



WISCONSIN OFFICE OF  
**Children's  
Mental Health**

# Children's Mental Health Network

**Nov. 7, 2025**

**Topic: Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health**



# ***Meeting Focus: Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health***

## **Agenda**

1. OCMH Announcements
2. Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health
  - Foundational Understanding Panel
  - Child Care Panel
  - Families Panel
  - Pediatricians
  - Discussion
3. Member Announcements
4. Adjourn

**Meeting coordination  
and assistance:  
Kim Eithun**





# OCMH Activities Updates





# Youth Mental Wellness Champions

**Building Student  
Leader Skills and  
Connections**



Wisconsin Office of  
Children's Mental Health



**Youth Mental  
Wellness Champions**

**2025-26 Inaugural  
Cohort**

- 15 students
- 1 from each CESA
- 9-month program
- Celebration event in Madison in May



# Resources in Spanish

## OCMH Resources in Spanish

To reach as many Wisconsin families as possible, OCMH has been translating key resources into Spanish for years. We have listed them here for easy reference. Please share within your organization, school, and communities.

OCMH Resources translated into Spanish – now available in one spot on OCMH [website](https://www.wisconsinchildren.org/)

Office of Children's Mental Health  
Resources in Spanish

 **Accessing Children's Mental Health Services** 

*A roadmap for parents getting started with accessing mental health services for their child.*



**Acceso a servicios de salud mental para niños**  
(Accessing Children's Mental Health Services)

**1** **Estoy preocupada/a por mi hijo/a. He notado...**  
Problemas para dormir, Arrebatos, Cambios bruscos de estado de ánimo, Irritabilidad, Ansiedad, Tristeza, Estado de alerta constante, Baja calificación de habilidades, Ira, Dificultades para concentrarse.

**2** **¿Quién nos puede ayudar?**  
Comuníquese con un proveedor de confianza, como por ejemplo:  
• Médico o proveedor de atención primaria  
• Consejero escolar o maestro  
• Especialista en servicios comunitarios o par especialista  
Solicite una evaluación de salud mental.  
Sea descriptivo al abordar sus preocupaciones.  
El seguro médico le ayuda a pagar los servicios que necesita y también le puede ayudar a encontrar un terapeuta o proveedor, pero no es necesario tener seguro para acceder a los servicios.

**3** **Terapia de apoyo emocional.**  
Existen distintos tipos de terapias y cada terapeuta es diferente.  
Busque un proveedor acorde con sus preferencias de género, raza o cultura.  
Encuentre a alguien con quien usted y su hijo/a se sientan cómodos.  
Cuando llame, pregunte:  
1. ¿Acepta nuevos pacientes?  
2. ¿Acepta mi seguro médico?  
3. ¿Acepta pagos por cuenta propia o según los ingresos?  
4. ¿Cuándo es la próxima cita que tiene disponible?  
5. ¿Cuáles son los próximos pasos que puedo tomar en este momento?  
Puede llamar a otra clínica y hacer las mismas preguntas.  
Es posible que reciba atención antes con otro proveedor.

**4** **¿En qué consiste la terapia?**  
Usted y su hijo/a aprenderán nuevas habilidades y hablarán sobre experiencias, estados de ánimo o comportamientos. Los padres se involucran:  
• Reuniéndose con el terapeuta con regularidad  
• Mejorando las habilidades para apoyar a su hijo/a  
• Hablando en representación de su hijo/a y familia  
• Cuidándose y encontrando el apoyo que necesita

La sanación es un camino

# PollEverywhere

- Log in at: <https://pollev.com/ocmh627>
- OR
- Join PollEverywhere by texting:
- “ocmh627” to 22333



What children's  
mental health topics  
would you like to  
learn more about in  
2026?



## What children's mental health topics would you like to learn more about in 2026?

Nobody has responded yet.

Hang tight! Responses are coming in.

# Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Foundational Understanding

# Data

## Early Play

- Toddlers who learn to **play well with their peers** by age 3 are more likely to have positive mental health later in childhood.
- Early play helps build skills needed for healthy relationships.



