



Connecticut Association for Infant Mental Health

Concerned with the Healthy Social Emotional Development
of Infants and Young Children

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Testimony for Mental Health Services Working Group

Bipartisan Task Force on Gun Violence Prevention and Children's Safety

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Improving Connecticut's Capacity to Address Children's Mental Health Needs

The Connecticut Association for Infant Mental Health, Inc. (CT-AIMH) is pleased that there is a commitment to examine mental health issues as they pertain to young children in Connecticut/ The Association thanks the Committee for the opportunity to contribute to the development of policies and practices toward building safe, healthy, secure communities and environments for families and our youngest children.

The Connecticut Association for Infant Mental Health (CT-AIMH) asserts that the path toward optimal mental and emotional health begins with healthy attachments early in life. There is an abundance of evidence that early relationship experiences are powerful predictors of later outcomes in life including school performance and social adaptation, and that the absence of such healthy relationship experiences in the very first years of life compromises an individual's life-long potential and may increase the risk for the kind of violent behavior we all seek to prevent. The research makes clear that infancy is where we must begin if we are to address the complexity of achieving more effective mental health services.

CT-AIMH testifies to explain:

- why infant/early childhood mental health that stresses the importance of early relationships is important,
- why those working with infants and toddlers and their families require unique knowledge and practice skills, and
- how this workforce can become competent in infant mental health in Connecticut.

Why Is Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Important?

Attachment refers to the relationship between an infant with his/her caregivers that develops during the first year of life. All infants and young children learn in the context of relationships and these early relationships are critically important for two reasons. First, during the first three years of life, a young child's brain grows faster than at any future time. Secure, responsive, and warm relationships with caregivers influence the formation of neural structures in the brain that influence behavior over the life span. When those relationships are absent or unpredictable, brain cells die, connections are not made, and children are at great risk for school failure including social adaptation. Research has clearly

demonstrated that brain development is altered when there is chronic stress caused by risk factors such as poverty, family violence, substance abuse, child neglect and abuse, or incarceration (www.developingchild.org), all factors that impede early relationship development. Second, when there are secure and warm relationships with parents/caregivers, the developing brain is buffered from significant harm in the event of stressful experiences. Without that buffer, the brain development of young children is significantly compromised leading to poor school performance and increased risk for mental health issues.

Why is training in infant mental health important for those working with infants/toddlers and their families?

Those working with at risk families and families with unresolved trauma have a very hard job. These people need to be competent in the knowledge and practice of infant mental health and they need support so they can, in turn, support and enhance responsive caregiving at a sensitive period of the children's development. Working with, and parenting, infants and toddlers is unique and difficult. Very young children communicate in subtle ways. They lack the language skills to comprehend or express the impact of stress. Infants and toddlers require close observation and sensitivity that enable them to elicit contingently responsive caregiving, often metaphorically referred to as "serve and return" caregiving. When those in the infant/toddler workforce including early care and education providers, home visitors, early interventionists, consultants, clinicians and academicians have achieved the essential skills and competencies, they have unique opportunities to support families and to prevent or treat disturbances in relationships.

How does the workforce become competent?

The CT Association for Infant Mental Health is one of 15 states in the US that offers a set of Competency Guidelines® for those working with infants/toddlers and their families. These Competencies® were developed by the Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health 20 years ago and were recognized in 2006 by the Annapolis Coalition for Behavioral Health for innovation in workforce development. The Competencies focus on theoretical and direct service skills that emphasize the importance of early relationships and the parent experiences that can get in the way of their sensitive caregiving. The Competencies® are specific to levels of work: infant/family associate, infant/family specialist, infant mental health specialist, and infant mental health mentor (higher education, policy, clinical). Achievement of the Competencies is recognized by Endorsement in Culturally Sensitive, Relationship-Focused Practice Promoting Infant Mental Health®. Acquiring these competencies can help the infant/toddler workforce meet the needs of our families of young children at risk. Connecticut currently has 14 persons who hold this Endorsement. The plan is to increase that number to 125 over the next three years.

We ask you to consider:

- Funding to CT-AIMH directly or through a state agency such as DCF, DDS, DPH or SDE to provide Competency related trainings in infant mental health in order to build a competent workforce for infants/toddlers and their families.
- Requiring a competent workforce for those working with infants, toddlers and their families whenever state funds are used to provide services to infants/toddlers and their families, i.e. Endorsement in Infant Mental Health®.

- Making reimbursement possible for Endorsed professionals providing home based services to infants and young children in families experiencing risks without the infant or young child needing a diagnosis.

Please contact us for more information about any of these points. Additional information about the Competencies and Endorsement is available at our web site: www.ct-aimh.org

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