

I had one zero to Three
friends send material
b/c I couldn't bear to
talk of them at the
length they wanted. Use
these materials if they're
helpful - I told them
her focus was not

early development & that
her role is more
interactive than formal
remarks. Maybe you could
include a question that
speaks to the early
childhood development
issue.

Nicole



National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families

MEMORANDUM

TO: Nicole Rabner
FROM: Matthew Melmed
DATE: May 28, 1999
RE: Mental Health Conference

Thank you so much for inviting us to prepare brief talking points on what we know about mental health and emotional development during the first three years of life. We are delighted, as always, by Mrs. Clinton's leadership in promoting the healthy emotional and social development of infants and toddlers.

The following talking points are based on input from many ZERO TO THREE Board members and staff. We have also included a list of some potential ideas for promoting and protecting the mental health of young children. We certainly have no expectation that they will be included in Mrs. Clinton's remarks, but thought they may be useful to stimulate some policy discussion around these issues. Please let us know if we can be of any further assistance.

Introduction

- The American public has heard a great deal in the past several years about the importance of the earliest years of life in laying the foundation for all that follows.
- Our attention to promoting and protecting mental health should begin at the very earliest moments of life and continue through the life span.
- Positive emotional interactions early in life are critical for building positive mental health including empathy, resilience, and healthy coping strategies.
- We now know that mental health disorders can occur very early in life. Even before they are a year old, babies can suffer from clinical depression, traumatic stress disorder, and a variety of other mental health disorders.
- Fortunately, however, there are many effective approaches to preventing, assessing, and treating mental health disorders in infants, toddlers and their families if only we identify them early and if parents and professionals are informed and trained.

Relationships are critical

- All children need stable, caring adults in their lives. It is through continuous, day-to-day relationships with parents, child care providers, and other caregivers that infants and toddlers develop emotionally and socially.
- Young children learn about the world through their own actions, and their caregivers' responses and expectations. They learn about who they are, how to feel about themselves and what they can expect from those who care for them. Such basic human capacities as the ability to feel trust, to experience

intimacy with, and cooperate with others, develop in these very early relationships with parents and other caregivers.

- Parents and caregivers, in turn, need and seek trustworthy support from relatives, friends, their community, and sometimes from professionals.

Stressors strain relationships

- Young children are extremely vulnerable to negative experiences. Poverty, a violent environment, and racism can impact a young child's mental health in very significant ways.
- Research has found that a strong secure attachment to a nurturing caregiver has a protective biological function, helping the child learn to cope with stresses.
- Longitudinal studies beginning in infancy affirm that infants who are securely attached to their caregivers -- emotionally connected, enjoyable and trustworthy in the daily grind -- can regulate their emotions better and have more self control as adolescents.
- Sometimes when parents are so overwhelmed themselves by depression, their own experiences of poverty, racism, violence, or drug abuse they are unable to provide their young child with the nurture and caregiving they require. The child's stress can become exacerbated.
- There is a hormone in the brain called cortisol which is produced when we perceive danger. When children suffer repeated neglect and trauma during their vulnerable 0-3 years, high cortisol levels also lead to increased activity in the brain structure involved in vigilance and arousal.
 - As a result, the parts of the brain that allow for only immediate responses related to biological survival become overdeveloped. This means that the slightest stress can unleash a new surge of hormones.
 - This over-development is associated with anxiety, impulsivity, poor regulation of emotions, and hyperactivity. Often, these children become overly quick to interpret others' actions as threatening, and overly quick to respond aggressively in their own defense.

