



Infant and Early Childhood *Mental Health* Resource Kit

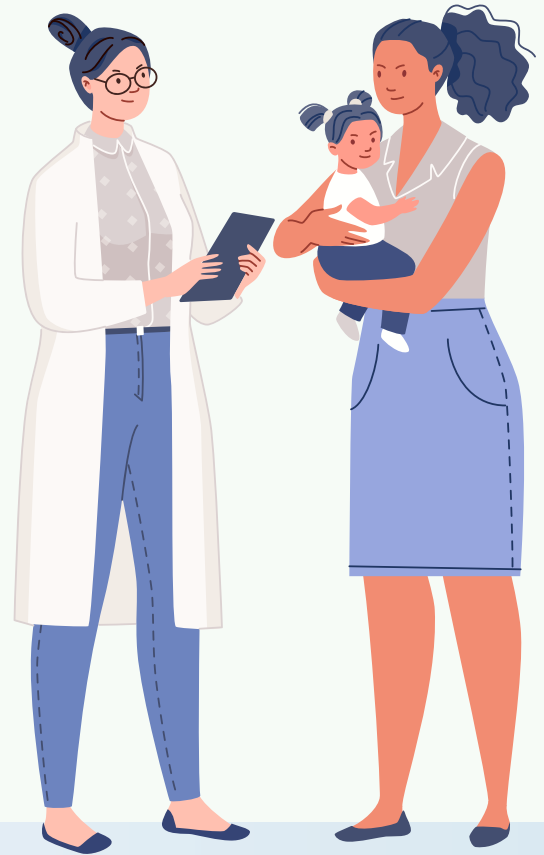


Building Strong *Parent–Provider* Partnerships

Effective parent–provider partnerships bring together the unique expertise of families and professionals to support a child’s growth and development. When parents and providers collaborate, they are better able to identify strengths, address areas of need, and make informed decisions that benefit the child.

Parents are the experts on their child, family, culture, and community. Providers contribute professional training and experience in child development and health. Combining these perspectives strengthens relationships, promotes shared decision-making, and supports healthy development. Growth, healing, and recovery occur within trusting, respectful relationships.

Simply put, two perspectives are better than one!



When to *Seek Support*

Early identification and intervention improve outcomes. An evaluation may be appropriate if a child has:

Lost skills they previously acquired.

Not yet met expected developmental milestones.

Ongoing emotional or behavioral concerns that affect daily functioning.

When You First Learn About a Diagnosis or Concern

Learning about a child’s mental health or developmental concern can feel overwhelming. Helpful strategies include:

- Check in with yourself and acknowledge your feelings.
- Go slow, reflect, and normalize your emotions.
- Talk with trusted people who can offer emotional support.
- Work closely with your child’s primary care team to plan next steps and identify appropriate providers and services.
- Identify your goals for support and services.
- Gather information and ask clear, concise questions.
- Limit exposure to excessive or distressing media content.
- Avoid starting or ending the day with social media or news.
- Connect with parents who have lived experience for support and help navigating services.



Advocating for Your Child and Yourself

Advocating for your child can feel intimidating, but doing so builds strong parent-provider partnerships and ensures the best care.

Take these four steps to advocate for your child and yourself:

- Keep records and track progress to share key information with providers.
- Ask questions and clarify recommendations to understand next steps.
- Know your rights and resources to access needed support and services.
- Collaborate, seek support, and care for yourself while working with providers.

Trust Your Instincts

You know your child better than anyone!

Relationships are central to growth, with parents leading the way to ensure children thrive.



Find the right fit for you and your child

Providers can help you anticipate and navigate the evaluation and treatment process.



Knowledge is power

When parents understand their child's diagnosis and actively participate in treatment, they become full partners in their child's care.



For more resources, visit
mhamd.org/earlychildhood



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Child Development

Stages and Milestones

Development is how children grow and learn to move, speak, think, and interact with others. While every child develops at their own pace, developmental milestones offer a general guide for what to expect at different ages. These milestones fall into four key areas: physical (movement), cognitive (learning and thinking), social and emotional, and communication (language).



Infancy Birth to 12 Months

Physical

Lifts head, rolls over, sits with support, and may crawl or stand.

