Early Childhood Mental Health

Critical to the well-being of children is their ability to successfully regulate their emotions and manage their social interactions in ways that are acceptable to themselves and others. There are numerous evidenced based tools available to assess the social and emotional well being of infants and young children. Some of the more common tools used in Colorado are *Ages and Stages Questionnaires: Social-Emotional* and the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment Program (DECA).

Mental health problems are more common in children than many people realize. When left untreated, a child's mental health problems can lead to tragic consequences for the child, their family and their community. For the purposes of this assessment, children's mental health problems are defined as the range of all diagnosable emotional, behavioral, and mental disorders in children. These include depression, attention- deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and anxiety, conduct, and eating disorders.

Mental health problems in children have biological and environmental causes. Biological causes include genetics, chemical imbalances in the body, or damage to the central nervous system. Environmental factors include:

- Exposure to environmental toxins, including lead
- Exposure to violence, including witnessing or being the victim of abuse
- Stress related to chronic poverty, discrimination, or other serious hardships
- Poor nutrition
- Parents with untreated mental health problems

Healthy Brain Development: The first three years last a lifetime

Recent advances in brain research indicate that 90% of brain growth happens in the first three years of life. During this time, healthy brain development depends upon a highly dynamic and continuous interaction between the child's genetic predisposition and their life experiences. Genetics determine the timetable for development, while experience shapes the actual construction of brain circuitry. The brain is built in a "hierarchical way". Basic circuits are established first and form the foundation for all future and more complex brain circuitry. This is called brain architecture

Prevention

Recent brain research has identified simple, yet significant positive infant experiences that are likely to have a profound impact on a child's future success in school and in life. For example, in early infancy a child naturally reaches out for interaction through such behaviors as babbling, making facial expressions, and uttering words. Studies have shown that when an infant's attempts at interaction are ignored, stress is likely to result almost instantly. Over time, this type of stress can adversely impact brain architecture.

The infant brain is likely to develop best when caring adults respond to an infant's attempts at interaction in warm, individualized, and stimulating ways. In addition, the development of a healthy brain is influenced by:

- Adequate prenatal and early childhood medical care
- Adequate prenatal and early childhood nutrition
- Nurturing touch
- A safe, loving, and predictable environment

The impact of stress during the early years

There are different types of stress. Everyday stress can occur when a child is told "no" or has apprehension, such as might occur when going to the doctor's office for a vaccination. Researchers refer to this as *healthy stress* and view learning to cope with this type of stress as a normal and necessary part of growing up. Another type of stress, *tolerable stress* may occur during a serious illness or from the loss of a loved one and can be damaging to a child. However, if the child has nurturing relationship and is helped to cope with the stress, there is not likely to be any lasting harm to the child. *Toxic stress* occurs when infants or young children face extreme poverty, abuse or neglect, or exposure to family violence and they lack nurturing and supportive relationships with adults. These circumstances can produce persistent elevated levels of stress hormones that can have a toxic effect on the developing brain. Toxic stress is known to disrupt the learning process and to be associated with some types of antisocial behavior.

Best practices: Early interventions make a difference

Four decades of program evaluation research reviewed by the Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University point to several program "effectiveness factors" that can enhance healthy brain development in the first five years of life:

- Access to prenatal care and medical care for children can help prevent threats to healthy brain development, as well as provide early diagnosis and appropriate management when problems emerge.
- For vulnerable families who are expecting a first child, early and intensive support by skilled home visitors can produce significant benefits for both the child and the parents.
- For young children from low-income families, participation in very high-quality, center-based, early education programs has been demonstrated to enhance child cognitive and social development.
- For young children from families experiencing significant adversity, two-generation programs that simultaneously provide direct support for parents and high-quality, center-based care and education for the children can have positive impacts on both.
- For young children experiencing toxic stress from recurrent child abuse or neglect, severe maternal depression, parental substance abuse, or family violence, interventions that provide intensive services matched to the problems they are designed to address can prevent the disruption of brain architecture and promote better developmental outcomes.

Research suggests that no single program approach or mode of service delivery has been shown to be a magic bullet. The key is to select strategies that have documented effectiveness, assure that they are well implemented, and recognize the critical importance of a strong commitment to continuous program improvement. Successful large-scale programs typically have organizations that provide rigorous assessment and periodic monitoring of the quality of individual implementation sites, as well as training and technical assistance for continuous quality improvement.