*Source: University of Cambridge*

# Data

## **Children who have been guided in Social Emotional Learning (SEL) during their preschool years:**

- Enter kindergarten with greater readiness to engage with peers, adapt to routines, and persist through challenges.
- Demonstrate better attention spans, greater resilience, and stronger problem-solving abilities.

In the long term, these competencies translate into more positive school experiences, healthier relationships, and a greater ability to navigate life's inevitable ups and downs.

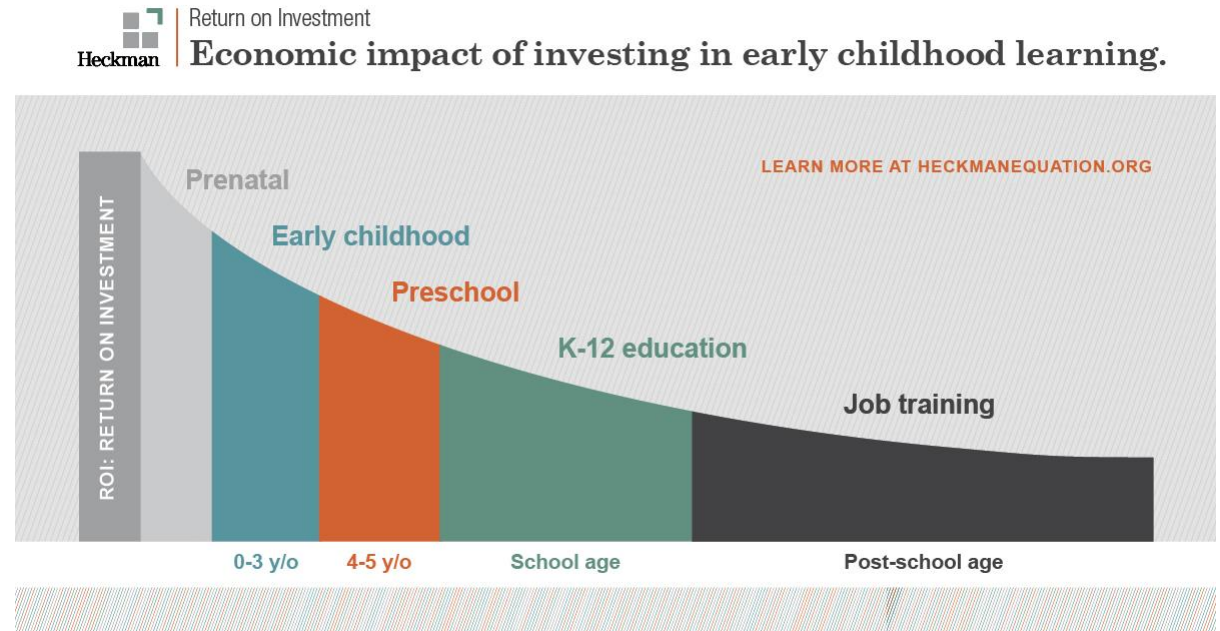
Source – [McGill Learning Center](#)

# Data

## Early Years Investments

- Programs targeted to the early years have the greatest productivity of investment return.
- Providing skills in the early years (in cognitive, social and emotional, and health skills) builds a base that allows for greater return later in life.

## The Heckman Curve



Source: [Heckman Equation](#), [Heckman Curve](#)

# Panel

Infant and Early  
Childhood  
Mental Health



- **Lana Shklyar Nenide** – Executive Director, Wisconsin Alliance of Infant Mental Health
- **Dawn Nixon** – Licensed Psychologist/Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant, Valley Birch LLC
- **Gretchen Huletz** – Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Manager, Children's Wisconsin Craig Yabuki Center for Mental and Behavioral Health

**LIFELONG  
MENTAL  
HEALTH  
BEGINS  
WITH  
INFANT  
MENTAL  
HEALTH**



# WHAT IS INFANT MENTAL HEALTH (IMH)?

## Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health The foundation of all future development

*Everyone who touches the life of a child can promote social and emotional well-being*

Social and emotional development, or **infant and early childhood mental health**, is the developing capacity of a child from birth to 5 years old to...