Communication

Coos, babbles, and uses gestures such as waving.

Social and Emotional

Smiles, recognizes caregivers, and shows attachment.

Cognitive

Explores with hands and mouth and follows objects with their eyes.



Toddlerhood 1-3 Years

Physical

Walks, runs, climbs, and uses utensils.

Communication

Says single words, combines words, and follows simple directions.

Social and Emotional

Shows independence, may have tantrums, and plays near other children.

Cognitive

Sorts shapes and colors and begins pretend play.



Preschool 3-5 Years

Physical

Hops, stands on one foot, and dresses self.

Communication

Speaks in sentences, asks questions, and tells simple stories.

Social and Emotional

Plays with others, shows empathy, and follows simple rules.

Cognitive

Counts, names colors, and understands basic time concepts.



School Age 6-12 Years

Physical

Improves coordination and learns sports or instruments.

Communication

Uses complex sentences and understands others' perspectives.

Social and Emotional

Forms friendships and develops self-esteem.

Cognitive

Thinks logically and solves problems.



Adolescence 13-18 Years

Physical

Experiences growth spurts and puberty-related changes.

Communication

Expresses complex ideas and engages in debate.

Social and Emotional

Seeks independence and values peer relationships.

Cognitive

Thinks abstractly and plans for the future.

When to Talk to Your Pediatrician

Talk to your child's pediatrician if your child loses skills, does not respond to sounds or people, or shows significant delays in:



Movement



Speech



Social Interaction

Early support can make a big difference.

Every child is unique. If you have concerns, your pediatrician can help guide you.



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Educator Essentials *for Early Childhood* Mental Health

Early childhood is a critical period for social, emotional, and behavioral development that directly affects learning and classroom engagement. The experiences children have in their early years influence how they manage emotions, interact with peers, and participate in educational settings.

Supportive routines, positive relationships, and responsive guidance help children develop skills such as self-regulation, problem-solving, and cooperation. Understanding and supporting early childhood mental health enables educators to create classrooms where every child can succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.

Early Childhood Mental Health Defined

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. In their first five years, children develop the ability to recognize and regulate a range of emotions. When educators and caregivers provide safe, stable, and predictable environments, children feel secure enough to explore, learn, and manage their feelings and behaviors.

Why are social-emotional skills important?

Social-emotional development is key to children's health and school readiness. When children feel safe and confident, they engage more deeply in learning, try new things, and build stronger academic and problem-solving skills.

How can teachers support social and emotional skills?

Teachers support development through responsive relationships, predictable environments, and activities that build emotional and social skills and core life skills such as self-regulation and problem-solving. Partnering with families and reducing stress helps children build coping skills, regulate emotions, and stay ready to learn.

How can you teach social and emotional skills?

- Praise positive behaviors
- Create developmentally appropriate environments
- Set expectations that match children's abilities
- Understand and respond to the meaning behind children's behavior
- Label and talk about both adult's and children's feelings
- Encourage friendships and empathy
- Teach problem-solving skills
- Read books about feelings and sharing
- Use positive discipline strategies



When to Seek Help?

Monitor children's development and share concerns with parents or specialists. Seek help when:



Infants and Toddlers (birth to age 3)

- Feeding, sleeping, or persistent irritability
- Separation anxiety, aggression, or withdrawal
- Limited communication, language delays, or loss of developmental skills

Preschoolers (ages 3 to 5)

- Unusual, impulsive, or overactive behaviors
- Long or intense temper tantrums, repeated aggression, or withdrawal
- Limited interest in social interaction or difficulty playing with others
- Inattention or delays in language and developmental skills



Taking Care of You

Supporting children's social-emotional development starts with taking care of yourself. Rest, hydration, continuous learning, and peer support all help reduce burnout. Use the ABCs of self-care as a guide:

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.



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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.



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Healthy Attachment *in Early Childhood*

Healthy attachments are the foundation for lifelong health. Building a durable foundation in the earliest years of life supports learning, behavior, health, and mental health into adulthood.

Parents, grandparents, childcare providers, teachers, pediatricians, and anyone helping to care for young children can all help strengthen the roots that help children grow and learn.

