials), but a number of promising approaches have shown significant improvements on social-emotional development and/or parent-infant relationships.

This brief describes selected programs that represent current approaches in infant mental health. This is not an exhaustive review; rather, illustrative programs are selected that:

a) Focus on the parent-infant relationship as a target of intervention.

b) Have been implemented in primary, focused, or tertiary care settings, with low to high risk families.c) Demonstrate evidence of short or long term improvement in parent-infant relationships.

As discussed in the report, *Addressing Social-Emotional Development and Infant Mental Health in Early Childhood Systems* (Zeanah, Stafford, Nagle, & Rice 2005), the Infant Mental Health service continuum is conceptualized as three broad levels of intervention, ranging from preventive approaches, to focused interventions for high risk groups, to tertiary intervention (psychotherapeutic treatment) (Exhibit Two).

## UNIVERSAL AND PREVENTIVE APPROACHES

Most young children and their families frequent health care, early care and education, and family support settings. In these settings, interventions may include assessment, education, and counseling about typical as well as problematic behaviors, referral, and in some cases, care management (Zeanah et al, 2005; Halfon et al, 2003). Examples of programs that use universal and preventive approaches include Healthy Steps, Bright Futures, Touchpoints, and mental health consultation.

## Healthy Steps

The Healthy Steps program is a promising approach for addressing social-emotional development, as well as emerging behavioral and relationship problems, within a primary health care setting. Healthy Steps places a specially trained child developmental specialist, nurse, or social worker in a pediatric setting. This approach was designed to respond to pediatric providers' lack the time and feeling that they

## Challenges and Opportunities in Providing Early Intervention Services In general, there is a lack of data on timing, intensity, and duration of intervention, 1 as well as the requisite provider knowledge and skills necessary for working with specific targeted populations. There is a need for more descriptive, exploratory investigations regarding the family-2 centered, community-based coordination of services-oriented programs. 3 There are significant problems with drop out rates that impact both service delivery and evaluation of programs. There may be inadequate resources and lack of commitment to undertaking rigorous 4 methods for evaluating programs, including random assignment. 5 Determining and achieving cultural competence, and the ability to respond to the needs of specific subgroups, is often lacking. 6 The infrastructure for providing services may be inadequate, and may result in services not reaching targeted populations (e.g., decreased accessibility related to costs, language, culture, citizenship status, transportation, eligibility standards, program scheduling, stigma associated with labeling, etc.) It is important to characterize the influence and assess the impact of post-intervention environments." 7 Cost-effectiveness studies are needed to make choices among early childhood investments.

From Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000.

are under-prepared to assess and intervene regarding many social-emotional issues (AAP, 2000). The specialist addresses social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth and development during the first three years of life by forging a strong, positive relationship with the parent(s) and uses a holistic, family-centered approach. Available services include individual guidance, a telephone information line, informational materials, home visits, parent groups, child health and family health checkups, and links to community services.

Initial outcome studies found that

- Healthy Steps parents were more likely to discuss developmental concerns, be satisfied with the care, and engage in more preventive health care practices compared to non-Healthy Start families (Minkovitz et al, 2003b).
- Healthy Steps families were less likely to use harsh discipline strategies such as spanking, yelling, and slapping (Guyer et al, 2003).
- Mothers in the Healthy Steps program were more likely to discuss feelings of sadness with someone in the pediatric practice compared to mothers in control groups. (Minkovitz, et al, 2003a).

More information about Healthy Steps and the Healthy Steps program evaluation can be found at www.healthysteps.org.

# **Bright Futures**

The Bright Futures Guidelines for Health Supervision (Green & Palfrey, 2000) emphasizes psychosocial development within the context of child health visits. The 2002 edition builds on the success of the 1994 edition with updated scientific information. In addition, the Bright Futures in Practice: Mental

*Health* (Jellinek, Patel & Froehle, 2002) guidelines emphasize the relationship between the infant and caregiver when addressing issues about common concerns during infancy and early childhood, such as temperament, feeding, sleep, and infant distress. The mental health guidelines provide information on family relationships, attachment, obtaining appropriate child care, socialization and peer relationships, and common behavioral problems. Outcome and evaluation studies are currently underway.

