

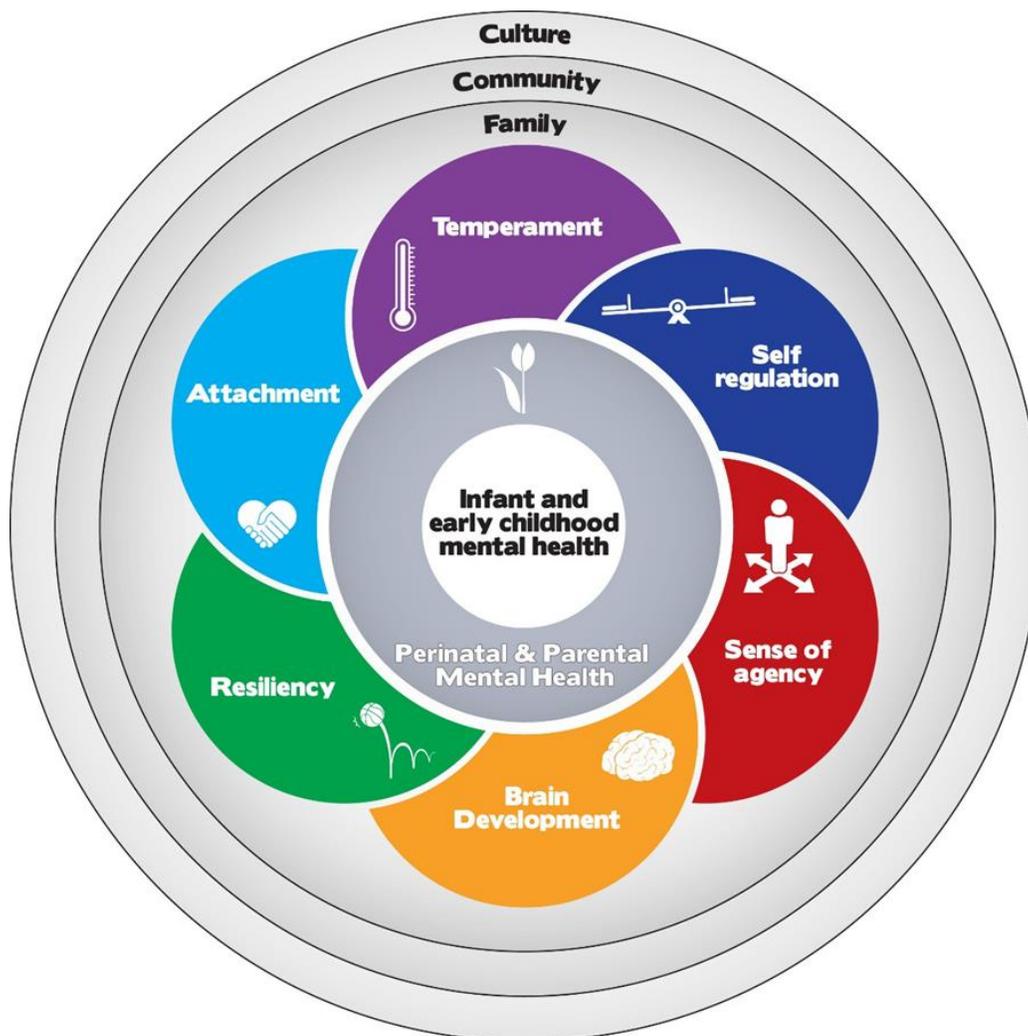
Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Guide for Professionals: Introduction

Mental health refers to striking a balance in all aspects of one's life: socially, physically, spiritually, economically and mentally.¹ It is more than the absence of a mental health condition or illness.

Infants and young children have mental health. It is the “developing capacity of the child, from birth to six years of age, to form close and secure adult and peer relationships to experience, manage and express a full range of emotions, and to explore the environment and learn – all in the context of family, community, and culture.”²

It is also important to recognize that brain development begins in pregnancy. Therefore, the prenatal period must also be considered in relation to IECMH.