Science shows that when we follow these three principles, we create strong foundations for healthy development:

Reduce Sources of Stress

Strengthen Core Skills

Support Responsive Relationships

Together, we can help children feel safe, nurtured, loved, and understood. When caregivers strengthen their relationships and core skills, they manage their own stress more effectively, and in turn, children learn to manage and express their big feelings and engage in learning.



Understanding Attachment

What is attachment?

Attachment is a lifelong process that begins with the emotional connection between an infant and their primary caregiver. It grows through consistent, sensitive, and responsive care, giving children a sense of security and trust. Healthy attachment helps children feel important, safe, and confident. Each caregiver and child bring their own personality, temperament, and experiences to this relationship.

Are bonding and attachment the same thing?

Bonding is the feeling a parent develops during pregnancy and after birth that motivates loving, caring responses to their baby. **Attachment** is the relationship that a parent and child build over time through consistent, responsive interactions.

Both describe the connection between a parent and child, but attachment has a broader and more enduring meaning. Bonding starts with the parent's feelings; attachment develops through repeated, sensitive caregiving over time.

Myth or Fact?

“Picking up a crying baby will spoil them.”

Myth. Crying is a baby’s way of communicating a need. Responding teaches them they are safe and cared for, building trust and emotional security.

“Attachment can only form in infancy.”

Myth. It's never too late to build attachment. Relationships grow at any age through consistency, empathy, and connection.

“I must be with my child 24/7 for attachment.”

Myth. Children need reliable, responsive adults — not constant contact. The quality of interaction matters more than the quantity.



The Development of Attachment: *Month by Month*

Birth-2 Months

Infants and parents learn each other’s cues. Babies use sight, sound, and touch to connect. Some babies give clear signals, while others are more subtle.

3-7 Months

Families build routines that help babies feel secure. Babies use their whole bodies — smiling, reaching, kicking — to communicate.

8-12 Months

Babies show preferences and begin asserting independence. Simple games like peek-a-boo teach babies that loved ones still exist when out of sight, building trust and security.

13-20 Months

Toddlers are eager to explore. Caregivers keep environments safe, label feelings, and respond sensitively — helping children manage emotions and grow with confidence.

21-26 Months

Toddlers test limits and express strong feelings. Caregivers balance warmth and guidance — firm when needed, but always kind and consistent — responding with empathy and teaching appropriate behavior.

Ways to Foster Healthy Attachment

- Learn your child’s temperament
- Read their cues and label feelings
- Accept and validate their emotions, even when different from your own
- Respond consistently and create daily moments of connection



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Intergenerational *Trauma and ACEs* in Families

What are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)?

The term ACEs comes from a landmark 1998 public health study, the largest of its kind. The study found that childhood abuse, neglect, and other adversities before age 18 can affect health throughout life. What happens in childhood can impact physical health, mental health, and overall well-being in adulthood.

ACEs fall into three categories:

- Abuse (physical, sexual, emotional)
- Neglect (physical, emotional)
- Household challenges (exposure to domestic violence, family separation, parental substance use, untreated mental health issues, or criminal behavior)

Researchers describe the relationship between ACEs and health as a "dose response effect" — the more ACEs a person experiences, the greater the risk of health and life problems.

Parents and caregivers need support, tools, and skills to help calm stress, for themselves and for their children. When caregivers can respond in safe, caring, and responsive ways, children are better able to grow, learn, and thrive.



Key Truths About ACEs

- ACEs are common across all communities
- They often happen together
- Experiencing three or more ACEs increases the risk of health and life challenges
- ACEs can affect both mental and physical health, contributing to disease, disability, and shorter life expectancy

How Stress Affects Children

When children experience ongoing stress or danger, their body's alarm system stays activated. Over time, this stress response may lead to chronic inflammation and increase the risk of health problems later in life. Children's bodies are meant to handle short bursts of stress and then recover. When children have chances to feel safe and supported, their bodies can reset, building strength and resilience.

Does stress affect all children the same?

Not all children who experience ACEs develop health or mental health problems, but early traumatic experiences such as abuse or neglect can disrupt brain development.

