Self-regulation: Building a Foundation of Emotional Literacy

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Based on portions from Modules 1 & 2
Infant Toddler Training Modules

Early Social Emotional Development

Early mental health or early social emotional wellness is the developing capacity of the child from birth to 3 to: experience, regulate, and express emotions; form close and secure interpersonal relationships; and explore the environment and learn - all in the context of family, community, and cultural expectations for young children.
• **Developing capacity** is a reminder of the extraordinarily rapid pace of growth and change in the first 3 years of life.

• Infants and toddlers depend heavily on adults to help them experience, regulate, and express emotions.

• Through close, nurturing interpersonal relationships with parents and other caregivers, infants and toddlers learn what people expect of them and what they can expect of other people.

The drive to explore and master one’s environment is inborn in humans. Infants’ and toddlers’ active participation in their own learning and development is an important aspect of their mental health.

The context of family and community is where infants and toddlers learn to share and communicate their feelings and experience with significant caregivers and other children. They develop a sense of themselves as competent, effective, and valued individual.

**Culture** influences every aspect of human development, including how infant mental health is understood, adults’ goals and expectations for young children’s development, and the child rearing practices used by parents and caregivers.

ZERO TO THREE, 2001

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**Developmental Pathways**

Patterns of functioning are constructed over time...

They are the result of transactional process between vulnerabilities (challenges) and protective (buffering) factors initiated by early experience.

• **Adaptation (resilience)**...successive experiences of supportive caregiving resulting in active, flexible participation in seeking and receiving support and in exploration

• **Maladaptation (disturbance)**...successive deviations from normal development and increasingly inflexible responses to the environment
Developmental Process

- In any given response to the environment (internal or external) at any stage of development the whole organism is involved.

- Behavior, thoughts and feelings result from a continuous process that builds on itself.

Three Major Elements of Social Emotional Wellness in Infancy

- Forming close and secure relationships
- Experiencing, expressing, and regulating emotions
- Exploring the environment and learning

Regulation and Stress in Young Babies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signs of Regulation</th>
<th>Signs of Stress</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Regular, even breathing; warm body temperature; even skin color.</td>
<td>1. Yawning, drooling, hiccupping; chilled or clammy; pale or blotchy skin.</td>
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<td>2. Good muscle tone; can lift arms and legs against gravity.</td>
<td>2. Poor muscle tone; flails arms and legs loosely or cannot pull up against gravity; trembling.</td>
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<td>3. Moves easily (with little comforting) between being awake and being asleep; when awake, is sometimes quiet and alert, sometimes active and alert; can become calm when crying.</td>
<td>3. Awakens screaming; cannot relax to fall asleep or falls asleep suddenly in the midst of noise and commotion; has trouble focusing when awake.</td>
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<td>4. Startles briefly at loud noises but recovers; tolerates handling even during diaper changes.</td>
<td>4. Startles at noise, light, and touch, and cannot recover.</td>
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Strategies for Helping Babies Self-Regulate

- Containing their limbs with swaddling, cuddling, and bringing them close to your chest and heartbeat
- Providing something to suck: a pacifier, their own hand, their fingers
- Limiting the stimulation in the environment
- Helping baby to awaken or to fall asleep with rocking, cuddling, gentle patting, a quiet voice, singing, or a simple chant
- Using a firm, gentle touch

Small Group Activity
Attachment

Attachment is a pattern of interaction that develops over time as the infant or toddler and caregiver engage.

Bowlby’s Attachment Theory

- Attachment is an evolved response that promotes survival
- Children construct an inner representation of the parent/child relationship that serves as a guide for future interactions

Evolutionary Perspective

All attachment patterns represent adaptations to the caregiving environment...

The child’s best effort to...
- Gain proximity to the adult caregiver
- Regulate arousal
- Explore the environment

Humans are predisposed to form attachments — babies are endowed with a set of built-in behaviors that help keep the parent nearby (cry, call, and crawl after their caregivers), increasing the chances that the infant will be kept from danger

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- Through hours of interactions with caregivers, infants develop expectations about the caregiver’s responses and the infant’s role in producing those responses.
- Over time, a relationship develops, supported by new emotional and cognitive capacities and a history of warm, responsive care.
By participating in a responsive relationship, the infant learns not only that the caregiver is available and responsive, but also that this is the way relationships work.

This is like learning to “dance” with someone you trust to lead you.

- Babies learn to “use” caring, responsive adults to help them regulate their emotions, and eventually learn how to do this on their own.
- Babies use caregivers as a “secure base” from which to explore the world, knowing they can return to the caregiver to “recharge” or to be comforted if they become fearful.

What happens when the attachment relationship goes awry?

Infants who do not experience responsive caregiving may not develop:
- the ability to calm themselves when they become upset
- a belief in their own effectiveness and self-worth (“When I need someone, they come to me. I’m powerful!”)
As they grow older, these infants may have:
- problems with aggression
- difficulty forming friendships
- challenges in school

I thought this session was on self-regulation...

What does attachment have to do with it?

Each baby is born into a unique family that has its own culture and history, its own strengths, and its own way of coping with stress and adversity.

(Activity Attachment Relationships 1.6)

(Parlakian & Seibel, 2002)
Families have the most continuous and emotionally charged relationship with the child. Infants and toddlers learn what people expect of them and what they can expect of other people through early experiences with parents and other caregivers. (Day & Parlakian, 2004)

**Activity**

**Learning About, Expressing, and Managing Emotions**

Lei, mother of twin sons, found her home visitor, Heather, to be very loud. Her voice seemed to take up the whole room. Heather, on the other hand, always commented to her colleagues about how quiet Lei was. During a staff meeting Heather shared, “She barely talks above a whisper and I can never tell what she is feeling or thinking. You wouldn’t believe how quiet that apartment is. You’d never guess two toddlers live there.” (Day & Parlakian, 2004).

