

## What do we need in our community?

- Education about what Early Childhood Mental Health means, why it matters, and why we literally can't afford to ignore it.
- Preventive and supportive services for vulnerable young children and families.
- Quality early childhood care and development programs for all young children and their families.
- Quality prenatal and pediatric care for all children: A "medical home."
- A comprehensive system of mental health care for families and young children. Services need to be strength based, culturally specific, and family centered; and families need to be able to find them when needed.
- A child welfare system attuned to the unique developmental needs of infants and young children, who are the most vulnerable to life-long effects of abuse, neglect, and other forms of violence.
- Screening for social, emotional, and developmental progress for all young children.
- Family systems advocates providing support and direction for families.
- Training and technical assistance for early childhood service providers and mental health professionals; which grows the community capacity to help young children and families.
- Encouragement of funding by concerned donors and governmental entities for vital programs.

## For more information, please contact:

### Coalition for the Advancement of Children's Mental Health (CACMH)

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## Parents: Where to find help

Nebraska Child Find can help parents access the Early Development Network through your local public school district: 1-888-806-6287.

Nebraska Family Support Network:  
402-345-0791

PTI Nebraska  
(Parent Information and Training):  
402-346-0525 or 800-284-8520

Nebraska Family Help Line  
1-888-866-8660

Ollie Webb Center  
402-342-4418

### Finding Practitioners with Early Childhood Mental Health Expertise:

These agencies participate in CACMH and offer services and support for young children and families:

- Child Saving Institute (402) 553-6000
- Heartland Family Service (402) 553-3000
- Lutheran Family Services (402) 661-7100
- Center for Holistic Development (402) 502-9788
- Project Harmony (402) 595-1326
- Behaven Kids (402) 926-4373
- Children's Respite Care Center (402) 496-1000
- Nebraska Children's Home Society (402) 451-0787
- Salvation Army (402) 898-5861
- Kid Squad (402) 553-6000
- Project Safe Start Nebraska (402) 472-3479

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# EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH

Why We All Need To Care

A White Paper published by the Coalition for the Advancement of Children's Mental Health.

Omaha, NE • 2011

**What does it take for children to grow up happy, productive and prepared for adult, family, and community life?** It's a question that is often raised as we confront our social failures: family violence, juvenile delinquency, adult crime, school dropouts, addictions, mental health problems, or poverty. What if we could turn the clock back to the first five years of life? What if we could use everything we have learned about failure, to prevent more failures? What if we could use everything we have learned about success to generate more success?

## A Good Start Means Everything

We know we would be focused on the very first days, weeks, months, and years in a child's life and the life of the family. Not long ago, it was thought that many diagnoses such as anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorder began only after childhood. We now know they can begin in early childhood. The human infant has the longest and most complex course of development of any living being; and we know that success depends on the consistent loving and competent care of parents and other supportive caregivers.

## What is Early Childhood Mental Health?

"... Early childhood mental health (ECMH) is the optimal growth and social-emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development of the young child in the context of the unfolding relationship between child and parent." (Source: *Early Childhood Mental Health: A Report to Nebraska*)

March 2002) ECMH is not about pathologizing child behavior; but rather promoting the healthy alternative of social and emotional development. It is not just the work of psychiatrists or other mental health providers—but the work of every parent, extended family member, child care provider, early childhood educator, medical practitioner, or anyone else who touches the lives of young children and their families. The core of early childhood mental health is a secure emotional bond between parent and child. This relationship creates a foundation for physical, social, cognitive, language, and emotional development; and literally promotes the developing complexity of the brain. By the time formal education begins for most children at the age of five, the factors most relevant to educational success have already exerted considerable influence. There are critical needs of young children and their families that must be addressed before the child enters school.



The challenge for all parents and for the community concerned about the happy, productive, and healthy adult of the future is this:

- How to recognize and promote the healthy social and emotional development of the young child;
- How to navigate the typical as well as atypical problems of early childhood, finding help, support, encouragement, and resources as needed;
- How to protect children from the harmful effects of high stress resulting from poverty, parental chemical dependency or mental illness, child maltreatment, domestic or community violence;
- How to recognize the early signs of atypical development and find the best early intervention and treatment services available.

## Building Healthy Relationships

The most important people in a young child's life need to monitor mental health just as they are vigilant to the child's physical health. It is easy to identify a child's physical needs: nutritious food, warm clothes when it's cold, bedtime at a reasonable hour. However, a child's mental and emotional needs may not be as obvious. Good mental health allows children to think clearly, develop socially and learn new skills.

## BRAIN DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: Why it Matters

In the year 2000, a group of child development experts set out to review all of the available research on what influences children's development in the first five years of life. Their findings were published in a groundbreaking report titled **From Neurons to Neighborhoods**. These are some of the key findings:

1. Humans are wired for connection with one another. The child's brain develops only in an interactive relationship with loving, dependable and nurturing caregivers. The brains of children deprived of early nurturing are smaller and poorly organized; and these children show delays in language, cognitive, social, emotional, and even physical development.
2. It is the attachment relationship, so important not only in infancy, but throughout childhood, which is the carrier of all other life learning and development.
3. Early experiences affect the development of the brain and lay the foundation for intelligence, emotional health, and moral development. Exposure to chronic stress, which releases stress hormones into the delicate brain of the young child, can have long lasting effects on the way the brain is organized and how it functions.
4. Children's development is influenced by the traits they are born with (nature), as well as what they experience (nurture). Most of all, they are influenced by how these factors interact. What children experience, including how their parents respond to them, shapes their development as they adapt to the world.
5. All areas of development (social/emotional/intellectual/language/motor) are linked. Physical and mental well being coexist within the same child. A threat to either will have pervasive consequences.