When young children perceive their environment as unsafe or threatening, stress levels rise and interfere with learning, emotional regulation, and development. Experiencing multiple adversities reduces opportunities to build resilience and raises the risk of poor health and life outcomes. Because young children's developing brains and bodies are especially sensitive to these effects, early support matters, it is not always best to "wait and see."

Parents and caregivers need support, tools, and skills to help calm stress—for themselves and for their children. When caregivers can respond in safe, caring, and responsive ways, children are better able to grow, learn, and thrive.

The Impact of ACEs on Parenting

Adverse Childhood Experiences can affect both children and adults. Adults who experienced ACEs may face challenges in managing stress, emotions, or relationships, which can influence their parenting.

Intergenerational trauma is the passing of trauma effects from one generation to the next. Parents who experienced trauma in childhood may unintentionally carry stress, fears, or coping patterns into their parenting. Recognizing these patterns can help break the cycle and support healthier family dynamics.

Signs of ACEs in parenting can include:

- Difficulty managing stress or emotions
- Overreacting or underreacting to children's behaviors
- Trouble setting consistent routines or boundaries
- Withdrawal from or difficulty connecting with children
- High anxiety, fear, or overprotectiveness
- Struggling to ask for or accept help

Understanding the impact of ACEs and intergenerational trauma allows parents, caregivers, and professionals to provide support that promotes resilience, healthy relationships, and family well-being.



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Parental Mental Health in the Perinatal Period

Becoming a parent brings both joy and new challenges. During pregnancy and the first year after birth, both mothers and fathers can experience perinatal mental health conditions. While changes in mood and emotions are common, these conditions are also common, treatable, and often go unrecognized. Early awareness, open conversations, and timely support can make a meaningful difference for both parents and their babies.



How common are parental mental health conditions during pregnancy and after the baby is born?

1 in 7 women will experience a mood or anxiety disorder during pregnancy or postpartum.

1 in 10 fathers will also struggle with depression or anxiety after having a baby.

Suicide is one of the leading causes of death among birthing women in the U. S.

Signs and Symptoms

Signs a parent may need support include:

- Persistent sadness, guilt, shame, or hopelessness
- Difficulty bonding with the baby or loss of joy
- Anger, irritability, or extreme mood changes
- Changes in sleep, appetite, or physical well-being
- Thoughts of self-harm, harming others, or experiencing hallucinations

If you or someone you know is experiencing these signs, seek support from a healthcare professional. If there is immediate danger or thoughts of harming yourself or others, **call 911** right away.

Common Perinatal Mental Health Conditions

Baby Blues - Affects 50% to 80% of birthing women. Mild mood swings, irritability, and crying typically begin a few days after birth and resolve within two weeks and do not get in the way of daily activities

Postpartum Depression - Affects 10% to 15% of parents. Persistent sadness, anxiety, and hopelessness that interfere with daily life and can last up to a year.

Postpartum Anxiety - Affects 11% to 21% of birthing women. Ongoing worry, nervousness, or panic after childbirth or adoption.

Perinatal Post-Traumatic Stress

Disorder (PTSD) - Trauma-related stress after childbirth or another traumatic experience, including flashbacks, nightmares, withdrawal, or new fears lasting more than a month.

Perinatal Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) - Affects 4–9% birthing women. Sudden onset of obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors, often centered on the baby or caregiving.

Postpartum Psychosis - Rare but serious. Hallucinations, paranoia, or thoughts of harm require immediate medical attention.

Ways to Support Parents

Normalize the Conversation - Talk about depression and anxiety as common, treatable health conditions. Acknowledge that stigma is real — many parents fear being judged as inadequate or unsafe if they speak up. Help dispel the myth of effortless bonding and reassure parents that struggling does not mean failing.

Encourage Getting Support - Share trusted resources, offer warm referrals to providers, and encourage reaching out to healthcare providers. Untreated perinatal mental health issues can affect pregnancy outcomes and early child development.

Be Informed About What Helps - Treatment works. Therapy and medication are effective, and so are social and partner support, parenting guidance, self-care, exercise, sleep, and healthy habits.

How You Can Help

- Bring up mental health directly to reduce stigma and give parents space to be honest.
- Follow up and recommend speaking with a pediatrician, OB/GYN, or mental health provider. Normalize getting help.
- Check in about self-care and remind parents that tending to their own well-being is not selfish — it benefits their child too.

