Building Strong Systems and Communities to Support

Children's Mental and Social Health

Q: *What is healthy mental development?*

A: *For children to develop the ability to regulate and express emotions, form close personal relationships with other children and adults, and explore and learn from their environment.*

"The health of the child is the power of the nation."

About This Document

The purpose of this document is to provide a visual aid for building a strong system of support for children's mental and social health, ranging from prevention and early identification to intervention. It is estimated that 15 – 18% of school age children have a developmental or behavioral disability, while only half are identified before starting school. Applied to Iowa, these figures mean that almost 78,000 children in our classrooms may have an unidentified delay.

According to the 2003 Surgeon General's task force report, "Mental health is a critical component of children's learning and general health. Fostering social and emotional health in children as a part of healthy child development must therefore be a national priority. Both the promotion of mental health in children and the treatment of mental health disorders should be major public health goals."

The report identified four guiding principles which are all incorporated into this document.

1. Promoting the recognition of mental health as an essential part of child health;
2. Integrating family, child and youth-centered mental health services into all systems that serve children and youth;
3. Engaging families and incorporating the perspectives of children and youth in the development of all mental health care planning; and
4. Developing and enhancing a public-private health infrastructure to support these efforts to the fullest extent possible.

System of Care Principles

Systems of care (SOC) is an approach to the delivery of services that recognizes the importance of a child's family, school, community, emotional, intellectual, cultural, and social needs.

A system of care requires that families know there is no wrong door to access services and ensures coordination among providers so that services are delivered in the most effective and efficient method possible. A SOC improves access to mental health treatments, care coordination, services and other supports in the least restrictive setting possible, so children can live with their families and remain in their communities.

Providing care coordination and service navigation

Establishing a mental/medical health home for children

Leading and facilitating the wrap-around process and individualized service planning

Coordinating children's service agencies, providers, families and other stakeholders to create a service network

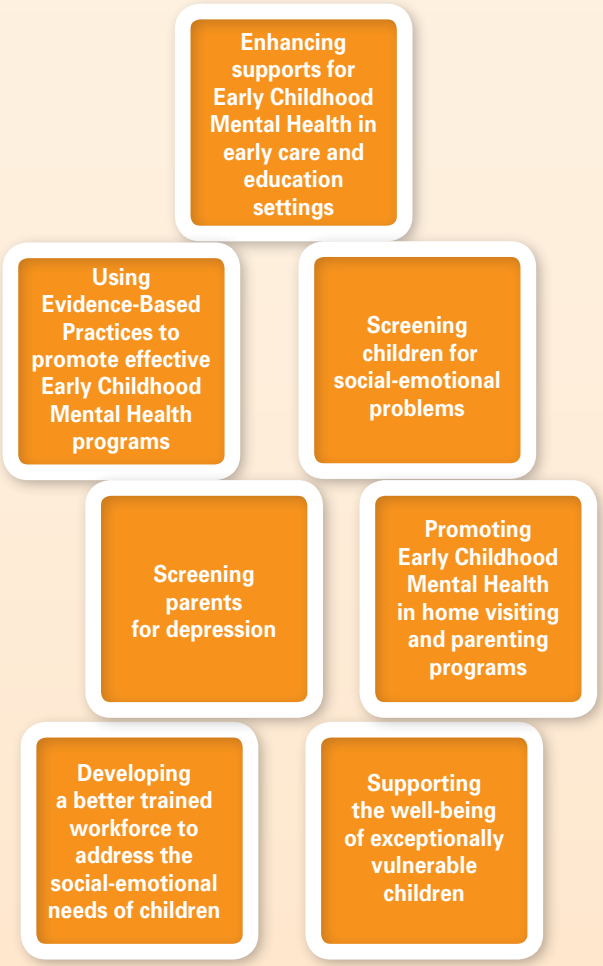
Providing flexible funding support for services for children who need financial assistance as part of the support plan

Prevention

The goal of strategies that primarily focus on prevention is to decrease the likelihood of significant problems developing in children and families who are at an increased risk for mental health problems.

Early Identification

Early identification is the process of identifying and addressing concerns as they relate to a child's overall growth and development. Early identification of concerns should lead to further evaluation, diagnosis, and (if necessary) intervention/s for children.



Traumatic experiences can have a profound and lifelong impact on a child. Mental health supports and services should be built upon a foundation that recognizes the role of trauma in child development and family functioning, and embraces scientifically proven practices for addressing prevention, early identification and intervention.

Prevention & Early Identification Strategies

Promoting Early Childhood Mental Health in Home Visiting and Parenting Programs

Programs aim to promote **nurturing parent-child relationships** and healthy child development **beginning** very **early in life.** Infants, toddlers and preschoolers at high risk of mental health problems (due to family risk factors such as poverty, history of substance abuse or domestic violence, depression, etc.) are targeted.

