



Center for Early Education and Development

Questions About Kids

What is Meant by “Infant Mental Health”?

Infant mental health refers to an infant’s intellectual, physical, and emotional growth and development. Unlike the term adult mental health, which usually describes a defined outcome, infant mental health is a developmental process. It is based on children’s inborn characteristics, such as their temperament, their interactions with their caregivers, and the environment in which they are raised. This means that children’s development depends on their parents and other caregivers to provide a “good enough” environment. British pediatrician and psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott coined the term “good enough” when he described an environment where parents respond consistently enough and well enough to their children. From those consistent responses, children learn to expect care, comfort, and pleasure in their achievements. And “good enough” means exactly that — good enough. No parent responds to babies’ cries each time, nor should they. It would not be good for babies to have their every uncomfortable feeling soothed from the outside, because then they would not learn how to wait, to tolerate some discomfort, and to soothe themselves.

Over time, as babies are cared for, responded to, and encouraged to grow and develop. They form the expectation that the world is a safe, interesting place and the people in it are responsive and kind. As they grow, babies who have a positive expectation of the world around them develop more satisfying relationships with other adults and children, are better able to handle everyday stresses, and show greater curiosity and interest in learning.

How Do I Learn to Provide a “Good Enough” Environment for My Baby?

Most parents naturally give babies the attention and responsiveness that they need. It feels natural because we learn how to hold, comfort, and delight in our babies from our parents. Parenting is not instinctive — it is learned from our experiences as children. Some parents were not given consistent positive attention, encouragement, and empathy when they were children. It is very difficult to “naturally” transmit these qualities to the next generation when they were not provided to you. However, babies and parents are predisposed to connect with each other, and you can learn to provide a “good enough” environment for your baby to get your relationship off to a secure start.

Connection

More than anything, babies need to connect with their parents. As newborns, they need contact through touch and sound as much as they need food. Many parents are confused if their babies still cry even though they are fed and changed. Sometimes parents are afraid that holding a baby just because the baby “wants attention” will lead to spoiling. When a baby cries and a parent responds, the baby learns that there is a connection and begins to expect to be cared for. That is what happens when the baby stops crying just by hearing your voice or your footsteps, or by being picked up. Contrary to the fears about spoiling, holding and comforting a baby helps the baby feel secure and comfortable. Will the baby expect you to hold him or her when upset? Yes, and that means your



baby has connected you with care and comfort. You have succeeded!

Education

Educate yourself about your baby's developmental needs and stages. This knowledge helps you respond to your baby's needs when your "instinct" does not. For instance, if your baby begins to fuss even though fed and dry, you will know that babies get bored, as all people do, and need new stimuli for learning and entertainment. Knowing what your child can do during different developmental stages can help control your frustrations.

Empathy

Emotional understanding builds a strong relationship between parent and child. Start when they are babies and toddlers. Children whose parents acknowledge their feelings, even when they do not give in to their demands, are easier to comfort and satisfy than children whose feelings are ignored. One way to build emotional understanding and empathy is to try to understand an event from the child's point of view. That helps your child believe that you are on their side. It does not mean that you give in to your child's wishes or change your plans, but children do much better when their wishes are acknowledged even if they are not granted. A small amount of reassurance and acknowledgment can help your child learn to adjust to disappointment without falling apart ("You didn't like it when I said no to ice cream. I know you really wanted that ice cream. Now let's go ride on the swings.").

Emotional understanding also helps children learn that their feelings and behavior are connected. Even with your baby or toddler, the more you acknowledge that your child's behavior and feelings are connected, the more your child will feel understood. Over time, they can learn that feelings and behavior are separate — that it's possible to be mad but still not throw a fit.

A "Good Enough" Environment Over Time

Parenting groups, friends, family, counseling, and books and articles about parenting can help you

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maintain the relationship you want with your child as they grow. Parenting presents new challenges as children develop. Staying connected with a young baby requires different parenting techniques, education, and empathy than staying connected with a two-year-old or a teenager. Luckily, parenting groups for parents of older children offer contact with people who have survived or even flourished during the parenting years. Many are more than willing to share ideas with others. Creating a supportive environment for yourself with experienced parents, friends, and family members will help you provide a "good enough" environment for your child.

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For More Information

For more information, please see the Web sites below. Each site will provide links to additional Web sites and materials about parenting and child development:

- http://www.zerotothree.org/ztt_parents.html
- <http://www.pbs.org/wholechild/>

Questions About Kids is on the Web at:

<http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>

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The "Question About Kids" series is published by the Center for Early Education and Development to provide state-of-the-art information about young children and families. They are reviewed by a panel of child development experts at the University of Minnesota. For further information, contact the Center at 612-625-3058.