

## NMAIMH Making a Difference

Promoting & supporting healthy development and nurturing relationships for all infants and young children in New Mexico.



# THE NEW MEXICO ASSOCIATION FOR INFANT MENTAL HEALTH Issues Brief N<sup>o</sup>. 1

## *Infant Mental Health Fundamentals*



**Infant Mental Health** is an interdisciplinary field of research, clinical practice, and public policy-making concerned with maximizing the well-being of infants (birth to age 3 years) and their caregivers. The field of infant mental health works to optimize the psychological, social and emotional well being of infants and toddlers in relationship with their caregivers, environment and culture, and with respect for each child's uniqueness.

**The New Mexico Association for Infant Mental Health (NMAIMH)** is a non-profit, membership organization that promotes and supports healthy development and nurturing relationships for all infants and young children in New Mexico. NMAIMH provides a forum for interdisciplinary collaboration by advocating for the application of infant mental health principles in services for infants, young children and caregivers. NMAIMH works to implement *A Strategic Plan for Infant Mental Health in New Mexico (January 2003)*. The plan can be accessed electronically at: <http://nmaimh.org>

**The purpose of this Issues Brief** (first in a series) is to describe *Infant Mental Health Fundamentals* that should be considered in all service systems and by all service providers working with families with young children.

## *Infant Mental Health Fundamentals*

- Infant Mental Health emphasizes the importance of healthy social-emotional development in infants and toddlers;
- Early development always happens through the day-to-day interactions between the baby or toddler and his or her primary care givers (parents and others with whom the child spends a significant amount of the day and has a strong emotional connection);
- The infant-caregiver relationship is central to social and emotional development and well-being. Through this relationship:
  - The infant begins to understand his world, learns how to interact with others, and begins to develop a sense of his competence and self-worth;
  - The infant experiences environmental risk factors, such as poverty, maternal mental illness, and partner violence, mainly through the way those conditions effect his or her relationship with the caregiver;

- Babies with biological risks, such as complications from prematurity, do better when their caregiving relationships are supportive.
  - The quality of the infant-caregiver relationship is a risk or a protective factor for the infant's later development<sup>1</sup>.
- The way that parents, families, and caregivers relate and respond to young children and the ways that they mediate children's contact with the environment, directly affect the formation of neural pathways.<sup>2</sup>
  - Anything that affects the relationship between the baby and his or her caregivers can have an effect on the infant's mental health.
  - The way in which professionals interact with parents can either positively or negatively impact infant-caregiver relationships.
  - Behaviors such as self-regulation, the ability to communicate feelings to caregivers, and active explorations of the environment are considered indicators of a baby's mental health. These behaviors are important for later social and emotional competence, readiness to enter school, and better academic and social abilities<sup>3</sup>
  - Everyone who works with infants and their families can promote the social and emotional well-being and mental health of each infant and toddler.
  - Everyone who works with infants and their families needs and deserves to have training and supervision that supports them to meet the social and emotional needs of the babies, toddlers and families with whom they work.

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<sup>1,3</sup>Zeanah, P., Stafford, B., Nagle G., Rice T. *Addressing Social-Emotional Development and Infant Mental Health in Early Childhood Systems*. Los Angeles, CA: National Center for Infant and Early Childhood Health Policy; January 2005. Building State Early Childhood Comprehensive System Series, No. 12.

<sup>2</sup>Shore, R. (1997). *Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development*. Families and Work Institute: NY.