

# TIP SHEET: Brain Development and Infant Mental Health



## BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

### Connect at Home

- In the first five years of life, children's brains grow faster than they ever will again. Children's earliest experiences shape the brain's physical development. These early experiences build the foundation for a lifetime of learning and development.

### Make It Social

- No need for fancy toys or programs to help children build their brains. Children learn best by interacting with you! Try to share as many back-and-forth interactions with infants and toddlers as you can throughout the day. Finding dedicated time can be challenging, so try to include children in as many everyday activities as you can.

### Follow Their Lead

- When a child expresses interest in something or someone, follow their lead. Even if it is just for a few minutes a day, following a child's lead can support their curiosity and provide playful moments for both of you. Resist the urge to take over, even if they may not be able to do everything on their own. Exploring their interests with your support helps children learn new things and gain confidence.

### Build Routines

- Routines help children feel comfortable and secure. It is easier for children to explore, play, and learn new things when they know what is going to happen. Even if you can't do something at the same time each day, try to build in everyday rituals. Do you sing songs while you put shoes on? Can you listen to soothing music while you read a few books before bed?

### Be A Regulator

- It's no secret that children have big feelings. If we are honest with ourselves, we do too. As adults, we have learned how to regulate our feelings and impulses. Children are still building the networks in their brains that regulate those big feelings. They need our help to hold them close when they are upset, or model what to do with angry feelings.

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC):

"A baby's early experiences in relationships, whether at home or in an early education environment, set the stage for future brain functioning. The information gathered in these early relationships is at the heart of a rich and complex brain-building process. As babies experience responses from their caregivers, their brains start to form expectations for how they will be treated and how they should respond. "

*Tips taken from [Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center \(ECLKC\) Supporting Early Brain Development: Building the Brain](#)*



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## INFANT MENTAL HEALTH

A secure attachment may look like the following:

- Affection is apparent between a parent/caregiver and child
- When a child is upset or hurt, they lean on their parent/caregiver for comfort and validation
- Noticing a child is more comfortable around a parent/caregiver rather than a stranger
- A child greeting a parent/caregiver with a hello
- A child feels safe to explore and come back to the parent/caregiver for validation

Some signs that an infant may be at risk for mental health challenges:

- Has a challenging time with sleeping or feeding
- May over-respond or under-respond to things around them, for example, crying for long periods of time and parent/caregiver does not understand why or a child not responding to a parent giving them a hug or kiss
- Poor attachment between an infant/child and their caregiver
- Acting out in social situations
- Lack of self-confidence

There are times a parent/caregiver cannot control some of the things that cause mental health challenges or illnesses, but they can provide things such as a stable home, healthy relationships, good support and attachment to promote good mental health. As a home visitor, you can have ongoing conversations with the parent/caregiver to help support them during this time.

- Consider encouraging a parent to reach out to their doctor if they have concerns for their infant's or child's mental health.
- As part of your conversation with a parent, discuss how they feel about their attachment with their baby and if they need any support with mental health resources.
- Think about how as a home visitor you can support an infant and parent/caregiver if there is a concern for their mental health and plan with the family about ongoing support.

## Resources

- [SAMHSA Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration](#)
- [Center of Excellence for Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation](#)
- [New Mexico Association for Infant Mental Health](#)
- [UNM Health](#)
- [BC Children's Hospital](#)