When perinatal mental health conditions go untreated, symptoms can worsen and persist for eight years or more. Framing a parent's mental health as directly connected to their baby's health can motivate parents to open up, accept screening, and follow through on referrals to support.



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Recognizing *Developmental Delays* and Behavioral Concerns

Children develop at different rates, but some missed milestones or ongoing behavioral patterns may signal a developmental delay or behavioral concern. Identifying these patterns early is key to getting children the support they need to thrive.

What is a Developmental Delay?

A developmental delay occurs when a child does not reach milestones in motor function, speech, or social skills within the expected age range. A delay is different from a “slow start”; it is a continuous delay in development that may require professional intervention.



Key Areas of Concern



Communication and Language

- **Infancy:** Lack of babbling or gesturing (pointing or waving) by 12 months.
- **Toddlerhood:** No single words by 16 months or no two-word phrases by 24 months.
- **Preschool and School Age:** Difficulty being understood by others, inability to follow simple instructions, or a sudden loss of previously acquired speech.



Motor and Physical Skills

- **Gross Motor:** Excessive floppiness (low muscle tone) or stiffness in the limbs; not walking by 18 months.
- **Fine Motor:** Difficulty grasping objects, using utensils, or showing persistent tremors or uncoordinated movements.



Social and Emotional Development

- **Social Engagement:** Limited eye contact, lack of interest in peers, or not responding to their name by 12 months.
- **Emotional Regulation:** Persistent difficulty transitioning between activities, or frequent, intense behavioral outbursts that are not age-appropriate.
- **Social Reciprocity:** Difficulty understanding social cues or a lack of joint attention (sharing interest in an object with another person).



Cognitive and Learning

- **Problem Solving:** Lack of interest in cause-and-effect play (for example, dropping a toy to watch it fall).
- **Attention:** Significant difficulty sustaining focus on age-appropriate tasks or play.

Identifying Concerning Behavioral Patterns

Occasional “acting out” is a normal part of development. These patterns, however, may warrant a clinical evaluation:

- **Regression:** A significant loss of previously mastered skills, such as toilet training, language, or social engagement.
- **Persistent Aggression:** Frequent physical aggression toward self, others, or property that does not respond to redirection.
- **Withdrawal:** A consistent preference for isolation, lack of emotional response, or appearing disconnected.
- **Repetitive Behaviors:** Intense focus on specific objects or repetitive movements (e.g., hand-flapping or rocking) that interfere with daily life.

Next Steps for Families

If you observe these patterns, it does not necessarily indicate a permanent disability, but it does warrant further investigation.

Document Observations: Note specific behaviors, when they occur, and how long they last.

Consult Your Pediatrician: Share your concerns clearly. They can perform standardized developmental screenings.

Seek Early Intervention: In many areas, families can access evaluation services through local school districts or state-funded early intervention programs.



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Recognizing Signs of Abuse and Neglect in Early Childhood



The Truth About Childhood Abuse and Neglect

According to the Administration for Children and Families (2023):

42 per 1,000

Children received a child protective services investigation or alternative response.

7-8 per 1,000

Children were confirmed victims of abuse or neglect (7.9 girls, 6.9 boys).

About 2,000

Children died from abuse or neglect.

21 per 1,000

Victims were under 1 year old, across all backgrounds.

What is Child Abuse and Neglect?

Child abuse is harm caused by an adult that threatens a child's health and well-being including traumatic brain injury when babies are violently shaken. Child neglect is the failure to provide proper care or meet a child's needs, including:

Physical needs (food, shelter)

Supervision and safety

Medical care

Educational needs

Abandonment

Sexual abuse includes molestation, exploitation, and exposure to sexual activity. Emotional neglect or abuse involves repeated patterns of verbal abuse, harsh punishments, and putdowns that harm children's mental or psychological ability to develop or function.

Why Are Young Children at Higher Risk?

Young children are especially vulnerable because they rely entirely on adults for survival, safety, and development. They cannot protect themselves or ask for help.