The preparation of the *Bright Futures Guidelines for Health Supervision, 3rd Edition*—expected release in Fall 2006—is underway. The Guidelines are centered around 11 themes, including Promoting Mental Health and Emotional Well-being. Four multidisciplinary expert panels are charged with a comprehensive revision of the 2nd edition, and are recommending content for well-child care visits. The expert panels were divided by the age stages of infancy, early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence. Members of the panels include pediatricians, nurse practitioners, nutritionists, pediatric dentists, parents and parents with CSHCN, mental health providers, family physicians, and public health representatives. The panels' recommendations have undergone extensive review by professionals from various disciplines and organizations. For example, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has reviewed the mental health content of the infancy and early childhood recommendations. The development process also includes a team of experts on health research that analyzes the evidence supporting the recommendations.

*Bright Futures Guidelines* is being designed to expand on the tradition of clear recommendations for child health practitioners as well as parents. The accompanying Bright Futures ToolKit will assist practitioners in addressing the implementation challenges and opportunities they can expect.

Numerous materials related to the current edition of the *Bright Futures Guidelines* are available and include materials focused on mental health, physical activity, oral health, nutrition, and other topics. These materials can be found at the American Academy of Pediatrics Bright Futures website (http://www.brightfutures.aap.org/web/).

# **Touchpoints Program**

Another effort to prepare pediatric and other providers in social-emotional development has been led through the Touchpoints Program, developed by T. Berry Brazelton. Trainings are available for individuals, communities via multidisciplinary teams, and early child care and education professionals.

The Touchpoints training curriculum is based on the concept of building relationships between children, parents and providers around the framework of "Touchpoints," or key points in early development. Professionals learn how to use relationship-building and communication strategies when they deliver care and interact with children and families. Trainings are offered periodically at the Brazelton Touchpoints Center in Boston. Attendees typically include many different professionals, including social workers, nurses, early care and education providers, and other professional who work with young children and their families. More information is available at www.touchpoints.org.

One study finds that the Touchpoints model increases the parenting self-confidence of adolescent parents (Percy et al, 2001).

# Mental Health Consultation in Child Care Settings

Child care sites can provide information to parents about social and emotional development, as well as cognitive development and learning styles. Information about resources and referral services should be readily available. Screening and/or observational assessments regarding social and emotional development can be provided in child care settings if there is adequate staff training and support. Some child care centers, including many Head Start programs, are obtaining mental health consultation on a regular basis to provide guidance to staff, and assistance in the identification and management of behavioral and social/emotional issues that are present in the child care setting (Johnson, Knitzer, & Kaufman, 2002; Fenichel, 2001). To date, there are few efficacy data available regarding these programs.

First 5 San Francisco, through the San Francisco Department of Public Health, funds community-based mental health consultation services for young children and their families at participating child care settings. DPH contracts with six local agencies to provide a continuum of early childhood mental health care services in child care. Each year, the program serves at least 800 children and their families in center-based child care programs and at least 80 family childcare providers (http://www.sfkids.org/pro-grams/grantees.htm).

Although the above four programs address the need for early intervention services in IMH, many challenges and opportunities remain. Zeanah et al describe the challenges and opportunities in detail in their report "Addressing Social-Emotional Development and Infant Mental Health in Early Childhood Systems".

# **EXHIBIT TWO** Levels of Infant Mental Health Care State-level Coordination, Local-level Coordination, Collaboration, Planning, Collaboration, Planning, Funding & Advocacy Funding & Advocacy **Universal/Preventive Services** Health & Developmental Screening & Assessment Case Management Parenting Education Provision of Care Promotion **Focused Services** Referral for At-Risk Children & Families Consultation **Risk-specific Assessment** & Referral Intervention Education Promotion **Tertiary Intervention Services** Referral **Direct Infant Mental Health Services Diagnostic Assessment** Treatment for Parent & Child Promotion

These are discussed at length in the report Addressing Social-Emotional Development and Infant Mental Health in Early Childhood Systems (Zeanah, Stafford, Nagle, & Rice 2005).

## **FOCUSED/INDICATED INTERVENTIONS**

A number of preventive interventions have targeted social-emotional development in children from high-risk families. Most of these services are provided by non-mental health or para-professionals. The best-developed of these programs is the Nurse Family Partnership (NFP) program. This intervention program was designed originally as a randomized controlled trial, and has been successfully replicated at three demographically diverse sites (Kitzman et al, 1997; Olds et al, 1988, 1986, 1998). Positive outcomes are found 15 years after the birth of the first child, including:

- Lower rates of being identified as perpetrators of child abuse and neglect,
- Fewer subsequent births,

- Larger gaps of time between birth of first and second child,
- Less time receiving AFDC,
- Lower rates of criminal behavior (Olds et al, 1997).