To think about...

Question 1: What might be Lei’s experience concerning expressing and regulating emotions?

Question 2: What might the twin’s experiences be with regard to expressing and regulating emotions? Would it necessarily be the same for both?

Question 3: How might the twins behave in school in regard to
- Management of emotions
- Animation or intensity of emotions
- Volume of speech
- Expression of emotions

Question 4: Might the twins behave differently from each other or different at home and school?

Some things to consider:
- The twins seem to be in a home environment where the mom, at least, values quiet and calm. We don’t know anything about the father or other members of the family who might live with them. It would be interesting to see, for example, how the twins behave with babysitters or others in the home.

Developing Ideas About Relationships Module 1

- Myra, Haniya, and Tia are all two-year-olds in the same Early Head Start class. Myra comes from a large family with many cousins and family gatherings. Her relationship with her parents is close, warm, and secure. She explores and learns from her environment. Haniya has one brother, and the extended family lives in other states. Her mom works hard at two jobs and is very tired when she is at home. Sometimes, Haniya’s mom is so tired she becomes very angry at Haniya and her brother if they make too much noise. Haniya has learned to stay quiet, not interrupt her mom, and play with her toys. Tia’s parents are experiencing marital stress, so sometimes they are emotionally available to her and sometimes they are not. Tia has learned to stay close to her parents and make noise, whine, and poke them to get their attention.
Question 1: How might the three girls behave differently in their classroom with regard to

- Their relationships and interactions with peers
- Their relationship with the teacher

More questions...

- Question 2: What could be challenging about each child’s expression of emotions (security and exploration)?
- Question 3: What are the children’s strengths concerning expression of emotions and relationships (security and exploration)?
- Question 4: What would you want these children to learn about relationships

Emotional Literacy...

....is the capacity to identify, understand and express emotion in a healthy way.

Adapted with permission, Cradling Literacy, 2007

Strategies to Develop Emotional Literacy in Infants and Toddlers

1. Using the adult/child relationship to expand an individual child’s awareness of his emotions or feelings:
   - Verbally acknowledging and labeling emotions expressed by children
   - Assisting infants and toddlers with regulating their emotions
   - Talking about the fact that feelings can change
   - Using questions about feelings to see if a child can respond

2. Finding opportunities to talk about feelings:
   - Taking advantage of teachable moments when children experience difficulties with peers and need adult support to resolve them
   - Staying close to support children in difficult encounters with other children
Strategies to Develop Emotional Literacy in Infants and Toddlers

2. Finding opportunities to talk about feelings (cont.):
   - Helping children learn to put into words how they think others are feeling and to express empathy for those feelings
   - Encouraging negotiating so that each child feels that she/he has been heard and that their feelings have been taken into consideration
   - Clarifying rules

3. Using enriching language tools:
   - Choosing books, music, finger plays with a rich vocabulary of feeling words
   - Using puppetry or felt board stories that retell common social experiences and that emphasize the feeling vocabulary and conflict resolution
   - Reading stories about characters that children can identify with who express a range of feelings
   - Encouraging toddlers to draw pictures of their difficult or scary emotions

Bibliotherapy

- Use children's literature and home-made books to promote a more organized emotional response to experiences and emotions.

Some simple guidelines when creating your own books

- Select books that reflect a child's concerns, life experiences, or emotional dilemmas.
- The book should stay focused on that particular issue. The difficult issue should be addressed honestly, at an age appropriate level, and with some realistic resolution of the issue at the end.
- Use language at an understandable level for the children

- Allows the adult to connect literature to the child's real life experiences.
- Helps children identify and eventually talk about their feelings.
- Demonstrates that what children feel is felt by others.
Making a book

- Illustrations should correspond with the text. They should also reflect the child's environment, culture, and experiences. Actual photographs are excellent illustrations but magazine pictures and hand-drawn pictures can be used.
- Books should be durable. Laminate the book and use notebook rings or large paper fasteners to secure the pages.

Strategies to Develop Emotional Literacy in Infants and Toddlers

4. **Modeling Positive Relationships**
   - With families
   - Between adults in the care setting
   - With other children

The preceding strategies adapted with permission from Im, Osborn, Sanchez, & Thorp, 2007

Relationship-Based Work

We seek to provide a validating, partnering relationship with the parent/caregiver which promotes the relationship between the parent and the child.

Supporting the mental health of infants means supporting the caregivers by:

- **helping them “keep the baby in mind”**
  To recognize that the infant or toddler has mental states—feelings, thoughts, and intentions of his own: “He’s sad.” “She’s angry.” “He likes bananas.” “She knows I’m gonna feed her.”
- **“speaking for the baby”**
- **helping the caregiver reflect on her own experience** and the feelings involved; pregnancy and birth are complex!
- **helping her understand the links between her affects and those of the baby**

Arietta Slade, “Keeping the Baby in Mind” (2002)

Being Fully Present and Engaged

- **Take an inventory of your own feelings—How do you feel about this particular visit and why?**
- **Take time to build a relationships—“intentional hanging out”**
- **Be curious. Wonder—**
  - What’s it like to be this child?
  - What’s it like to be the parent of this child?
  - What does it mean to the family that I am here?
"To Listen" =

- Ear
- You
- Eye
- Undivided attention
- Heart

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