



Healthy MENTAL DEVELOPMENT

This issue brief is the first in a series developed by Early Childhood Iowa (ECI) Quality Services and Programs Component Group. This issue brief is intended to help inform policy makers about the importance of Healthy Mental Development for children birth through five and their families.

Healthy Mental Development – What is it?

In the first years of life, children rapidly develop the social and emotional capacities that prepare them to be self-confident, trusting, empathetic, intellectually inquisitive, competent in using language to communicate, and capable of relating well to others. Even very young children can develop skills that allow them to soothe themselves, share and play, and listen and follow directions. These developments, sometimes called infant mental health, social and emotional development, or healthy mental development, include the child’s ability to:

- Appropriately regulate and express emotions;
- Form close interpersonal relationships with other children and adults; and
- Explore and learn from their environments.

Why is Healthy Mental Development Important?

The early experiences of childhood serve as either risk factors or protective factors for future health and development, for instance:

- When young children do not achieve the milestones linked to healthy mental development, they are at risk to do poorly in the early school years, putting them at increased risk for school failure, juvenile delinquency, and other problems.
- Young children of depressed mothers are at particular risk for delays in school readiness, verbal comprehension, and expressive language skills.
- A recent national study revealed that 12 to 16 percent of children experience developmental problems, but only a third of those children are identified before they enter school.

Iowa’s Current Programs and Policies:

A major challenge for the state is the **absence of a formal plan for children’s healthy mental development**. The state is engaged in several activities to support children with severe mental health needs. However, a review of available programs identifies a lack of prevention strategies. Specifically, Iowa lacks strategies for keeping well children well and for meeting the needs of “at risk” children. Without coordinated efforts to address prevention strategies, Iowa’s current situation can not be expected to improve.

Two key projects in the past five years provide guidance for the future. The report “*Creating a System of Mental Health Services for Children in Iowa*,” released in 2001, provides a framework for mental health system development for the state. Based on the study, the report outlines a plan to create a system of social and emotional health services for Iowa’s youngest citizens. A second key initiative is the *Assuring Better Child Health Development (ABCD II)* project. With leadership from Iowa’s Medicaid program and seed funding from the National Academy for State Health Policy (NASHP) and The Commonwealth Fund, the

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project, which began in 2004, brings together a broad coalition of private and public partners. Best practices and the need for policy and system changes are being identified. The *ABCD II* project funding ends December 2006.

How to Improve Children’s Healthy Mental Development:

To make a difference in the healthy mental development of Iowa children, three strategies must exist:

1. **Promotion** of healthy mental development for all children.
2. **Prevention** that includes screening, identification, and intervention services.
3. **Treatment** from qualified staff to address problems of identified children and families

Healthy Mental Development System Building Activities:

To fully develop a system of **promotion, prevention, and treatment** for young children these system-building activities are recommended:

1. **Integrated Services:**
 - Integrate the **promotion** of healthy mental development into early care, health, and education programs and services.
 - Build on creative **promotion** and **prevention** strategies that already exist in the public sector.
2. **Developmental Screening:**
 - Support **prevention** through developmental screening with standardized screening tools for all children.
 - Recognize screening of maternal depression as a key component in the **promotion** of children’s healthy mental development and the **prevention** of delays.
3. **Workforce Development:**
 - Offer specialized training for professionals who already provide **treatment** for families of young children.
 - Enhance pre-service training for students preparing to provide **treatment** for families of young children.
 - Recognize trained child care providers for their roles in **promotion** and **prevention** and provide additional professional development.
4. **Coordinated Community Planning:**
 - Infuse healthy mental development **promotion, prevention, and treatment** services within the existing programs that serve children and families.
 - Develop community wide strategies to provide **promotion** and **prevention** services to infants, children, and families.
5. **Improve Access:**
 - Identify gaps and barriers in providing low-level intervention **treatment** to children and families.
 - Facilitate linkages between and among early care, health, and education services to eliminate barriers and gaps in **treatment** provision.
6. **Increase Public Awareness:**
 - Increase the **promotion** of early identification and effective interventions.

Summary: Resources directed toward implementation of recommendations identified in the “*Creating a System of Mental Health Services for Children in Iowa,*” report along with resources for sustainability and dissemination of the *ABCD II* project would provide an opportunity to address a significant concern for the future of Iowa’s children and families.