Parenting in the early years can be overwhelming, and some families need extra support to meet children's needs. Stress increases when basic needs like housing, food, or utilities are hard to meet, or when parents face mental health, substance use, or domestic violence challenges without adequate help.

These pressures do not mean parents don't care. Without support and resources, stress compounds and parenting becomes harder. Access to support can reduce stress and help prevent abuse and neglect.

How Can We Protect Children and Help Them Thrive?

Research shows that safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments are powerful protective factors. When families have access to services and support, they are better able to provide responsive caregiving— and when stress decreases, children are more likely to thrive even in the face of adversity.

Resource parents (foster parents or extended family caregivers) play a vital role by:

- Building strong, healthy attachments
- Supporting children's emotional needs
- Working with parents and child welfare professionals
- Helping create safety, stability, and permanency for children

Recognizing Signs of Child Abuse, Neglect, and Stress:

Possible physical and behavioral signs include:

- Poor nutrition, malnourishment, or eating concerns (hoarding food, stuffing, extreme pickiness)
- Low energy or lethargy
- Unexplained bruises, injuries, or poor hygiene
- Developmental or dental delays
- Sexual behaviors unusual for age, or self-harming behaviors
- Flinching, fearfulness, or withdrawal

Signs of a traumatic stress response can include:

- Sleep problems, including nightmares
- Distress from noises, touch, smells, tastes, or busy environments
- Feeling sick or experiencing flare-ups of health problems (such as asthma)
- Frequent tantrums or difficulty managing strong emotions
- High activity levels, trouble paying attention, or listening
- Reluctance to play, try new things, or engage socially
- Believing they are bad or to blame for what happened

How to Seek Help



Talk to your providers about parenting resources, support, and trauma treatments to help the whole family heal. Talking about child abuse and neglect is sensitive; your providers will listen and guide you through the steps to get the help and needed to keep children safe and healthy.

Effective therapies exist for both children and caregivers. Look for therapists trained in:

- **Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-Up (ABC):** Helps parents strengthen their bond with infants and young children while supporting healthy emotional development.
- **Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP):** Helps young children and caregivers heal together after trauma, stress, or difficult life experiences.
- **Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT):** Coaches parents to strengthen their relationship with their child while improving behavior and communication.
- **Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT):** Helps children and caregivers process trauma, build coping skills, and support emotional healing.

Parent programs can also help caregivers, resource parents, and teachers support young children experiencing traumatic stress:

- Circle of Security
- Strong Roots / Mom Power
- Attachment Vitamins
- Resource Parent Curriculum (NCTSN)



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Screening Tools and Evaluation in *Child Development*

Screening and evaluation are important steps in understanding your child's development. These processes help identify strengths and areas where your child may need extra support.



What is Developmental Screening?

Developmental screening is a short, standardized process used to check if a child is meeting expected milestones in areas like movement, speech, social skills, and learning. Screenings are usually done during well-child visits, but parents and caregivers can request them at any time.

Common Screening Tools



Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ)

A parent-completed checklist covering your child's skills in communication, movement, problem-solving, and social interaction.



Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (M-CHAT)

A brief questionnaire that identifies early signs of autism spectrum disorder in children 16–30 months old.



Denver Developmental Screening Test

Assesses personal-social, fine motor, language, and gross motor skills.



Pediatric Symptom Checklist (PSC)

Screens for emotional and behavioral problems in children.

Screenings are not diagnostic—they help decide if more information is needed.

What is a Developmental Evaluation?

If a screening shows possible concerns, a more detailed evaluation may be recommended. This is a comprehensive assessment by specialists such as psychologists, speech-language pathologists, or occupational therapists.

What to Expect During an Evaluation

Observation: The specialist watches your child play, interact, and complete tasks.

Parent Interview: You'll be asked about your child's history, behaviors, and any concerns.

Standardized Tests: Your child may be given age-appropriate tasks to assess specific skills.

Hearing and Vision Checks: These rule out sensory issues that could affect development.

Early screening and evaluation are key steps in supporting your child's healthy development. If you have concerns, don't hesitate to speak with your pediatrician.

Why Are Screenings and Evaluations Important?

Early Identification: The sooner a concern is found, the sooner your child can get support.

Individualized Support: Results help create a plan tailored to your child's needs.

