

Foundations of *Early Childhood* Mental Health

Early childhood mental health shapes how young children learn, play, and relate to others. Every experience, from interactions during play to support during daily routines, influences how children understand themselves and connect with the world. Positive relationships and responsive care build curiosity, confidence, and emotional skills.

Through these early experiences, young children develop the ability to manage feelings, form friendships, and explore their surroundings.

Supporting early childhood mental health lays the groundwork for lifelong well-being and success.



The Foundations

What are social-emotional skills?

Social-emotional development, also called early childhood mental health, involves children learning to understand and manage emotions and build relationships. When caregivers provide safe, stable, and loving relationships with predictable daily routines, children feel secure enough to explore, learn, and regulate their behavior.

How do we support social and emotional skills?

Research shows that three things strengthen children's school readiness and well-being: building responsive relationships (serve and return), developing core life skills like planning and attention, and reducing sources of stress in children's lives.

How can you teach social and emotional skills?

- Praise positive behavior, especially kindness and helpfulness
- Set expectations that match children's developmental stage.
- Talk about and label feelings, both children's and adult's.
- Encourage friendships, empathy, and sharing.
- Teach problem-solving.
- Make time for play, its how children learn best
- Understand the meaning behind children's behaviors.

When to Seek Help?

Talk to your pediatrician about your child's development and report any changes in the development. Ask for help when:



Infants and Toddlers (birth to age 3)

- Feeding, sleeping, or persistent fussiness.
- Difficulty settling down or getting used to new situations.
- Little interest in play, people, or making sounds and words.
- Limited communication, language delays, or loss of developmental skills.

Preschoolers (ages 3 to 5)

- Long, intense, or frequent temper tantrums
- Little interest in social interaction or difficulty playing with others.
- Trouble focusing, listening, or sitting still
- Delays or loss of developmental skills.



Taking Care of You

Supporting children's social-emotional development starts with taking care of yourself. The ABCs of self-care can guide your thinking and planning:

Awareness

Be aware of your own feelings and stress levels.

Balance

Seek a balance in work and home life.

Connections

Stay connected to friends, family, and colleagues who support you and promote your professional development.



For more resources, visit
mhamd.org/earlychildhood



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Healthy New Families is a program of the Mental Health Association of Maryland. We promote mental health and well-being for new parents, infants and young children, and families across Maryland by connecting families and providers with resources, education, and support.

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