

Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation in Wisconsin

Best Practice Guidelines



The first five years of life are a time of unparalleled brain development in young children.ⁱ Increasingly, the social and emotional needs of infants and young children are recognized as a critical component of school readiness, overall well-being and lifelong success.

Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) is an effective intervention strategy for building parent/caregiver capacity to support young children's social and emotional development and to address challenging behaviors in the context of relationships across multiple settings and systems of care. As a result, more and more states and communities are investing in IECMHC.ⁱⁱ

As Wisconsin embraces IECMHC as a valuable early prevention and intervention strategy, it's important to have a shared understanding of best practice guidelines regarding what IECMHC is, how it's delivered and who should be providing it. The following guidelines were developed by a group of Wisconsin experts, chaired by the Wisconsin Alliance for Infant Mental Health, to ensure that high standards of practice are consistently maintained throughout the state.

"I cannot begin to describe how much I value this time and our consultant. It has had such a huge impact on my entire staff and I see and hear my staff being more reflective"

- Program Supervisor

Infant Mental Health

The developing capacity of the child from birth to five to:

1. Experience, regulate, and express emotions;
2. Form close and secure interpersonal relationships;
3. Explore the environment and learn

... all in the context of family, community, and culture.

(Adapted from ZERO TO THREE Infant Mental Health Task Force, 2002)



Inside...

What is Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC)?

How is IECMHC provided?

Who can provide IECMHC?

Who can utilize IECMHC?

What are the benefits of using IECMHC?

How can I or my agency get more information on IECMHC?

Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Is:

Preventive

Prevents social, emotional and behavioral challenges in young children from occurring or progressing.

Multi-faceted

Addresses the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of young children by mobilizing the collective resources of families, staff, programs and communities.

Relationship-based

Recognizes the critical role of positive relationships for supporting healthy child development.

Capacity-building

Increases the ability of parents, professionals, and programs to address the needs of young children.

Examples of what an IECMH Consultant does:

- ◆ performs skilled observations
- ◆ conducts assessments and early identification
- ◆ develops individualized and universal strategies
- ◆ provides coaching, collaboration, and referrals
- ◆ creates a climate of empathy and compassion
- ◆ provides reflective supervision and consultation to hold multiple perspectives in mind
- ◆ helps adults understand and change how they perceive the meaning of behaviors
- ◆ explores intergenerational patterns as they impact family relationships today

What is Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation?

Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) is a preventive intervention that teams a mental health professional with early childhood professionals to improve the social, emotional, and behavioral health of children in early childhood programs.ⁱⁱⁱ The primary role of an IECMH Consultant is to build the capacity of professionals and parents to understand the powerful influence of their relationships and interactions on young children's social-emotional well-being and development.^{iv}

Although IECMH Consultants are licensed mental health clinicians, their role as a consultant is to work in partnership with the adults caring for the child (parents and professionals), not to provide therapy to children and families served by the organization. The *consultative stance*—an approach that conveys to staff, families, and programs that supporting children's mental health is a shared responsibility—is a critical component to IECMHC.^v

IECMH Consultants collaborate with early childhood professionals, programs, and families to improve their ability to prevent, identify, and respond to mental health issues among children in their care. While IECMHC is not direct therapy, an IECMH Consultant offers a capacity-building approach for professionals to reduce problem behaviors in young children and address challenges parents/caregivers are experiencing; thereby, promoting positive social and emotional development.^{vi}

"I've been providing IECMHC for a Head Start Program since March 2011. Within this role, I provide 3-hours of weekly consultation that includes reflective supervision groups for home visitors and classroom consultation with Head Start teachers. Additionally, I provide annual in-service trainings for staff regarding aspects of positive behavioral support, child development, and social-emotional well-being. Services have been well received and continually promote children's social-emotional development, increase access to appropriate community services for families, and improve capacity of Head Start staff to attend to the myriad needs of vulnerable families within the community."

*-Samantha L. Wilson, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Pediatrics, Medical College of Wisconsin
International Adoption Clinic, Child Development Center*

How is Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Provided?

An IECMH Consultant works with a program, agency or organization to address child, family, staff and program needs. The cornerstone of IECMHC is the collaborative, continuous relationship between the consultant and the adults who care for young children.

IECMHC is a multi-faceted approach comprised of four core elements^{vii}:

1. **Child-Centered:** Staff and/or family seeks help because they have concerns about a child.
2. **Family-Centered:** Supports staff and parents in understanding and addressing child or family concerns and creates positive child-parent relationships by developing strategies to support and involve the family.
3. **Programmatic:** Focuses on providing support to improve the overall quality of the program by solving specific issues; reviewing policies and procedures; and enhancing program environment, structure, and responsiveness.
4. **System and Community:** Assists organizations, systems, and communities to improve infant and child social, emotional, and behavioral health by facilitating training, collaboration, and coordination across their systems of care.



The provision of consultation should be flexible and adaptable to meet the needs of the organization, and the relationship between the consultant and the agency should be ongoing and continuous. IECMHC will not look the same in every agency and will evolve and shift over time within the same agency. An agency could utilize all or some of the four IECMHC elements at any given time. For example, a consultant could work with an organization around specific child social-emotional development issues, and also work on a programmatic level to improve engagement, reflective practices and shared problem solving with parents.