Examples of stressors and their impact: violence and foster care

- Unfortunately, ever increasing numbers of young children are being exposed to violence as victims or as witnesses. Many people think that infants and young children who witness violence are "too young to know what happened." They "don't take it in." They "won't remember."
- In fact, infants and young children can be overwhelmed by their exposure to violence especially -- as is likely to be the case with very young children -- when both victims and perpetrators are well-known and emotionally important to the child and the violence occurs in or near the child's home.
- Trauma occurring early in life can have enduring developmental consequences. Unfortunately, few victims or witnesses of violence receive the support and help they need. (see the enclosed publications -- *Hurt Healing Hope: Caring for Infants and Toddlers in Violent Environments* and *Islands of Safety: Assessing and Treating Young Victims of Violence*)
- Just as infants and toddlers are increasingly becoming victims or witnesses, they are also now the fastest growing category of children entering foster care. In fact, children less than four years old are twice as likely to enter foster care than those ages 5 to 17.
- Sudden separation from parents, added to the experiences that precipitated placement, may leave young children traumatized and can severely stunt their social emotional, and even physical growth and development unless they receive appropriate evaluation and care.
- Unfortunately, many of the professionals who work with and make decisions about the lives of young children in foster care do not understand and appreciate their unique developmental

needs, and services to meet the complex needs of very young children, foster parents, and birth parents are scarce.

What can we do to promote and protect the mental health of infants and toddlers?

1. We were delighted to learn about the Administration's decision to require health insurance plans for federal employees to provide equal coverage for mental and physical illnesses. This monumental step presents a tremendous opportunity to protect and promote the emotional and social development of our youngest children.

Guidelines should ensure that insurance companies encourage clinicians (i.e. reimburse for) to use developmentally appropriate diagnostic and assessment tools, and to provide developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive mental health treatment and services when working with infants, toddler and their families. Prevention, and prompt identification of mental health and developmental problems, and early intervention can eliminate or greatly reduce the need for more costly rehabilitative efforts.

Federal guidelines should encourage insurance companies to:

- when appropriate, provide prenatal mental health services and supports for parents who may be struggling with their own "ghosts in the nursery" before birth. With the right treatment and support, parents who were abused or neglected when they were children or suffer from mental health issues can form healthy and stable relationships with their children.
- offer and expand the use of doulas (providers of emotional support to women at the time of childbirth) to extend beyond labor-only support to include the critical three-month pre-natal and post-partum periods. This would allow doulas to have the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with new mothers based on trust. This model of doula intervention, as demonstrated in the Chicago Doula Project, seems to be having dramatically positive impacts on labor outcomes (including c-sections), breast feeding, and mother-child interactions.
- provide mental health services to babies and parents "where they are." Qualified and well-trained practitioners could provide infant/parent psychotherapy in the home, provide services to individual children and parents in child care settings, and address parents concerns and questions in pediatric settings.
- reimburse clinicians for assessment and treatment based on Diagnostic Classification: 0-3 (DC: 0-3). DC: 0-3 is a comprehensive, developmentally appropriate approach to diagnosis for infants and toddlers developed by ZERO TO THREE. The system pays attention to the quality of the very young child's relationships and caregiving environments, as well as to presenting symptoms and constitutional factors. (Enclosed please find *DC: 0-3* and *Assessing and Treating Infants and Young Children with Severe Difficulties in Relating and Communicating*).

2. As new welfare-to-work requirements affect families with very young children, infants and toddlers are moving into out-of-home care in unprecedented numbers. High-quality child care settings with well-trained and compensated staff can foster healthy social and emotional development and strengthen parent-child relationships. In child care settings, as consultants to staff, mental health professionals can serve families and children who may be facing multiple stressors "where they are." States and communities should be encouraged to integrate mental health services and supports in their child care settings.

Pre-natal & post-partum use of doulas (emotional support)

Clinton Presidential Records Digital Records Marker

This is not a presidential record. This is used as an administrative marker by the William J. Clinton Presidential Library Staff.

This marker identifies the place of a publication.

Publications have not been scanned in their entirety for the purpose of digitization. To see the full publication please search online or visit the Clinton Presidential Library's Research Room.

hurt healing **hope**

Caring for Infants and Toddlers in
Violent Environments



ZERO TO THREE/National Center for Clinical Infant Programs