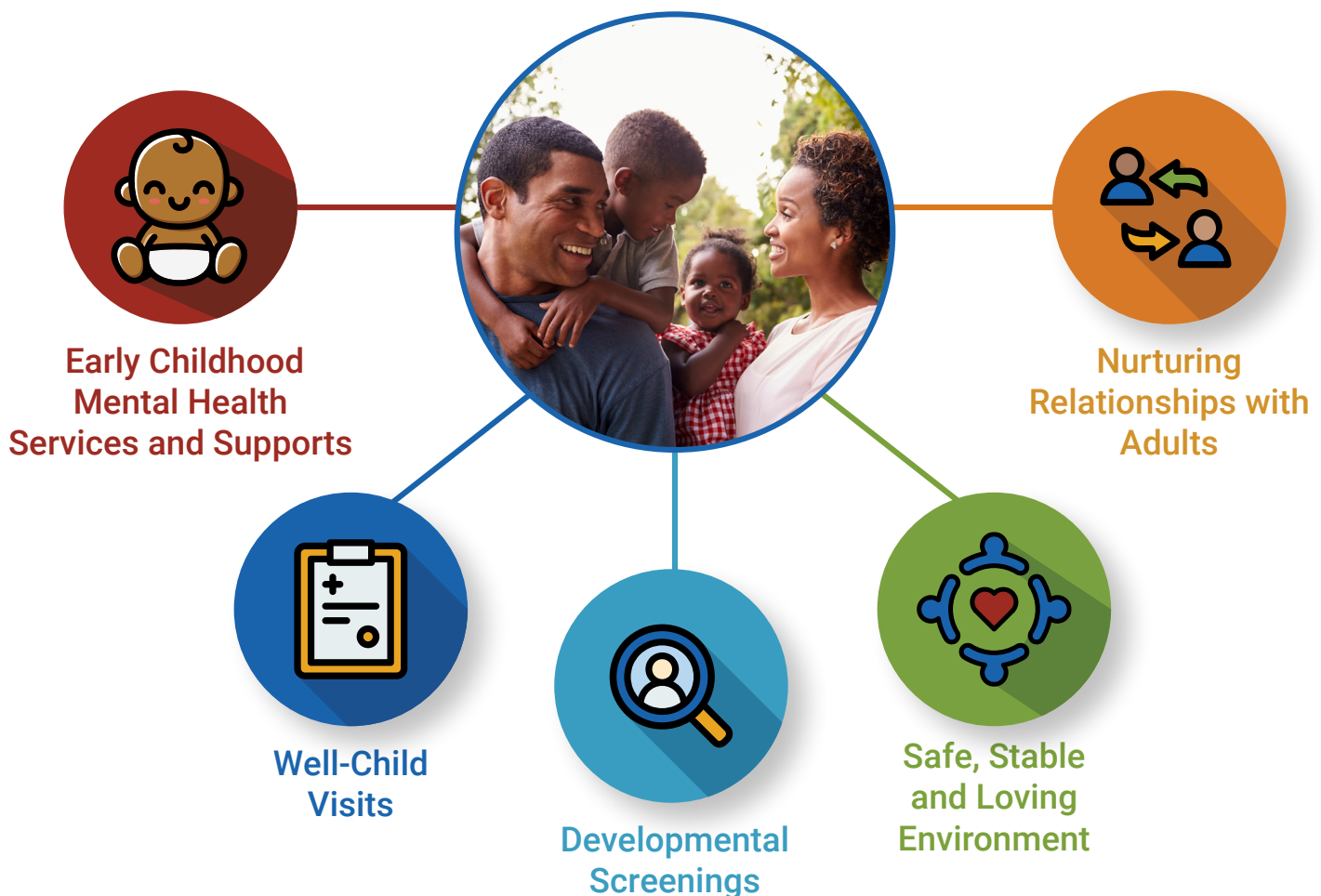


# How Families Can Support their Child's Social and Emotional Development

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH), also known as social-emotional development, is just as important as physical health to a child's well-being. Without support, even the youngest kids can suffer from mental health issues, disorders and conditions. As parents, you play an important part in building your babies' social-emotional strengths.



## WHAT'S IN THIS FACT SHEET:

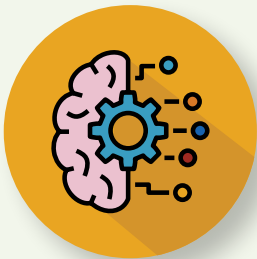
- What is Early Childhood Development?
- What is Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health?
- How can I support the social and emotional development of my young child?
- What else can I do to support my young child's development and mental health?

## WHAT IS EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT?

Remember, if you feel that something isn't quite right with your child's development, trust your instinct and contact your child's doctor.



### Experiences Build the Brain



A child's brain develops much faster during their first five years than at any other time in life: **one million new neural connections are formed every second and 90% of a child's brain develops by age 5.** From birth, brain connections are built through a child's everyday experiences - the good and the bad - including their interactions with parents, caregivers and family members. Children's experiences in their youngest years have a lasting impact on their health and ability to learn and succeed in school and in life.