What does IECMH consultation look like?

Tricia Schutz, LCSW, Clinical Consultant with SaintA, provides IECMHC to two separate programs, a Home Visiting program and an Early Education program.

Her role within the Home Visiting program is to provide monthly, office-based, Reflective Supervision to home visitors and home visiting supervisors. In this role, she cultivates a safe, discussion "space" for the participants to reflect upon all the thoughts, feelings, and reactions that come up in their work with families, who are oftentimes struggling with toxic stress and traumatic adverse experiences. Through the process of Reflective Supervision, Tricia helps home visiting staff pause and step back from immediate reactions to consider multiple perspectives and the important influence of all relationships--the relationship of the supervisor and the home visitor, the relationship between the home visitor and the caregivers, and the relationship between the caregivers and the child.

Tricia also provides IECMHC to an Early Education program. In this role she provides coaching, classroom observations, and consultation directly to caregivers and families, and also attends parent engagement events to discuss topical agenda items. For example, recently she met with parents to talk about the impact of stress and toxic stress on social emotional health of their children, and how caregivers can respond to their children and moderate their own stress.

Who Can Provide Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation?

Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultants are licensed clinical mental health professionals who work collaboratively with parent(s), families, professionals, organizations and systems to enhance their ability to promote children's optimal social and emotional development and well-being. Consultants have knowledge and experience in Infant Mental Health, reflective practice, child development, consultation services, assessment, and clinical, dyadic interventions with young children and parents. An IECMH Consultant should hold or qualify for *IMH Endorsement® as an Infant Mental Health Specialist* and also receive support through Reflective Supervision or Consultation.

Summary of IECMH Consultant qualifications:

- Minimum of a Master's degree in a mental health field
- Licensed clinical mental health provider or license-eligible with supervision
- 2+ years of work experience as a mental health professional including experience providing infant and early childhood screening, assessment, interventions, and consultative services
- Knowledge and experience in Infant Mental Health, attachment and early child development
- Experience focusing on the relationship and holding the dyad as the focus of intervention
- Attributes and skills critical to this work (e.g., building relationships, coaching, flexibility, empathy, patience, cultural sensitivity, maintaining a sense of wonder and curiosity)
- Knowledge and experience in Reflective and Mindfulness Practice, both:
 - ◊ providing Reflective Supervision/Consultation
 - ◊ and receiving their own support through Reflective Supervision/Consultation
- Hold or qualify for *IMH Endorsement® as an Infant Mental Health Specialist*
- Experience working with parents with mental health, substance use concerns, and/or trauma history

Who can utilize Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation?

IECMHC can be beneficial and appropriate for a number of early childhood and family support professionals and systems. Professionals from the fields of early childhood education, child development, family studies, occupational therapy, physical therapy, social work, or speech and language therapy who provide direct services to young children and their families can benefit from IECMHC. This includes those who provide direct services to young children and their families in Early Care and Education, Home Visiting, Birth to 3, Public Health, Early Childhood Special Education, Early Head Start, Head Start, Medical Care, Child Welfare, or Family Resource Centers.

The decision to implement IECMHC is an agency-wide decision, with administration or managers taking the lead in introducing and explaining the role of the consultant. The consultant and the agency together develop a plan and work together in making an agency and cultural-shift towards shared collaboration, reflection and relationship-based work.

What are the benefits of using Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation?

IECMHC has shown positive results in: reducing challenging behaviors; improving young children's social skills; increasing provider-family collaboration; improving child-adult relationships; preventing preschool suspensions and expulsions; increasing program quality; and, reducing provider turnover.^{viii}

One of the greatest benefits of using IECMHC is the collaborative and consultative stance that the consultant takes in helping an organization to better address the needs of children and families. It is through safe, secure, stable healthy relationships that infants and young children develop and continue to thrive and IECMH Consultants model and reinforce the importance of relationships through their emphasis on collaboration, shared problem solving and reflection.

How can I or my agency get more information on Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation?

The Wisconsin Alliance for Infant Mental Health (WI-AIMH) can provide you with more information, and can identify a qualified IECMH Consultant who is a good fit for your agency and the work you do with children and families.

"[Our consultant] enables our agency to extend mental health/wellness services and consultation to not just our staff but also to the wider community of young, low income families and their children facing multiple risk factors that we serve.

The outcomes of this collaboration have all been positive--our staff members' own feelings of efficacy in working with individual families on their caseload (leading to improved staff well-being); improved child-parent relationships; parents' growth in the understanding of how to encourage and support their own child's socio-emotional health and the resulting positive development in enrolled children's development and behavior."

Carol Rogers, M.Ed, C.O.O.,
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- ii. Georgetown University for Child and Human Development
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- iv. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Experts Convening on Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, (2014).
- v. Johnston, K., Brinamen, C. Mental Health Consultation in Child Care: Transforming Relationships among Directors, Staff and Families. Zero to Three Press. (2006).
- vi. Georgetown University for Child and Human Development
- vii. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Experts Convening on Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, (2014).
- viii. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Experts Convening on Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, (2014).