## Resources, Solutions, and Support

CACMH works as an all-inclusive team in the Omaha area. Coalition members represent the entire spectrum of health and mental health care professionals, parent organizations, early childhood educators, child care providers, child advocacy organizations, and many others. We welcome new members at all times. The Coalition's goal is to promote a comprehensive and integrated system of care for young children with mental health needs and their families residing in the Omaha metropolitan area.

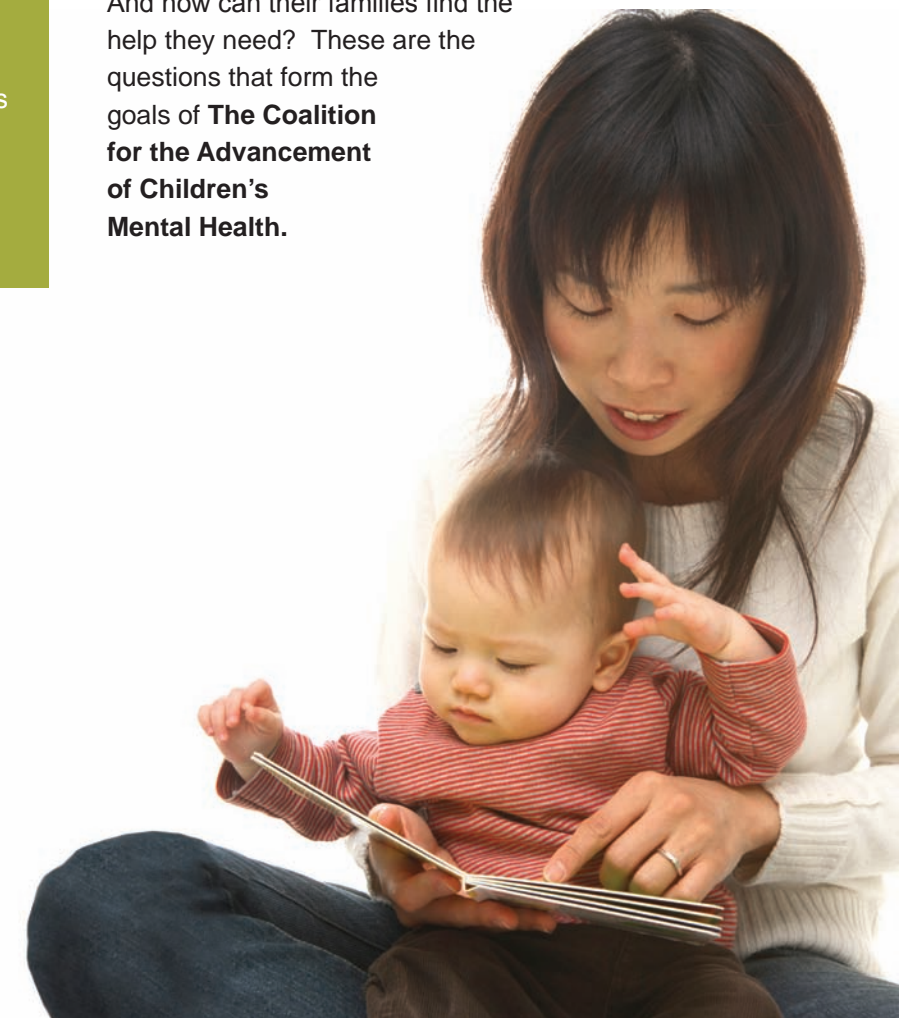
### CACMH envisions a community that:

1. Promotes knowledge and skills necessary to support healthy social and emotional development of young children. It is our hope that anyone who touches the lives of young children and families will be able to support that family in finding appropriate preventive, screening, assessment, and intervention services needed.
2. Provides early identification through screening for social, emotional, and developmental progress for all young children.
3. Supports intervention with sufficient community resources to provide developmentally appropriate social and emotional development and mental health services for young children and families.

Dr. Jack Shonkoff, one of the editors of this report, commented in an interview that what the team learned was so important, that they felt compelled to go forward with the mission of bringing brain development science to into practice. "We want to close this unacceptable gap between what science tells us about early development, and what we are doing to support young children. Every parent, every policy maker, every educator, and every community needs to understand the astounding curve of development that occurs during the first five years of life, and to apply what we know to strengthen vulnerable children, families, and communities."

## How Pervasive is the need?

Kids Count in Nebraska, a publication of Voices for Children, recently published its 2010 report. It is difficult to know exactly how many Nebraska children experience mental health problems, but it is estimated that about 90,000 children have some form of mental health or substance abuse disorder. About half of these are in the category of significant impairment. In addition, the most recent National Survey of Children's Health found that about 11% of Nebraska children age 2-17 have at least one developmental, emotional, or behavioral condition. Early identification of problems, and provision of preventive or early intervention services could greatly improve children's chances of developing to be healthy, happy, and contributing adults in the community. But a recent article in *The American Psychologist* (February 2011) by Joy Osofsky, Phd, points out that infants and toddlers are unlikely to receive the treatment they need, which could prevent lasting developmental problems. How do we develop the mental health practice expertise to meet the needs of young children? And how can their families find the help they need? These are the questions that form the goals of **The Coalition for the Advancement of Children's Mental Health**.



A person's a person . . . no matter how small! -Dr. Seuss