The purpose of this guide is to provide support and information to professionals when they have conversations about IECMH and its interrelated components.



1. Canadian Mental Health Association: Mental Health [Internet]. Ottawa, ON; 2021 [cited December 2021] Available from <https://cmha.ca/find-info/mental-health/>
2. Clinton J, Kays-Burden A, Carter C, Bhasin K, Cairney J, Carrey N, Janus M, Kulkarni C, Williams R. (November 2014). Supporting Ontario's youngest minds: Investing in the mental health of children under 6. [Internet]. Ottawa (ON): Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health: [cited 2016 Nov 16]. Available from <https://www.cymha.ca/Modules/ResourceHub/?id=AF13E20F-F63B-40B8-A2E4-84C98FF479DF>

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Guide for Professionals: Attachment

Here is what we know about attachment:

- Infants are hardwired to develop strong emotional connections, known as attachments, to primary caregivers through [serve and return](#) interactions.
- Babies need to feel safe, cared for, and protected. A secure attachment develops when a caregiver responds consistently in a warm and sensitive manner.
- Caregivers are the anchors from which young children explore their surroundings. This supports optimal development and learning.
- Children develop trust when secure attachment needs are met; they gain the knowledge that they are important and loveable.
- Children require a nurturing caregiver to protect them from harm and the effects of toxic stress.
- Secure attachment is foundational to positive developmental outcomes and future relationships (e.g., peers, partners).

Within your professional role and considering the [social determinants of health](#), how do you:

- Support caregivers responding to their child's needs and feelings in a prompt and sensitive manner?
- Explore the importance of healthy predictable routines with a caregiver (e.g., feeding, sleeping, connecting time, play time, outdoor time)?
- Share screen time guidelines and the impact screen time may have on brain development and the formation of secure attachments with caregivers? The [Canadian Pediatric Society's](#) screen time guidelines are:
 - Children under 2 years old: screen time is not recommended.
 - Children 2 to 5 years old: firmly limit screen time to less than 1 hour per day. There is no evidence demonstrating recreational screen time benefiting early childhood development; less is best.
- Investigate opportunities with the caregivers for safe and supervised indoor and outdoor exploration?
- Explore attachment based workshops or services that promote healthy caregiver-child relationships?
- Discuss coping and support mechanisms with caregivers?
- Explore connection opportunities to informal and formal supports (e.g., professional and peer community-based supports and services)?
- Support caregivers in having developmentally appropriate expectations for their child?
- Screen and refer caregivers for risk factors that may impact attachment (e.g., substance-induced mood disorders, postpartum mood disorders)?

Where can you find more information?

- [Caring for Kids: Screen Time and Young Children](#)
- [Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development: Attachment](#)
- [Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child: Key Concepts, Brain Architecture, Serve and Return, Toxic Stress](#)
- [Zero to three: Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health](#)
- [Best Start, Healthy Baby Healthy Brain](#)
- [Best Start, Life with a New Baby](#)
- [Infant Mental Health Promotion, Comfort, Play and Teach](#)
- [Psychology Foundation of Canada](#)
- [Public Health Agency of Canada: Social Determinants of Health](#)

Where can you find services that support families?

- [Parenting in Ottawa](#)
- [Parent Resource Centre](#)
- [211 Ontario](#)
- [Community Navigation of Eastern Ontario](#)
- [Mental Health and Substance Use Services and Resources](#)

References:

- [Best Start, Healthy Brains Video: Love Builds Brains](#)
- [National Scientific Council on the Developing Child \(2004\). Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships](#)
- [Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development: Attachment](#)
- [Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child: Key Concepts, Brain Architecture](#)
- [Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child: Serve and Return](#)
- [Caring for Kids: Screen Time and Young Children](#)

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Guide for Professionals: Brain Development

Here is what we know about brain development:

- Genes, environments, relationships and lived experiences all work together to shape the architecture of a child's brain; early childhood experiences matter.
- Brain development begins in pregnancy and undergoes its most rapid and critical period of growth during the first 2000 days.
 - Latest research shows that more than 1 million new neural connections are made each second.
 - Brain development occurring in the first 2000 days is highly vulnerable to the effects of toxic stress. Toxic stress is defined as ongoing stress that occurs in the absence of a caring and responsive caregiver. It can have an impact on learning, behaviour, and both physical and mental health.
 - Studies have shown that providing supportive, responsive relationships can protect against or reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress.
- Social, emotional, physical, and cognitive capacities (e.g., executive functions), continue to develop throughout childhood and into early adulthood.

