

How Early Childhood Education Providers Can Use COVID-19 Relief Funds to Establish Lasting Mental Health Supports for Staff and Children

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After more than a year of the COVID-19 pandemic, many young children have experienced disruptions to their daily routines, missed seeing family and friends, mourned the death of loved ones, or felt the strain and uncertainty of economic difficulties. These disruptions and trauma can have lasting effects to children's social and emotional development and contribute to behavior difficulties. In fact, a [recent study](#) found high rates of challenging behavior of preschoolers and associated exclusionary practices such as suspension and expulsion in early care and education (ECE) settings during the pandemic. It has always been important to think about ways to strengthen teachers' ability to promote children's social-emotional growth and positive behavior; the recent influx of federal COVID-19 relief funds provides an opportunity to fund such educational supports and services. President Biden's American Families Plan which seeks to expand access to high quality child care may make even more funds available.



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State agency leaders and early childhood educators can use infant and early childhood mental health consultation (IECMHC) to meet children's social and emotional needs during and beyond the pandemic.

IECMHC is prevention-focused; consultants work with ECE providers and families to identify and use practices that support children's social-emotional skills and behaviors that help children learn and thrive. IECMHC activities include modeling effective positive behavior support, training ECE staff in creating and implementing individualized behavior support plans, and linking families to community mental health services and care coordination. For example, a consultant can observe the classroom to assess when and where transitioning from one activity to the next may promote challenging behaviors. The consultant can support the provider with recommendations about how to implement developmentally appropriate practices such as using the cleanup song "Clean up, clean up everybody everywhere..." as a cue that one activity is ending and a new activity is beginning, and having children sing while they transition.

What IECMHC is and isn't

IECMHC is **not** focused on "fixing kids" or providing therapy directly to children. Rather, consultants typically focus on building the capacity of *adults* who work with infants and young children. IECMH consultants are trained professionals with knowledge about child development, the effects of stress and trauma, and how adult mental health can impact children. They work with caregivers in a variety of settings including prekindergarten programs, child care centers, home-based settings, and with informal family, friend, and neighbor caregivers. The duration and frequency of IECMHC services may range from 1-6 hours per week and from 6 weeks to up to one year or longer.

Research shows that IECMHC produces many positive outcomes for infants and young children, their families, and caregivers.

Benefits of IECMHC for infants and young children:

- Improved social skills
- Improved emotional functioning
- Reduced challenging behaviors
- Reduced suspensions and expulsions

Benefits of IECMHC for families and caregivers:

- Improved child-adult relationships
 - Reduced provider stress
 - Reduced provider burnout
 - Reduced provider turnover
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The recent influx of federal COVID-19 relief funds can help states pay for IECMHC.

The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 provides new opportunities to fund IECMHC, including the following:

- Nearly \$24 billion for stabilization funds for eligible child care providers that is administered by state lead agencies. These funds can cover **expenses related to mental health supports for children and ECE providers**.
- \$1.5 billion for Community Mental Health Services and Block Grant Funding. These funds can be used to **establish or expand IECMHC**, especially for underserved populations (e.g., children of color, families living in rural areas) and prioritize coordination of IECMHC within a community-based mental health system.
- \$80 million for Pediatric Mental Health Care Access grant funding. States without existing Pediatric Mental Health Care Access programs can pursue grants to build IECMHC capacity into program design and budget. States with existing programs can pursue opportunities to **increase IECMHC expertise and capacity** within their programs.

How can you encourage state leaders to access new federal funding opportunities? Talking points for program directors and providers:

- The American Rescue Plan Act can provide our state with funds to support mental health services for ECE providers and children in their care.
- This is a golden opportunity for us to fund an evidence-based, prevention strategy called infant and early childhood mental health consultation or IECMHC.
- IECMHC supports ECE providers in helping children develop key social-emotional competencies that are critical for their success in school and life.
- Our state leaders should take advantage of this unique and historic opportunity to build and expand supports for young children and their caregivers.

Additionally, the Office of Child Care in the Administration for Children & Families recently released guidance about how states, territories, and tribes can use Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act funds and their Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) quality set-asides to support the social-emotional health of staff and children, including services like IECMHC, which is cited as an allowable mental health support (see page 20 in the [Information Memorandum](#) issued on 5/10/21). States like [Arkansas](#) have used these funds to coordinate and link their [IECMHC program](#) participants with professional development that focuses on high quality daily practices.

The full consequences of the pandemic on young children and their families' health and well-being have yet to be seen, but addressing children's social-emotional needs now is critical for their later success in school and life. The opportunity to leverage new federal funding to support ECE providers in establishing positive learning environments through IECMHC could ultimately build professional capacities as it simultaneously increases children's competencies, with lasting impacts in ECE practices and policies.

Resources for Ongoing Learning

We compiled the information for this post from the following available resources.

- [Center of Excellence for Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation](#) provides technical assistance to programs, communities, states, territories, and tribal communities, and individual mental health consultants to increase access to high quality mental health consultation throughout the country.
 - [About Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation](#) provides a brief 2-page overview about IECMHC.
 - [Best Practice Tutorial Series](#) provides information about how to enhance your skills and knowledge around how to implement effective mental health consultation.
- The [Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation: Policies and Practices to Foster the Social-Emotional Development of Young Children](#) consultation brief by ZERO to THREE provides an overview of ECMHC and current issues in the field (including state profiles about how ECMHC programs are funded, managed, implemented, and staffed).
- [A Resource Guide for Developing Integrated Strategies to Support the Social and Emotional Wellness of Children](#) by the Office of Child Care describes how to integrate social-emotional supports as part of the Child Care and Development Fund quality activities.
- [Information Memorandum](#) (April 14, 2021) from the Office of Child Care that provides an overview and guidance on the supplemental CCDF discretionary funds made available through the CRRSA Act.
- [American Rescue Plan Act of 2021](#)
 - ZERO TO THREE and The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) hosted a [webinar](#) about opportunities to support babies and families in the American Rescue Plan Act.
 - CLASP describes [Child Care Relief Funding in the American Rescue Plan and provides state-by-state estimates](#).

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Note. This blog post is crossposted on the SRI Education website.