

NEWS

You Can Use

Early Head Start, Head Start,
& Migrant/ Seasonal Programs

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- **Mental Health Services in EHS & Migrant & Seasonal Head Start** pg. 1-2
- **A Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Services** pg. 3-4
- **But What about the Stigma?** pg. 5-6
- **De-stigmatizing the Stigma** pg. 7
- **Quick Tips for Staff** pg. 8
- **Quick Tips for Families** pg. 9
- **Resources** pg.10

Supporting Families and Staff: Mental Health Services in EHS & Migrant and Seasonal Head Start

There are over 40 *Head Start Program Performance Standards* (HSPPS) that mandate the inclusion of comprehensive mental health related services in Head Start (HS). However, the unique structure of each program and community dictates the need in each setting. Your Early Head Start (EHS) or Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) program may partner with a local Mental Health Agency, Mental Health Consultant, or have a qualified Mental Health Professional on staff. Recently, the Office of Head Start has highlighted the importance of mental health, and HS/EHS program staff around the country are facing increasingly complex family situations and behavior from young children. In light of these conditions, HS/EHS staff are seeking training and assistance to strengthen their skills and learn new approaches for supporting the mental health needs of infants, toddlers and their families.

HS/EHS programs often face challenges in providing comprehensive mental health services. One of the ongoing challenges is ensuring mental health services that meet changing programmatic and community needs. Another challenge is encouraging families to accept this support within programs. Many families and staff still view receiving mental health support as a stigma—and/or do not want to be looked upon as “crazy” if they accept help. Even when some parents have acknowledged that their infant or toddler needs additional mental health support, fear of harsh social judgment from family and others can create a barrier to receiving mental health services. However, avoiding mental health issues does not make them go away; they just get bigger and often harder to manage.



Mental Health Services in Early Head Start & Migrant & Seasonal Head Start (Cont.)

No matter how extensive or limited your program's mental health services are, removing the stigma of mental health can make a noticeable difference in family and staff awareness, understanding and promotion of services. Creating a "mentally healthy" atmosphere and normalizing mental health services within HS/EHS programs also encourages families to accept mental health services when needed. **This edition of News You Can Use will:**

- define Infant Mental Health;
- outline important elements of comprehensive approaches to mental health services;
- provide strategies for creating a "mentally health" atmosphere;
- highlight the stigma of mental health as a barrier to promoting and receiving services; and
- list ways to reduce the stigma of mental health and support and encourage parents and staff to use mental health services.

Definition of Infant Mental Health

Before considering mental health approaches and other related issues, let's consider mental health as defined by ZERO TO THREE'S Infant Mental Health Task Force (*U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, p. 9, 2001*):



"Infant mental health is the developing capacity of the child from birth to three 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."

This comprehensive definition includes all of the areas of development that infants and toddlers experience. Our task is to figure out how to support these essential elements in the lives of our youngest children.