

## **EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH CONSULTATION PROJECT**

### **Why Do We Call It Early Childhood “Mental Health”?**

Because of the continuing stigma of mental illness, some people question why we would want to conjure it up in connection with young children. Can infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers even be mentally ill, and secondly, even if they can, why would we want to attach such a label to a child that might stick with him or her for a long time and negatively affect the way others respond to the child? Why do we call it early childhood mental health?

To begin with, mental illness and mental health are not the same thing, even though they are often closely connected because, for example, agencies that treat mental illness often have the words “mental health” in their names. But one term focuses on a problem (illness), while the other focuses on something positive (health). When we talk about “early childhood mental health,” we are not primarily talking about bipolar disorder, major depression, or even oppositional defiant disorder or conduct disorder, even though it is possible that some of the young children served by the Early Childhood Mental Health Project will develop those illnesses. Rather, we are referring to the positive results (i.e., health) of intervening early before problems develop into something more serious. Simply put, early childhood mental health is the same as healthy social and emotional development in young children, encompassing things like learning to express and regulate emotions, forming close and secure personal relationships, and exploring and learning about their environment.<sup>1</sup>

So why don't we call it the “early childhood social and emotional development project”? Besides that being quite a mouthful, the language of mental health is important not only for its educational value in combating stigma against mental health problems but also for its implicit reminder that if we don't do our job with prevention with young children, their problems may require more serious interventions. We truly do want them to develop good “mental health” in the most positive sense of that term.

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<sup>1</sup> This definition of “early childhood mental health” is adapted from the one developed by Zero to Three's Infant Mental Health Task Force and used by Pennsylvania's Infant-Toddler Mental Health Project.