Within your professional role and considering the [social determinants of health](#), how do you:

- Explore how the caregiver is sensitive and responsive to the child's cues, feelings and needs?
- Explore child and caregiver connection opportunities based on positive interactions (e.g., playing, talking, singing)?
- Share screen time guidelines and the impact screen time may have on brain development and the formation of secure attachments with caregivers? The [Canadian Pediatric Society's](#) screen time guidelines are:
 - Children under 2 years old: screen time is not recommended.
 - Children 2 to 5 years old: firmly limit screen time to less than 1 hour per day. There is no evidence demonstrating recreational screen time benefiting early childhood development; less is best.
- Discuss coping and support mechanisms with caregivers?
- Explore connection opportunities to informal and formal supports (e.g., professional and peer community-based supports and services)?
- Support caregivers in having developmentally appropriate expectations for their child?
- Administer appropriate screening tools that advise on if a child is within the typical developmental milestone range? How do you manage referrals?

Where can you find more information?

- [Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development: Brain](#)
- [Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child: Key Concepts; Brain Architecture; Serve and Return; Toxic Stress; Executive Function and Self Regulation](#)
- [Best Start: Healthy Baby, Healthy Brain](#)
- [Infant Mental Health Promotion, Comfort, Play and Teach](#)
- [City of Hamilton: Parenting with LOVE - Brain Development](#)
- [Public Health Agency of Canada: Social Determinants of Health](#)

Where can you find services that support families?

- [Parenting in Ottawa](#)
- [Parent Resource Centre](#)
- [211 Ontario](#)
- [Community Navigation of Eastern Ontario](#)
- [Mental Health and Substance Use Services and Resources](#)

References:

- [Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child: Key Concepts, Brain Architecture](#)
- [Fraser Mustard Institute for Human Development](#)
- [Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child: Five Numbers to Remember about Early Childhood Development](#)
- [Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child: Toxic Stress Derails Healthy Development](#)
- [Make No Little Plans: Ontario's Public Health Sector Strategic Plan](#)

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Guide for Professionals: Resiliency

Here is what we know about resiliency:

- Resiliency is the ability to manage challenges and bounce back after facing adversity in a positive way.
- Resiliency helps people cope with stress, overcome childhood disadvantages, and chase new opportunities.
- Resiliency develops throughout a person's life; it is not a personality trait.
 - Development occurs through the interaction of supportive relationships, biological systems, and gene expression.
- Research shows that resiliency can be linked to higher levels of happiness, positive relationships, and greater success in academic and professional endeavours.

Within your professional role and considering the [social determinants of health](#), how do you:

- Share strategies with parents? Examples:
 - Calming strategies (e.g., deep breathing, hugs, body breaks, water breaks, music, art, sensory play)
 - Modeling and nurturing the development of positive thinking habits and reaching out for support as needed.
 - Encouraging perseverance in children while also sharing that mistakes are a natural part of learning.
 - Giving children opportunities to help out and contribute to the needs of others through meaningful tasks (e.g., getting a bandage for a friend, helping with cleaning up, helping with mealtime preparation).
- Discuss coping and support mechanisms with caregivers?
- Explore connection opportunities to informal and formal supports (e.g., professional and peer community-based supports and services).
- Support caregivers in having developmentally appropriate expectations for their child?
- Administer appropriate screening tools that advise on if a child is within the typical developmental milestone range? How do you manage referrals?

Where can you find more information?