Enhancing Supports for Early Childhood Mental Health in Early Care and Education Settings

Promising approaches that enhance supports for young children in early care and education settings include Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, training teachers on strategies that support young children's social-emotional growth, and implementing curriculum to promote young children's social-emotional competence and positive behavior.

Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation aims to build the capacity of staff, families, programs, and systems to prevent, identify, treat and reduce the impact of mental health problems among young children and their families.

Mental Health Consultants approach reduction of challenging behaviors in young children broadly by promoting social and emotional development through observation, workforce development, utilization of evidence-based practices and limited child assessment.

Screening Parents for Depression

Depressive symptoms in a **child's primary caregiver** are associated with **increased risks of problems in early development and learning**. The negative **effects of caregiver depression on young children** include **lower cognitive functioning, weaker language skills**, and **behavior problems**. One in five Americans will be affected by depression during his or her lifetime. Unfortunately, many caregivers suffer in silence.

Screening Children for Social-Emotional Problems

Screening young children **is an effective, efficient way** for professionals to **identify problems and begin intervention when it does the most good**—during the crucial early years when the child's brain and body are developing so rapidly.

Social-emotional and behavior problems are common among young children ranging from 12% to 20% of children. Without intervention, behavioral difficulties tend to persist and may worsen. Identifying and addressing the social-emotional problems of young children as early as possible can limit the negative effects of these difficulties on learning, school performance and relationships with peers and teachers.

Developing a Better Trained Workforce to Address the Social-Emotional Needs of Young Children

An essential element of a strong system of supports **for early childhood mental health** is a workforce that has the knowledge and skills needed **to promote positive social-emotional growth in young children** and **to identify and address problems** in this domain. Children benefit when professionals in multiple settings have early childhood mental health knowledge and competencies.

Using Evidence-Based Practices to Promote Effective Early Childhood Mental Health Programs

The use of evidence-based interventions and practices can help ensure desired outcomes for children and their families in early childhood mental health initiatives.

There are many promising practices and evidence-based early childhood mental health models that states can consider as they expand supports for young children's social-emotional well-being. These include models across the continuum from promotion and prevention to intervention.

A 'promising model' is defined as one with at least preliminary evidence of effectiveness in small-scale interventions or for which there is potential for generating data that will be useful for making decisions about taking the intervention to scale and generalizing the results to diverse populations and settings.

Supporting the Well-Being of Exceptionally Vulnerable Children

A critical element of a comprehensive system of supports for young children's mental health **is intentional outreach to exceptionally vulnerable children whose life circumstances place them at very high risk** for the development of mental health problems in early childhood and beyond. This includes **young children** involved **in the child welfare system**; young children **who are homeless**; and young children **whose families are experiencing multiple risks** such as extreme poverty, parental psychiatric illness, substance abuse or domestic violence.

System of Care Principles

Purpose

To provide services in early childhood to decrease the likelihood of future social-emotional problems.

System of Care Principles

A system of care is a strengths-based approach that recognizes the importance of family, school and community. The goal is that families work with public and private organizations to design a coordinated network of community-based services and supports thus improving functioning at home, in the school setting and ultimately the community.

Foundation

Evidence-Based Practice

Evidence-based approaches to prevention and intervention are based in theory and have undergone scientific evaluation. Evidence-based stands in contrast to approaches that are based on tradition, convention, belief or anecdotal evidence.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Study is a large-scale, ongoing evaluation of the link between negative childhood experiences and the origins of risk behaviors that evolve into the leading causes of disease and disability in adulthood. ACEs refer to 10 categories of experience (Childhood Abuse, including emotional, physical or sexual; Childhood Neglect, including physical or emotional; and Growing Up With Household Dysfunction, including living with domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, parental discord or crime) that a child may experience up to 18 years of age. ACEs appear to affect multiple brain systems and functions.

Trauma Informed Care

Trauma Informed Care (TIC) is an organizational structure and treatment framework that involves understanding, recognizing and responding to the effects of all types of trauma. TIC is an emphasis on physical, psychological and emotional safety for both consumers and providers, and helps survivors rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.

Sources:

The content of this document is a compilation of several research studies, white papers and issue briefs offered through a variety of national and state organizations with expertise in the topics. A full bibliography is available at **www.projectlaunchiowa.org.**

"The future prosperity of our society will be determined by the health and capabilities of our population. Child development provides a foundation for economic productivity, responsible citizenship, and strong communities." –

Center on the Developing Child
at Harvard University

helping children soar

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