Form close and secure  
**adult and peer  
relationships...**



Experience, manage  
and express a **full  
range of emotions...**



**Explore the  
environment**  
and learn...

...all in the context of family, community, and culture.

# WHAT IS INFANT MENTAL HEALTH?

Infant mental health is social, emotional, and behavioral well-being for children from birth to age five



Social and emotional health OR difficulty is communicated/demonstrated through behavior

# WHAT THE BABY/CHILD LEARNS ABOUT **SELF** FROM INTERACTIONS WITH ADULTS



**I am listened to or I am not**

**What I choose to do is valued or it isn't**

**How I express my emotions is accepted or it is not**

**I am allowed to explore or I am not**

**Mostly my needs are met or they are not**

Ron Lally, EdD

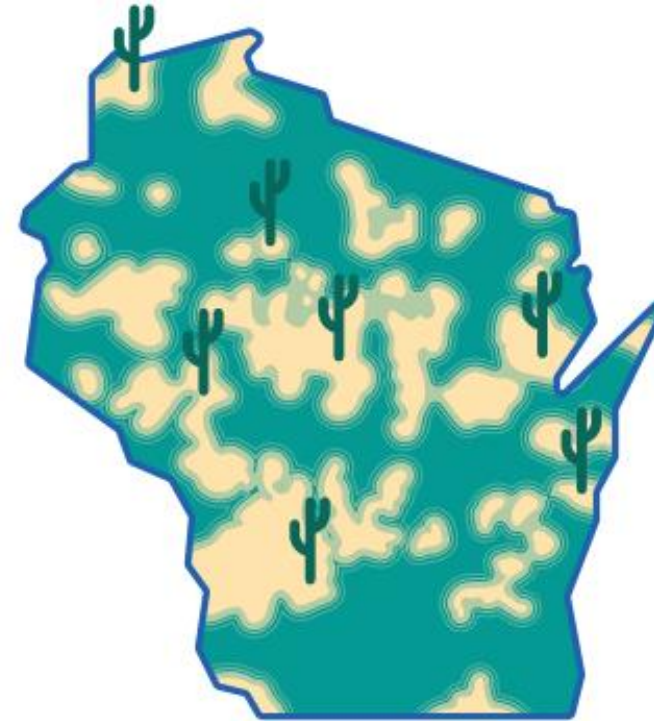
Founding member of ZERO TO THREE

# Child Care

# Data

## Availability of Child Care

**Childcare deserts** exist throughout Wisconsin, but especially in **rural areas** where 70% is considered a childcare desert.



 **54%** of Wisconsin residents live in a child care desert where 3+ children compete for every slot<sup>2</sup>

 **70%** of rural Wisconsin is a child care desert<sup>3</sup>

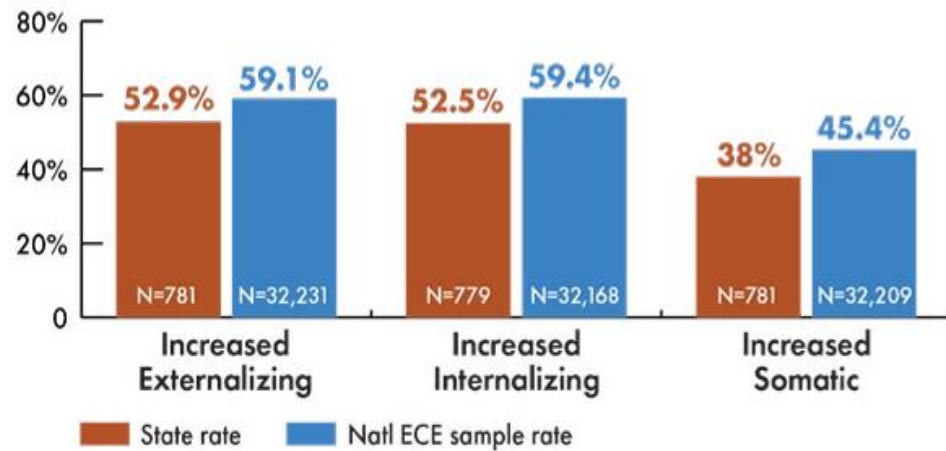
Source: [Wisconsin Department of Children and Families](#)

# Data

More than half of children had elevated mental health concerns – but 75% of staff not aware of IEMHC.