- [Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development: Resilience](#)
- [Reaching IN ... Reaching OUT: Road to Resiliency Factsheet and Video](#)
- [Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard: 8 Things to Remember about Child Development](#)
- [Best Start: Building Resilience in Young Children](#)
- [Public Health Agency of Canada: Social Determinants of Health](#)

Where can you find services that support families?

- [Parenting in Ottawa](#)
- [Parent Resource Centre](#)
- [211 Ontario](#)
- [Community Navigation of Eastern Ontario](#)
- [Mental Health and Substance Use Services and Resources](#)
- [MindMasters 2](#)

References:

- [Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development: Resilience](#)
- [Reaching IN ... Reaching OUT Resiliency Guidebook](#)
- [Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child: Key Concepts, Brain Architecture](#)
- [Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child: The Science of Resilience](#)
- [Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard: 8 Things to Remember about Child Development](#)
- [Best Start: Building Resilience in Young Children](#)

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Guide for Professionals: Self-Regulation

Here is what we know about self-regulation:

- It is the ability to deal with stressors and recover from them.
 - Challenging behaviours should be thought of as the child not coping due to stressors, skill deficits or unmet needs.
- Closely linked to brain maturation, self-regulation develops over time with support from nurturing and responsive caregivers.
- Is the ability to adjust our bodies, emotions, thinking, attention and behaviour so we can be in a [calm, focused, alert state](#) for learning and responding to our environment.

Within your professional role and considering the [social determinants of health](#), how do you:

- Explore with the caregiver how to:
 - provide environments that reduce stressors while supporting the child's effort to learn how to self-regulate?
 - Help children understand, identify and label their feelings and responses to stressors? Support them while they release emotions using "[time ins](#)"?
 - Model and practice social skills and problem solving through the use of songs, stories and unstructured play?
- Discuss coping and support mechanisms with caregivers?
- Explore connection opportunities to informal and formal supports (e.g., professional and peer community-based supports and services)?
- Support caregivers in having developmentally appropriate expectations for their child?
- Administer appropriate screening tools that advise on if a child is within the typical developmental milestone range? How do you manage referrals?

Where can you find more information?

- [Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development: Executive Function](#)
- [Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child: Executive Function & Self-Regulation](#)
- [The Mehrit Centre](#)
- [Beyond Blue: Self-regulation](#)
- [Public Health Agency of Canada: Social Determinants of Health](#)

Where can you find services that support families?

- [Parenting in Ottawa](#)
- [Parent Resource Centre](#)
- [211 Ontario](#)
- [Community Navigation of Eastern Ontario](#)
- [Mental Health and Substance Use Services and Resources](#)
- [Families Canada](#)

References:

- [Calm, Alert and Happy by Dr. Stuart Shanker](#)
- [How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years](#)
- [Best Start, Frequently Asked Questions about Time-outs](#)

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Guide for Professionals: Sense of Agency

Here is what we know about sense of agency (“I can do it!”):

- It is the child’s ability to make choices and decisions that will influence and have an impact on their life.
- Children need to develop a strong sense of belonging and self-identity. These foundational conditions encourage children to see themselves as capable, competent and valued contributors.

Within your professional role and considering the [social determinants of health](#), how do you:

- Explore opportunities with caregivers that support children in:
 - Making daily age-appropriate choices and decisions?
 - Having opportunities to develop autonomy in safe and nurturing environments (e.g., taking graduated risks according to readiness, ability and interest)?
 - Engaging in meaningful interactions, tasks, problem solving, play and exploration?
- Discuss coping and support mechanisms with caregivers?
- Explore connection opportunities to informal and formal supports (e.g., professional and peer community-based supports and services)?
- Support caregivers in having developmentally appropriate expectations for their child?
- Administer appropriate screening tools that advise on if a child is within the typical developmental milestone range? How do you manage referrals?

Where can you find more information?

- [Early Childhood Australia, Promoting Independence and Agency](#)
- [Talking about Practice Series Video: 'I can do it!' Supporting Babies' Sense of Agency](#)
- [How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years](#)
- [Reaching IN ... Reaching OUT: Road to Resiliency Factsheet and Video](#)
- [Public Health Agency of Canada: Social Determinants of Health](#)

Where can you find services that support families?