#### LEARN MORE:

[Harvard Center for the Developing Child: Key Concepts](#)

### Developmental Milestones Information for Parents & Families

Developmental milestones are a set of skills or age-specific tasks that children achieve by a certain age. They are a guide of what to expect around a particular age, and they fall into four categories:



**Social and emotional:** ability to express emotions effectively, follow rules and directions and form positive, healthy relationships



**Speech and language:** ability to absorb and learn to speak language



**Cognitive:** ability to think, learn and solve problems



**Physical:** ability to learn large motor skills (such as sitting up and walking) and fine motor skills (such as picking up a crayon, drawing and using scissors)



#### LEARN MORE:

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has a checklist for parents and caregivers to track the milestones for children 0-5 as they grow: [CDC's Updated Milestones & Related Materials](#) (available in English & Spanish)

**California Department of Developmental Services:** DDS oversees the coordination and delivery of services for Californians with developmental disabilities through a statewide network of 21 community-based, non-profit agencies known as regional centers. Regional centers provide assessments, determine eligibility for services, and offer case management services.

[CDC: Concerned About Your Child's Development](#)

### Well-Child Visits and Developmental Screenings



Part of supporting a child's healthy development is to attend their annual well-child visits, which include developmental screenings. Developmental screenings identify delays in development and other challenges that are important to learn about early. Screenings consist of a series of questions and checklists that assess a child's skills and abilities. National guidelines recommend developmental screenings should be done at 9 months, 18 months and 30 months of age. **Ask your pediatrician if you have concerns. If you're not sure what to look for with your child's development or behavior, ask your pediatrician if they can refer you to someone who can offer guidance or support.**



#### LEARN MORE:

[What is Early Start? Department of Developmental Services](#)

Help Me Grow California helps connect children and families to the appropriate developmental services within their community: [Help Me Grow \(HMG\) Locations in CA & County Websites](#)

## WHAT IS INFANT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH?

Infant and early childhood mental health, also known as social-emotional development, refers to how well a child learns to:



Form close and trusting relationships with adults and peers



Experience, manage and express a full range of emotions



Explore their environment and learn

These abilities help infants and toddlers develop healthy social and emotional skills, laying the foundation for good mental health, positive relationships and well-being later in life. Young children are just as likely to experience mental health challenges as older children and teens, but their distress often goes unrecognized unless adults know what to look for. It is important to note that Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) does not represent a mental health condition, cognitive or intellectual disability, or developmental delays. Rather, IECMH refers to the social and emotional development that is important to and experienced by all infants and young children regardless of their cognitive abilities.

### What do I look for in my young kids?

Young children communicate their feelings through their behaviors. Unlike older children (6 years and older) who verbalize their feelings, young children will show the adults in their life any signs of distress they may feel. This includes behaviors like frequent tantrums or not getting along with other children, but it can also include being unusually shy, quiet or withdrawn. Any change in behaviors should be a sign to talk to your child's doctor.



### Chronic Stress & Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that occur in a child's life. It is important to note that there are aspects of a child's environment that can affect their mental health that may be out of a parent's control, including things like job, housing, or income loss. Parents and adults play a vital role in supporting their young child through difficult experiences in order to help protect against chronic stress and its negative impacts on a child's health and development. Parents can help reduce the effects of ACEs and chronic stress in their child's life by forming trusting, loving relationships with their children and modeling positive coping skills, including reaching out for help.

# HOW CAN I SUPPORT THE MENTAL HEALTH OF MY YOUNG CHILD?



## Bond With Your Child

Nurturing relationships with parents and caregivers are the foundation for a child's social and emotional development and make babies' brains stronger. These relationships also include child care providers, teachers and other community members who care for your child.

### Positive interactions can include:



Cuddling



Talking



Singing



Reading



Playing with Toys



Counting



Storytelling



Sharing Meals

From birth, young children invite their parents and other adult caregivers into their lives to engage with them through cooing, facial gestures and crying. Each invitation is an opportunity for the adult to either be responsive or unresponsive to the child. This back and forth process is known as "serve and return" and is part of how the brain learns and grows. Parents and caregivers who engage positively with their child are literally building the child's brain. That's why it's so important to interact with your child through talking, singing, reading and playing from the day they're born.

### LEARN MORE:



Vroom: Free for parents to learn new and creative activities to keep young children engaged while also stimulating brain development.

The California Healthy Minds, Thriving Kids Project: Free videos for parents that helps parents teach their children mental health and coping skills.

## Support for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health



Different services offer parents, caregivers and providers extra support to care for their young children's social and emotional development. This includes parent trainings, support groups, and infant and early childhood mental health consultations. Such services offer adults in young children's lives with the tools and knowledge of their child's behaviors and how to support them. For example, services provided by a mental health consultant can be offered in many settings where young children learn, grow and play, such as child care programs to help the teachers understand and respond to children's behavior. IECMH consultations provide the adults in young children's lives with the tools and

knowledge of their child's behaviors and how to support them.



### LEARN MORE:

Talk to your child's pediatrician or child care provider to learn more about IECMH Consultations

## What else can I do to support my young child's development and mental health?

Parents and caregivers are critical to babies' social-emotional development. It is also important to take care of yourself. Young children are very sensitive to their caregivers' stress. Strategies for parent/caregiver mental health can include:



Mindfulness/  
Breathing Exercises



Physical  
Exercise



Therapy/  
Counseling



Home-Visiting  
programs through  
your doctor's office



Visiting with other  
friends and family who  
have young children

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found [here](#).