In these focused interventions, targeted outcomes vary, but may include the caregiver-child relationship, secure attachment, family mediators of child well-being, parenting skills acquisition, improving infant behaviors, subsequent school achievement, and improving parent educational, work and mental health outcomes. Notably, many of these interventions address a variety of family issues, and are not short-term.

In **Exhibit Three**, six examples of focused and indicated intervention models are described in detail, including the target population and program outcomes.

# **TERTIARY CARE-PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC APPROACHES**

Infant mental health is also a new mental health service, and training in infant mental health assessment and intervention techniques is uncommon in most mental health training programs. In addition to lack of training, other issues impact the development of treatments, such as a lack of:

- Baseline data about which problems require intervention;
- Agreement about diagnostic criteria;
- Comprehensive, well-integrated services;
- Longitudinal outcome studies;
- Well defined outcome criteria; and
- The need for multiple informants for assessment and treatment.

Nevertheless, a number of psychotherapeutic approaches have been developed to modify either the interactions between caregiver and child and/or the caregiver's expectations of, feelings, and reactions to the infant. Several approaches appear to be useful in addressing severe relationship and social-emotional problems in young children and their caregivers. Validation studies are being undertaken to assure effectiveness. Six examples of tertiary care-psychotherapeutic approach models are described in **Exhibit Four**.

# **LESSONS LEARNED**

In their summary of IMH interventions, Egeland and Bosquet (2001) identify several lessons learned:

- 1. Interventions with high-risk families are more successful when they address not only the parent-
- child relationship, but also the extenuating problems parents face, such as poverty, unemployment, housing, and substance abuse.
- 2. The caregiver's relationships with other family members and partners also need to be addressed, as they impact the mother's relationship with the infant.
- 3. Interventions should begin as early as possible, preferably during pregnancy so that the parent can rely on a relationship with an established provider before having to support her infant.
- 4. Early intervention programs need to be of sufficient length and intensity, including frequency of services, length of therapeutic engagement, and complete duration of services, in order to be effective.

In addition, Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) emphasize the need for individualized services that also target the everyday experiences of the child and caregiver, as well as the importance of interventions targeting the caregiver-child relationship, rather than either the parent or the child.

## **SUMMARY**

This review describes many interventions designed to influence the development of healthy parentinfant relationships and infant social-emotional development. Despite the current limitations, the field is continuing to evolve and demonstrate short and long-term interventions that show positive outcomes. Although many interventions to date do not change attachment classifications, they often do seem to improve parent-infant interactions, as well as other influences that may negatively impact the child's social-emotional development.

EXHIBIT THREE: FOCUSED/INDICATED SERVICES					
INTERVENTION TITLE / MODE	TARGET POPULATION	PROVIDER	INTERVENTION LENGTH OF INTERVENTION		
Nurse Family Partnership (1)* (NFP)	First-time, poor mothers	Registered Nurses	Weekly or bi-weekly home visits by specially trained nurses Pregnancy to age 2 years		
Steps Toward Enjoyable, Effective Parenting (2) (STEEP)	New Mothers	Parenting facilitator	Home visits to develop relationship. Group time with dyadic play. Discussion of common stressors and supports, developmental expectations, sensitive responses to infant cues, child care Pregnancy through age 3		
Promoting First Relationships (3)	Homeless mothers and infants	Trained child care providers and nurse consult- ants	Attachment based training in practical, effective strategies to promote secure relationships between mothers and babies; reviews of videotaped mother-infant interaction and discussion of emotional needs Eight week duration		
Sensitivity Coaching (4)	Mothers of irritable infants	Trained professionals	Coaching mother to be more sensitive using videotapes three-five sessions		
Home Visiting Family Support Program (5)	Poor mothers and their infants with histories of validated abuse/ neglect, psychiatric hospital stay or depression	Trained professionals and para- professionals (lay home visitors)	Providing an accepting and trustworthy relationship, increasing families' competence in accessing resources, modeling and reinforcing more interactive, positive and developmentally appropriate exchanges between mother and infant, and decreasing social isolation through participation in weekly group 47 visits over 18 months		
UCLA Family Development Project (6)	First-time, poor mothers	Trained professionals	Positive, trusting, and working relationship with a weekly home visitor as well as a mother infant group		

\*Each program is numbered to assist the reader to identify relevant citations in the Intervention References Section.