Peace of Mind: Screenings can reassure you if your child is developing typically.



What Should Families Do?

Attend all well-child visits and complete recommended screenings.

Share any concerns with your child's healthcare provider.

If referred for evaluation, follow through with appointments and ask questions about the results.



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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.

Content developed by the Mental Health Association of Maryland in partnership with the University of Maryland School of Medicine, Taghi Modaressi Center for Infant Study, Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

Supporting Social-Emotional Development in Early Childhood

Everybody has feelings! Children experience feelings in their bodies and minds and express them through their words, actions, and behavior. As Mr. Fred Rogers said, “Whatever is mentionable can be more manageable.” When caring adults and peers help children with their feelings, children learn to cope and regulate rather than be overwhelmed.



Social-Emotional Development Defined

Developmental milestones—social-emotional, cognitive, language, and motor — form the foundation for lifelong health and learning. Social-emotional development is shaped by the child’s temperament and interactions with family, friends, teachers, and community.

Although each child is unique, parents, pediatricians, teachers, and developmental specialists monitor patterns of development to help understand children’s health and development. These patterns align with expected skills and tasks that a young child’s brain is ready to learn.

Core Components of Social-Emotional Development



Emotional Regulation

Young children learn to experience, tolerate, and express a wide range of emotions.



Relationships

When young children feel safe and loved, they can build trusting relationships with parents, siblings, family members, teachers, peers, and neighbors.



Culturally Expected Skills

Community values shape what children learn. For example, parents who value education may read to their children and help them prepare for school success.

How to Support Social-Emotional Development

Everyone who cares for or teaches a child can support their social-emotional development. Here are some practical ways to encourage growth:

- **Celebrate your child's uniqueness and learn to read their cues.** For example, I get grouchy when I am hungry, I get frustrated when I am tired, I want to be close to you when I am worried or anxious.
- **Give attention to the behaviors you want to see.** Offer praise when your child tries something new and doesn't give up, or when they follow through with what you asked them to do.
- **Provide predictable routines** that set your child up for success and help them feel proud that they can do some tasks on their own.
- **Make time for play.** Play supports development — playing together strengthens your relationship.
- **Be selective about screen time.** Not all screen time is equal. Brief interactive media can help teach a skill; passive media can interfere with attention and the ability to focus on tasks that require concentration and “stick to it-ness.”



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How to Seek Support

11-20% of young children in the United States meet the criteria for a behavioral or emotional disorder, and 10-15% of preschoolers have developmental delays. Parents can ask their pediatrician for resources to track their child's social-emotional development and get help if concerns arise.

Request an evaluation when a child:

- Misses one or more developmental milestones.
- Loses previously acquired skills.
- Shows persistent behavioral or emotional challenges, especially when they affect relationships or learning.

Early identification improves children's mental and developmental health and can reduce the stigma associated with mental illness. Supporting healthy early childhood development — from before birth through age 5 — produces significant educational, social, and financial benefits for children and their communities.



For more resources, visit
mhamd.org/earlychildhood

Understanding Trauma and Stress in *Early Childhood*

Young children are born with a remarkable capacity to recover from trauma and adversity. Research shows that safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments promote healthy child development and lessen the negative effects of traumatic stress.



Understanding a Child's Stress Response

Any frightening or overwhelming event can be traumatic for a young child. When children feel fear, their brain's stress response system acts as an alarm, preparing the body to freeze, hide, run, or fight. Because young children rely on parents and caregivers for safety, harm to caregivers can also affect the child. Potentially traumatic events young children may experience include:

- Accidents, injuries, or serious health procedures
- Animal bites
- Natural disasters, war, or exposure to violence
- Abuse, crime, or bullying at home, school, or in the community
- Family separation or death of a loved one

Recognizing Signs of Traumatic Stress

Recovery is possible when caregivers help children feel safe and assure them they are not to blame for what happened. When children are left to cope alone without comfort or soothing, recovery is difficult. Watch for these signs of traumatic stress in young children:

- Eating or sleeping problems, including nightmares
- Upset by noises, touch, smells, tastes, or busy environments
- Feeling sick or flare-ups of health problems such as asthma
- Being overwhelmed by strong emotions like sadness, anger, or frustration
- Frequent tantrums, very active behavior, or trouble paying attention
- Reluctance to play, try new things, or engage with others
- Clinginess, fussiness, worry, or thinking they are to blame for what happened

What Is Resilience?