- [Parenting in Ottawa](#)
- [Parent Resource Centre](#)
- [211 Ontario](#)
- [Community Navigation of Eastern Ontario](#)
- [Mental Health and Substance Use Services and Resources](#)

References:

- [How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years](#)

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH)

Guide for Professionals: Temperament

Here is what we know about temperament:

- Temperament is an individual's innate way of approaching and responding to the world.
- Some children approach situations with ease while others may experience more challenges.
- Temperament describes a range of character traits which include: activity level, adaptability, approach and withdrawal, distractibility, intensity, persistence, positivity/mood, regularity and sensitivity.
 - A child's temperament can shape their outcomes and influence how others respond to them.
 - Each caregiver has their own unique temperament; how these temperaments interact can impact the quality of the caregiver-child relationship. This is known as the "goodness of fit," which is the ability of the caregiver to adapt their expectations and responses to the child's personal style and abilities.

Within your professional role and considering the [social determinants of health](#), how do you:

- Provide opportunities for a caregiver to learn more about temperament?
- Explore individualized strategies to support the caregiver and the child?
- Discuss coping and support mechanisms with caregivers?
- Explore connection opportunities to informal and formal supports (e.g., professional and peer community-based supports and services).
- Support caregivers in having developmentally appropriate expectations for their child?
- Administer appropriate screening tools that advise on if a child is within the typical developmental milestone range? How do you manage referrals?

Where can you find more information?

- [Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development: Temperament](#)
- [Raising Your Spirited Child by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka](#)
- [City of Hamilton: Parenting with LOVE Video - Temperament](#)
- [Public Health Agency of Canada: Social Determinants of Health](#)
- [Parents 2 Parents: The Temperament Corner](#)

Where can you find services that support families?

- [Parenting in Ottawa](#)
- [Parent Resource Centre](#)
- [211 Ontario](#)
- [Community Navigation of Eastern Ontario](#)
- [Mental Health and Substance Use Services and Resources](#)

References:

- [Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development: Temperament](#)
- [Parents 2 Parents: The Temperament Corner](#)
- [Georgetown University, Centre for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation](#)

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Guide for Professionals: Perinatal and Parental Mental Health

Here is what we know about perinatal and parental mental health:

- *It takes a village to raise a child*; we all share a responsibility in supporting parenting practices.
- Family, friends, culture and community influence an adult's ability to interact positively with children.
 - This circle of support is foundational for a child's optimal growth and development, as well as for their ability to build healthy relationships.
- Caregivers can experience a range of emotions during and post pregnancy.
- A caregivers overall health and wellbeing may have an impact on the developing child.

Within your professional role and considering the [social determinants of health](#), how do you:

- Discuss coping and support mechanisms with caregivers?
- Discuss access to primary health care support with expectant caregivers?
- Explore connection opportunities to informal and formal supports (e.g., professional and peer community-based supports and services)?
- Screen and refer caregivers for risk factors that may impact their mental health (e.g., substance-induced mood disorders, postpartum mood disorders)?

Where can you find more information?

- [Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development: Mental Health](#)
- [Caring for Kids: Pregnancy and Babies](#)
- [Best Start](#)
 - [Mental Health Resources](#)
 - [Life with a New Baby](#)
 - [Prenatal and Postpartum Health Resources](#)
 - [Prenatal Education Program](#)
- [Public Health Agency of Canada: Social Determinants of Health](#)

Where can you find services that support families?

- [Parenting in Ottawa: Pregnancy](#) and [Life with your new baby](#)
- [Parent Resource Centre](#)
- [211 Ontario](#)
- [Community Navigation of Eastern Ontario](#)
- [Mental Health and Substance Use Services and Resources](#)

References:

- [Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child: The Foundations of Lifelong Health are Built in Early Childhood](#)
- [Infant Mental Health Promotion](#)