

## **Continued from “Infant Mental Health: Instilling Hope, Promoting Wellness” ...**

Strategies to support infant mental health can be thought of on a continuum and encompasses a variety of work, including promotion of social-emotional health and well-being, dyadic strategies for the prevention of adverse childhood experiences, as well as specialized clinical interventions within context of the parent-child relationship to mitigate the effects of trauma in early childhood.

### **Why is infant mental health so critical?**

Research concludes early experiences matter. The early years set the foundation for lifelong success. Babies are born with incredible capacities to be in relationships and to experience the world around them. Babies have a perspective and preferences. Adults are in a profound position to nurture and respond lovingly to infant's cues each and every day. Repeated interactions where the adult lovingly and appropriately responds to an infant's cues of hunger, tiredness, discomfort, closeness and the need for proximity contribute to the infant's experience of safety and security. When an infant learns his or her needs will be met by a nurturing adult, the infant is more capable of exploring and learning from the world around them. The infant's brain is making millions upon millions of connections each day. (Harvard Center on the Developing Child). However, according to the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families 2017 Annual Child Abuse and Neglect Report, the data shows children under the age of three years old are among the highest population to suffer from child abuse and neglect. The effects of abuse and neglect can be long-lasting. Almost 60% of adults surveyed in the WI Behavioral Risk Factor Survey reported one or more adverse childhood experiences (May, 2018). The full report can be found by [clicking here](#).

Yet, there is hope. The Harvard Center on the Developing Child reminds us, it is never too late, but earlier is better. The human brain is malleable and young children are resilient. Through early experiences with caring adults, infants and toddlers learn to develop confidence, the ability to be in relationships, make friends, concentrate, persist during challenging tasks, listen and communicate, problem-solve, manage emotions and develop empathy. These are critical skills needed to be successful in school and the workforce. (Center on Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning). The benefits on society are numerous and measurable when we prioritize the early years. Many industries are coming to more fully understand the 13% return on investment for every dollar invested in high-quality early childhood programming. (heckmanequation.org)

### **What kind of specialized skill-set is needed to serve this population?**

Wisconsin is fortunate to have a nationally and internationally recognized professional credential for individuals who demonstrate the specialized knowledge and skills to work with infants, toddlers and their families, known as Infant Mental Health Endorsement®. This competency-based system was developed by the National Alliance for Infant Mental Health. The process for earning Infant Mental Health Endorsement® in our state is multi-faceted. More information is available through the Wisconsin Alliance for Infant Mental Health. WI-AIMH describes on their website

www.wiaimh.org, “Infant Mental Health (IMH) Endorsement® for Culturally Sensitive, Relationship-Focused Practice Promoting Infant Mental Health is an internationally recognized credential that supports and recognizes the development and proficiency of professionals who work with or on behalf of infants, toddlers, and their families.”

**What is Family Service Madison doing to support the very youngest children in our community?**

Family Service Madison recognizes the importance of social and emotional health and well-being for the very youngest members of our community. Currently, six staff members of the Bridges for Families Birth to 3 Program are graduates of the UW-Madison Infant, Early Childhood and Family Mental Health Capstone Certificate Program. Additionally, two staff members have earned Infant Mental Health Endorsement®. Family Service Madison supports infant mental health and the promotion of healthy attachment relationships through early intervention services delivered in families’ homes and the community. FSM provides Infant Mental Health Classroom Consultation services to child care centers in Southern WI. These centers are invested in creating classroom environments and further developing teaching strategies center-wide to promote and foster infant and toddler’s social emotional development.

For more information about infant mental health supports and services, contact Elizabeth Wahl at [elizabethw@fsmad.org](mailto:elizabethw@fsmad.org), or call Family Service Madison at (608) 252-1320.