



WHY THIS MATTERS

Everyone has thoughts, emotions, and behaviors – what we know as mental health – infants and toddlers are no different. Having positive mental health and responsive relationships in early childhood is critical to a child's health, as well as their caregivers'. Building awareness of the importance of early childhood mental health and prioritizing the mental health of young children and their caregivers leads to positive effects on a community-wide level.

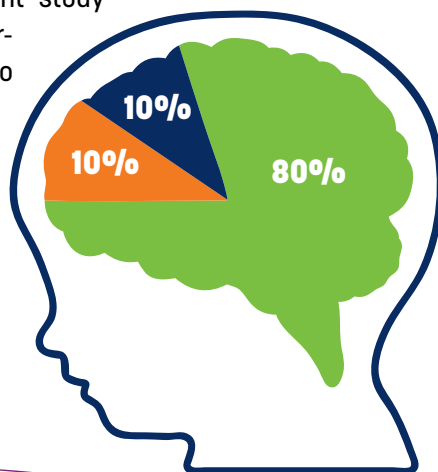
WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

A baby's brain doubles in size in their first year. By age 3, a child's brain grows to about 80% of its adult size, and by age 5, it has grown to 90% of its full size.¹

During these pivotal early years, babies and toddlers are rapidly developing brain connections, which are formed through positive experiences and interactions with their caregivers. Healthy, responsive, secure relationships with the adults in their lives is vital to infant and toddler brain development.

In a process known as 'serve and return', children build these essential brain connections when the adults around them respond to their invitations to interact, whether it is in the form of crying or playing or singing. When adults respond to these behaviors in a sensitive and responsive manner, healthy brain circuitry is formed, and the basis of healthy relationships is established, benefiting both the adult and the child.²

Research shows that high quality child care leads to healthier brain development, improved emotional well-being, and fewer behavioral challenges. Additionally, a recent study found that high-quality center-based child care starting prior to age two can produce robust, sustained academic benefits in elementary school.³



80% of brain development occurs between ages 0-3

10% of brain development occurs between ages 4-5

10% of brain development occurs after age 5

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN WISCONSIN

The Wisconsin Alliance for Infant Mental Health (WI-AIMH) works to promote infant mental health and support all professionals who care for our youngest children. WI-AIMH is working to reach all early care sectors including pediatrics, child care, Head Start, home visiting and child welfare. They have a number of projects throughout the state, including **Healthy Minds Healthy Children** –the state's Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Program –and training programs that coach caregivers on the social and emotional development of babies, toddlers, and young children.

The **Wisconsin Child Psychiatry Consultation Program (CPCP)**, coordinated by the state Department of Health Services, provides consultation, education, and referral support to primary care providers, including pediatricians caring for children ages 0-5.

UW-Madison offers a **Capstone Certificate Program for Infant, Early Childhood and Family Mental Health**. An intensive academic program intended for practicing professionals, the program trains practitioners, which helps to address the workforce shortage in youth mental health.



WHAT HELPS

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) is a preventative strategy that promotes the social and emotional competence and mental health of infants, toddlers, and their caregivers. IECMHC can be particularly helpful in coaching early care educators (ECE) on how to respond to challenging behaviors and handle classroom management.

Caregivers' mental health – whether families' or professionals' – impacts infant mental health. Addressing caregivers' mental health is a key step in helping children's mental health.

While studies show IECMHC is effective at improving the mental health of both children and their caregivers, the majority of ECE professionals surveyed during the pandemic lacked awareness of, or access to, these consultation services.⁴

WI-AIMH is working to expand access to consultation throughout Wisconsin's child care sector and beyond, with the goal of consultation being available to all those who work with infants, young children, and families. Expanding consultation to professionals in other sectors is key to scaling up implementation and improving child well-being throughout the state.

REFERENCES

¹ Lebel et al. *NeuroImage*, Vol 40(3). April 2008. Microstructural maturation of the human brain from childhood to adulthood. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2007.12.053>.

² Harvard University Center on the Developing Child. *A Guide to Serve and Return: How Your Interaction with Children Can Build Brains*. Retrieved from: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/guide/a-guide-to-serve-and-return-how-your-interaction-with-children-can-build-brains/>.

³ Horn, et al. 2022. "Kindergarten through Grade 3 Outcomes Associated with Participation in High-Quality Early Care and Education: A RCT Follow-Up Study" *Education Sciences* 12, no. 12: 908. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12120908>.

⁴ Yale-CARES data as reported in *Examining the Mental Health of Early Childhood Professionals and Children Early in the Pandemic*. May 2023. Retrieved from https://childandfamilysuccess.asu.edu/sites/default/files/2023-05/mh-report_051623.pdf

WHAT WE CAN DO

➤ PARENTS/CAREGIVERS:

- Explore the emotional world of babies and young children at [The Power of Connection](#).
- Use serve and return techniques to build your child's brain and establish a secure connection.
- Prioritize building a responsive relationship with your child.
- Support your child's caregivers' mental health and your own.

➤ EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS:

- Educate staff and parents on infant mental health.
- Embed responsive relationship techniques and social emotional skills into early care culture.
- Learn more about [IECMHC](#) and [WI-AIMH Healthy Minds Healthy Children](#).
- Promote mental health literacy among staff and support their own coping skills/self-care.
- Seek opportunities to receive reflective supervision
- Consider earning Infant or Early Childhood Mental Health Endorsement

➤ POLICYMAKERS:

- Provide long-term investments for infant and early childhood mental health consultation across sectors.
- Provide long-term investments for Child Care Counts.
- Increase state funding for the Birth to 3 Program to support access to early intervention for children with developmental delays or disabilities.
- Fund recruitment and retention programs to strengthen ECE workforce development. Provide student debt relief for ECE professionals.
- Require all insurers provide 12-month postpartum coverage.
- Increase payments to private insurance and Medicaid for early childhood mental health services.
- Ensure use of proper diagnostic tools when assessing infants and young children's mental health.
- Support evidence-based home visiting programs.

➤ PROVIDERS AND PEDIATRICIANS:

- Share with parents how to create supportive environments for emotional development.
- Consider additional training and certification in infant and toddler mental health.
- Explore opportunities like [the Pediatric Mental Health Care Access and Education Program](#) through the Department of Health Services to fund behavioral health integration.