OUTCOMES	EVIDENCE BASE	
Decreased a variety of child health and development problems, including child abuse and neglect, accidents, and injuries. Long-term outcomes in both child and maternal behavioral indices	Randomized controlled trials in three sites by the same investigative team	
Reduced stressful life events experienced by families, promoted realistic expectations about child development and parenting, decreased social isolation and improved the quality of the child's environment	Two randomized controlled trials by two different groups	
Providers reported improved positive, contingent, and instructive interactions with parents. Mothers more contingent, socially and emotionally responsive with infants.	Subjects as their own controls, pre- and post-intervention measures	
Increased security of attachment in infants of mothers who received training	Three randomized controlled trials compared to no intervention by three investigative groups	
Enhanced secure attachment and reduced disorganized attachment in intervention group compared to two control groups. Bayley scores were 10 points higher (2/3 of a standard deviation in intervention groups); effects most apparent in context of maternal depression	Case comparison of intervention versus community controls and a high-risk untreated comparison group	
Intervention group showed increased partner and family support for mothers, increased maternal responsiveness, and increased secure attachment in intervention group, all at infant age 12 months. Mothers of infants age 24 months showed more developmentally appropriate maternal control.	Randomized controlled trial comparing intervention to pediatric follow-up	

EXHIBIT FOUR: TERTIARY AND PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC SERVICES					
INTERVENTION TITLE / MODE	TARGET POPULATION	PROVIDER	INTERVENTION LENGTH OF INTERVENTION		
Relational Psychotherapy Mother's Group (7)*	Substance abusing mothers with self-identified parenting problems	Trained psycho- therapists along with substance abuse counselor	Supportive group therapy with relational focus and insight-oriented parenting skill facilitation 24-week integrated intervention		
Interaction Guidance (8)	Clinic-referred infants and their parents	Trained psycho- therapists	Strengths-based treatment that emphasizes caregiver involvement. Includes videotaped interactions between caregiver and child, and dyadic, reflective discussions between caregiver and supportive therapist Focus on here and now interactions between caregiver and child 12 sessions, four to six month duration		
Tulane Infant Team (9)	Abused and neglected infant and toddlers in foster care	Trained psycho- therapists	Integrated clinical team approach to assessment and treatment of child, foster and birth parents, as well as a systems intervention aimed at child protective services and juvenile court Average treatment 18 months		
Early Intervention Foster Care Program (10)	Abused and neglected three-six year old children in foster care	Trained professionals	Intensive training of foster parents, consultant assigned to provide support and supervision, foster parent group, behavioral intervention with children, medication by psychiatrist as needed 6-9 months		
Infant/Child - Parent Psychotherapy (11)	Immigrant, depressed, domestic violence dyads	Trained psycho- therapists	Emotional support, concrete assistance, developmental guidance, and insight-oriented psychotherapy Average of 12 months		
Cognitive behavioral psychotherapy (12)	Sexually abused preschool girls	Trained psycho- therapists	Parent and child sessions focused on educa- tional aspects of trauma coupled with efforts to reduce child's symptoms through titrated exposure to safety education and assertiveness training, identification of appropriate versus inappropriate touching, attributions regarding the abuse, ambivalent feelings toward the perpetrator, regressive and inappropriate behaviors, and fear and anxiety. 12 sessions for parent and child		

\*Each program is numbered to assist the reader to identify relevant citations in the Intervention References Section.

OUTCOMES	EVIDENCE BASE		
Decreased maltreatment risk, improved affective and instrumental interaction, and improved adherence to drug treatment	One randomized controlled clinical trial compared to standard drug treatment. Expanding to a new toddler program		
Reduced symptoms in children— indistinguishable from alternative intervention	One randomized controlled trial of clinic referred infants and toddlers (interaction guidance vs. psychoanalytic psychotherapy)		
Reduced recidivism in index group (child less likely to be maltreated again and mother less likely to return with a subse- quently maltreated child)	Case-cohort comparison		
Reduced failed placements in index children	Randomized controlled trial comparing to usual services		
Enhanced attachment, reduced symptoms in mothers and children	Three randomized controlled trials by two different investigative teams		
Reduced symptoms in sexually abused girls immediately after treatment and at one year follow-up	Randomized controlled trial comparing cognitive behavioral psychotherapy to non-directive therapy with child		

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