## Mental Health in Children

EXTERNALIZING, INTERNALIZING, AND SOMATIC SYMPTOMS<sup>1</sup>



CONTEXTUAL FACTORS	
Child poverty rate <sup>5</sup>	13.4%
Children under age three not coping well (as reported by parent) <sup>6</sup>	32.1%
ECE professionals not aware of or without access to IEMHC	75.4%

Source: [Children's Equity Project](#)

# Data

## Unlivable Wage

Early Care and Education (ECE) workers are paid far below other Wisconsin workers (2021).

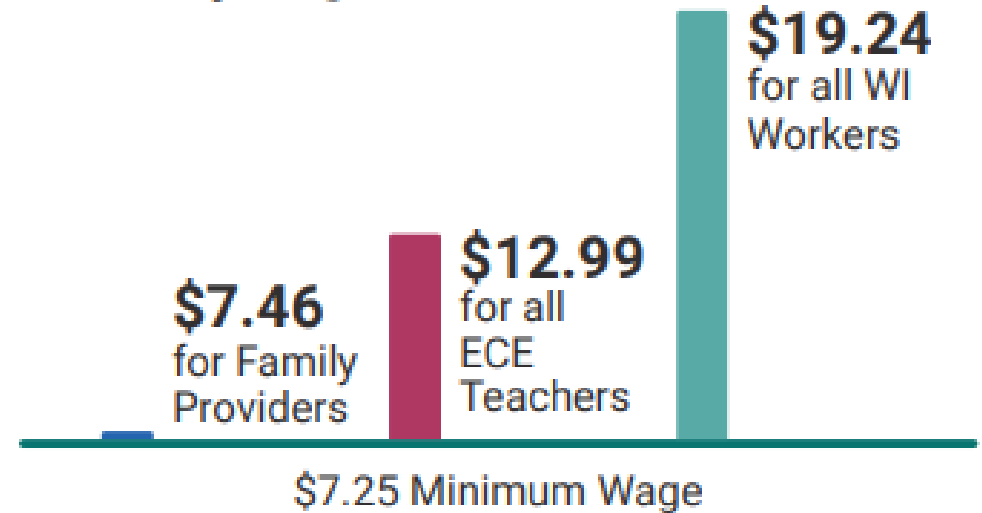
## Average Yearly ECE Salary (National, 2021)

- Home-based provider = \$23,750.40
- Center-based provider = \$29,049.60  
*(both are SNAP eligible)*

Source: [Children's Equity Project](#)



## Median Hourly Wages



Family providers = home-based care  
ECE teachers = center-based care

Source: [Wisconsin's Early Care and Education Workforce at a Glance](#)

# Panel

Infant and Early  
Childhood  
Mental Health



- **Connie Dunlap** – Assistant Director, Thriving Wisconsin
- **Sarah Dillinger** – Program and Policy Analyst Advanced, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families
- **Dawn Nixon** – Licensed Psychologist/Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant, Valley Birch LLC

