



# A Look at the Social/Emotional Development of Infants and Toddlers



Healthy social and emotional development begins at the beginning! This developmental area, perhaps more than any other, occurs early, when parents and other important caregivers in the baby's life welcome him/her into their lives. This is the time that the relationship between parent and child unfolds, and helps to establish the foundation for life-long learning.

An infant or toddler's mental health or social and emotional wellness describes his/her ability to demonstrate developmentally appropriate social behavior and emotions based on individual characteristics, i.e. family culture, environmental circumstances and the quality of close relationships. Infant Mental Health has been well defined by several professional organizations.

**ZERO TO THREE** defines infant mental health as, *"...the developing capacity of the child from birth to age 3 to: experience, regulate, and express emotions; form close and secure interpersonal relationships; and explore the environment and learn -- all in the context of family, community, and cultural expectations for young children. Infant mental health is synonymous with healthy social and emotional development."*

**The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child** recognizes that "young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development – intellectual, social, emotional, physical, behavioral, and moral."

## **The Role of Relationships and Development**

Infants rely on their parents and other primary caregivers to help them regulate and, over time, learn culturally acceptable ways to respond to and express emotions. Infant development begins and continues within the context of an emotional relationship.

**Why is social and emotional development so important?** An infant and toddler's social and emotional development is critical to developmental progress across all domains. The desire to engage with others, curiosity and willingness to explore, enjoyment and pleasure from social encounters, and the ability to adapt to challenges are all characteristics of an infant-toddler's emotional competence. These skills are learned through experiences shared within

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relationships. Early intervention services that support a child's development recognize the importance of promoting healthy social and emotional development.

Infants and toddlers who have delays in development or who have disabilities often need additional support to enjoy the same quality of developmental experiences as children who do not have to manage those challenges. A relationship with a parent or caregiver who is able to put the child's needs first is likely to be the most important influence on the child's development. Infants and toddlers who experience secure attachments have an increased capacity to adapt to stressful circumstances that could negatively impact development (Zeanah, Zeanah, 2001).

ECI service providers promote social and emotional development of infants and toddlers by providing a relationship-based approach to intervention. Services focus on addressing the developmental needs of the infant and toddler but also value listening to families to help them identify what they need to help their child develop. The relationship of the early intervention provider to the family is as important as the early intervention provider's skill in addressing the child's development. The intent of early intervention is to implement strategies that will support the child's development but to do so keeping in mind that the strength of the parent child relationship is the foundation for all learning. Strategies are embedded in the family's typical routines and therefore offer opportunities throughout the day for the family to help their child grow and learn. If a family feels stress around a specific developmental task, the ECI provider and family will work together to determine what strategies will be the most effective in moving forward. This approach is an integral part of routine service delivery.

Zero to Three provides more information on how to promote social and emotional development; how to manage challenging behaviors, or information about early childhood mental health. To learn more visit the Zero to Three website:

1. Promoting Social and Emotional Development - <http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/social-emotional-development/>
2. Challenging Behaviors - <http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/challenging-behavior/>
3. Early Childhood Mental Health - <http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/challenging-behavior/>

**Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) is a division of the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS). ECI programs provide services to families with children, birth to 36 months with developmental delays and disabilities. For more information about DARS/ECI, call 1-800-628-5115 or visit [www.dars.state.tx.us/ecis](http://www.dars.state.tx.us/ecis).**

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