



PROMOTING THE EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES—Policy Brief 1

Building Services and Systems to Support the Healthy Emotional Development of Young Children—An Action Guide for Policymakers (JANUARY 2002)

OVERVIEW

For most young children, early experiences—sensitive, responsive parents, stable child care situations, and generally supportive emotional experiences—provide the kind of nurturing and stimulation that enables them to develop age-appropriate emotional and cognitive competencies. But there is also a group of young children for whom emotional development does not proceed smoothly, placing the children at risk for poor cognitive, social, and behavioral outcomes. To date, there has been very little systematic attention paid to how to develop policies and practices to promote healthy emotional development in these children. This guide is for policymakers and community leaders who want to craft such policies and improve practices. It paints a portrait of the kinds of young children and families who are in need of preventive, early intervention, or treatment services; highlights why policymakers should invest in such services; describes emerging principles and strategies for what are often called early childhood mental health services; and offers concrete tips from early leaders in these efforts, as well as more general recommendations.

KEY FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH: WHY POLICY-MAKERS SHOULD INVEST IN IMPROVING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH IN YOUNG CHILDREN

- The earliest years set the stage for lifetime emotional skills, competencies, and problems.
- Many young children are not developing the emotional skills that they will need to succeed in school and be productive members of society.
- Achieving the national policy goal of school readiness for all children requires paying more strategic attention to early social, emotional, and behavioral challenges as well as cognitive and physical development.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

Early childhood mental health strategies should be designed to:

- Enhance the emotional and behavioral well-being of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers to promote early school success, particularly those whose emotional development is compromised by poverty or other risk factors.
- Help parents be more effective nurturers.
- Expand the competencies of nonfamilial caregivers to prevent and address problems.
- Ensure that more seriously troubled young children get appropriate help.

Effective mental health services for young children are:

- Grounded in developmental knowledge.
- Relationship-based.
- Family supportive.

- Infused into existing early childhood networks and services.
- Responsive to the community and cultural context.
- Attentive to outcomes, especially those related to school readiness.

Emerging service delivery strategies and initiatives have these elements in common:

- Initial leadership comes from different agencies and systems.
- Partnerships are key.
- Services offered reflect a range of intensities, from those that promote emotional health to early intervention to treatment strategies.
- Entry points vary, but all build on the existing community network of early childhood services, such as home visiting, Early Head Start, Head Start, and center and family-based child care.

TEN ACTION STEPS TO MOVE THE AGENDA

1. Build the vision and get started, even with one cluster of services, such as early childhood mental health consultation.
2. Pay attention to language and employ words that are “user-friendly.” Sometimes policymakers, families, and the public find the term “early childhood mental health” off-putting.
3. Develop state, community, and national strategies to ensure that healthy emotional development is integrated into the larger early childhood agenda.
4. Ensure a strong family voice in the planning and implementation of services and service delivery strategies to promote children’s healthy emotional development.
5. Address the key infrastructure and policy challenges, including funding, serving young children who are at risk of developing and experiencing long-lasting emotional and behavioral problems, and building needed interagency collaborations.
6. Expand the capacity and size of the work force with the appropriate child development and mental health skills and perspectives.
7. Increase the ability to track outcomes, efficacy, and cost.
8. Build the evidence base about the effectiveness of different kinds of interventions, especially linked to outcomes such as school readiness.
9. Forge national coalitions and partnerships.
10. Strengthen federal leadership.

CONCLUSION

Many kinds of services are emerging to help emotionally at-risk children. These include interventions for parents and children, both separately and together—such as informal parent play groups facilitated by mental health professionals and infant-parent therapy. Other services take the form of classroom-based interventions for preschool-age children; crisis intervention; consultation and training to child care providers, teachers, and others who work directly with children and families; and screening and assessment strategies. Even in the face of limited resources, by forging new alliances and building on local and state assets that already exist, it is possible to move forward and respond to an arena of child development that has, from a public policy and practice perspective, been too long ignored.

For more information about government agencies, the courts, and other child welfare partners pursuing these strategies and contact information, as well as research citations, please refer to Promoting the Emotional Well-Being of Children and Families Policy Paper No. 1: *Building Services and Systems to Support the Healthy Emotional Development of Young Children—An Action Guide for Policymakers*, by Jane Knitzer. Copies of the full publication are available through the NCCP Web site at: www.nccp.org.

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