Resilience is built on strengths, skills, and resources that help children heal from traumatic stress. Research shows that nurturing, responsive relationships are the essential ingredients to help young children recover. Children thrive when they feel:

Safe

Loved

Understood

Capable

Taking Care of You

Everyone experiences stress. Practicing coping skills helps you reset so you can keep teaching, inspiring, and caring for children. Get rest, stay hydrated, learn new skills, and accept help from friends, family, and peers. Consider using the “PRN” approach to promote your resilience.



Pause

Check how your body is feeling in the moment



Reset

Actively work to calm yourself and steady yourself for the next task.



Nourish

Replenish your mind, body, soul, and spirit.



For more resources, visit
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How to Seek Help

Talk to your pediatrician and provider. Talking about traumatic events can be sensitive. Your pediatrician will listen and guide you on what steps you can take. Effective treatments exist for both children and caregivers. Look for therapists trained in:

- Child Parent Psychotherapy (CPP)
- Parent Child Interactional Therapy (PCIT)
- Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)

Parent programs such as Circle of Security, Strong Roots/Mom Power, and Attachment Vitamins can help caregivers support children experiencing traumatic stress.



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Understanding Trauma and Stress in Families

What is Trauma?

A trauma is a scary, dangerous, or violent event that can happen to any or all members of a family. Some families have more than one traumatic event or live in ongoing, traumatic circumstances.



Some types of traumatic events that families may experience are:

- Accidents, injuries, or serious illness
- Family loss, sudden death, or grief
- Abuse, neglect, or violence within the home
- Community violence, school violence, or crime
- Racism, discrimination, or other social stressors
- Homelessness or displacement, including war zones and combat injuries
- Natural disasters, fires, or acts of terrorism

What is Traumatic Stress?

Everyone experiences stress at times. Traumatic stress happens when families face unsafe or overwhelming situations, which can affect their stability and health. When “bad things happen,” family members may show signs of traumatic stress that make daily life more challenging.

Symptoms can include:

- Feeling numb, detached, or overwhelmed by fear, anger, or sadness
- Avoiding people, places, or triggers
- Having nightmares or vivid memories, as if re-living the event
- Having trouble sleeping, focusing, or completing tasks
- Feeling worn down, helpless, or hopeless

What is Family Resilience?

With practice and support, resilient families can overcome the effects of trauma and even thrive in harsh circumstances. Resilience grows over time, and it builds when strong relationships, routines, and resources are in place.

Resilience often means “bouncing forward” — making new accommodations — rather than returning to how things were before. Each family experiences trauma differently, and factors like children’s ages or cultural background shapes how a family copes and recovers. Resilient families share common strengths:

- Creating routines that help everyone know what to expect
- Building ways to feel and stay safe
- Sharing family stories and listening to one another
- Practicing meaningful rituals and traditions and creating ones as needed
- Solving problems together – naming the problem, practicing coping strategies, and seeking help
- Reflecting on lessons learned from coming through traumatic experiences



Getting Support After Trauma

Talk with your primary care provider and seek services that promote the well-being of the whole family.

Family-informed trauma services put families in the “driver’s seat,” empowering them to guide their own recovery and healing. Safe, nurturing relationships among family members, neighbors, and community or faith groups, help protect and support families as they recover.

These services support families by:

- Promoting safety for all family members and preventing exposure to further traumas.
- Building on the family’s cultural, spiritual, and community strengths.
- Helping families recognize the signs of traumatic stress and how it can affect the family.
- Linking families to essential community resources.
- Creating space for family members to talk together about their experiences and how they have been affected.

Family-informed services focus on growth and resilience, not just symptoms. Providers use clear language, honor spiritual beliefs, and recognize the many ways families and communities recover. Over time, families develop survival skills, cope with stress, and support each other across generations.

Families’ stories help with healing. When children and caregivers can talk about what happened, they can:

- “Name it to tame it”
- Master difficult feelings
- Make meaning of difficult situations
- Build hope for the future

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