**Break**

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# Families



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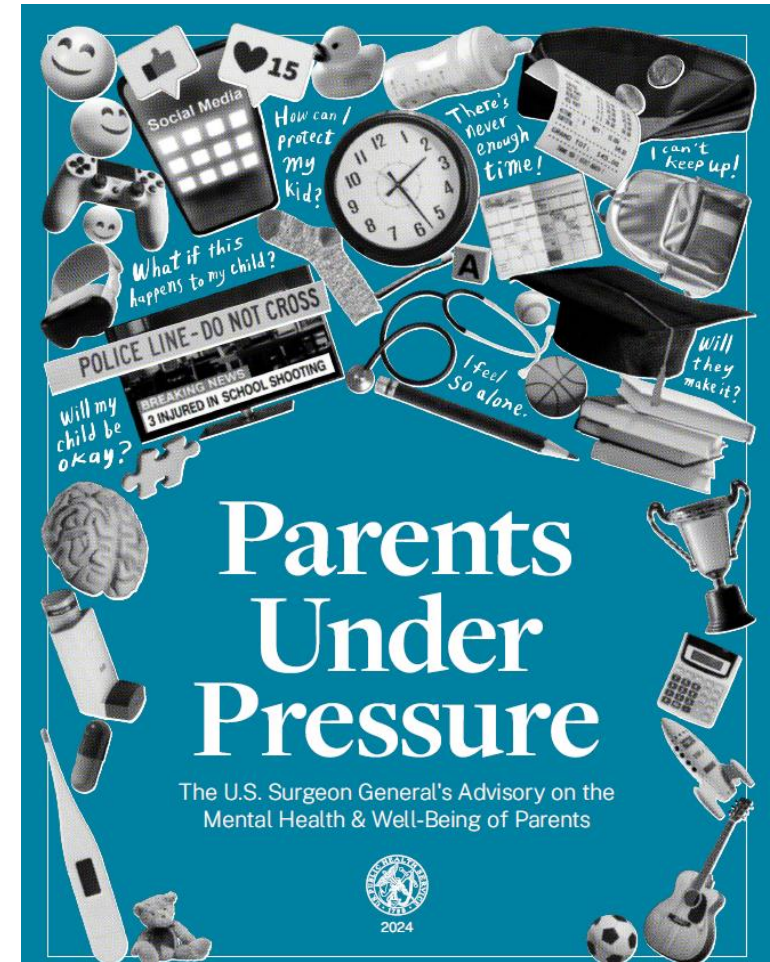
# Data

## Parent Mental Health

Parents are consistently more likely to report experiencing high levels of stress compared with other adults.

“We know that the well-being of parents and caregivers is directly linked to the well-being of their children.”

- Vivek Murthy, Prior Surgeon General, 2024



Source: [Parents Under Pressure – The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Mental Health & Well-Being of Parents, 2024](#)

# Data

## Maternal Mental Health

**1 in 5 Mothers are impacted by mental health conditions – affecting 800,000 families each year in the U.S.**



Source: [Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance](#)

**Only about ¼ of U.S. moms say they have excellent mental and physical health:**

- Excellent mental health declined from 38.4% (2016) to 25.8% (2023).
- Excellent physical health declined from 28% (2016) to 23.9% (2023).

Source: [CBS News](#)



Measures:

- Providers and programs
- Screening
- Insurance coverage

Source: [Policy Center for Maternal Mental Health](#)

# Data

## Household Stress

- Mental health and financial health are inherently connected.
- Financial worries are often the #1 stressor facing families.
- Those with high financial stress are 2 times as likely to report poor health.



Source: [Purdue](#)

# Panel

Infant and Early  
Childhood  
Mental Health



- **Melanie Anderson** – Parent Leader, The Parenting Network
- **Connie Dunlap** – Assistant Director, Thriving Wisconsin
- **Gretchen Huletz** – Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Manager, Children's Wisconsin Craig Yabuki Center for Mental and Behavioral Health

# Pediatricians

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**Dr. Sharyl Paley**

Medical Director of Primary Care Mental  
Behavioral Health, Children's Wisconsin

# Small Group Discussion

## Select Your Discussion Room

1. **Child Care** – Connie Dunlap, Sarah Dillinger
2. **Families** – Gretchen Huletz, Melanie Anderson
3. **Coaching/Consultation** – Lana Shklyar Nenide, Dawn Nixon



### Discussion questions:

1. Any questions you have.
2. What take-aways do you have from the discussion today?
3. How does your organization look at infant and early childhood mental health?



# Announcements / Next Meeting

## Member Announcements

Share announcements/events/activities from your organizations.



## 2026 Meetings

- Feb. 6
- Aug. 7
- May 1
- Nov. 6



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