



Promoting Mental Health and Well-being in Early Childhood Programs

Overview

The Office of Early Childhood Development in the Administration of Children and Families (ACF) is excited to announce new policy guidance for ACF's four early childhood programs: the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), Head Start, Preschool Development Grants Birth through Five, and the Tribal Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting program.

This guidance (in the form of program-specific Informational Memoranda, or IMs) aims to support programs in their efforts to promote the mental health and well-being of children, families, and the early care and education workforce. The IMs are tailored to the unique priorities, needs, and activities of each program, and include a range of actionable recommendations, resources, and strategies to promote mental health. Guidance across all four programs is based on a common framework that spans the array of services and supports that make up a comprehensive early childhood mental health system of care.

Policy Guidance Recommendations

Mental Health Promotion	Prevention and Family Strengthening	Increasing Access to Treatment
Strategies Include:		
Sharing culturally and linguistically appropriate information about early childhood development and mental health	Implementing social emotional learning curricula and approaches	Integrating treatment services and supports into early childhood settings
Social-emotional screening and referrals	Offering family strengthening and parenting programs	Embedding or linking to community health workers and family navigators
Professional development on early childhood mental health Activities to promote workforce wellness	Utilizing infant and early childhood mental health consultation (IECMHC)	Partnering with behavioral health agencies to increase access to treatment for children, families, and the workforce

Each IM:

Identifies federal funding streams and initiatives that can be leveraged to support these activities in early childhood programs, for example:

- Help child care providers (including family child care providers) to access informational materials on maternal mental health, such as NICHD's [Mom's Mental Health Matters](#) campaign, as well as ensuring awareness of the HRSA-funded [National Maternal Mental Health Hotline](#).
- Partner with [Healthy Start Project Directors](#) to connect child care programs with Healthy Start programs in their communities.

Clarifies how program funds can be used to support these practices, for example:

- Consider using CCDF quality funds to support professional development efforts that build foundational knowledge of infant and early childhood mental health and trauma-informed approaches to care among staff and providers in center-, home-, and school-based child care programs.
- Provide trainings for staff on compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, and self-care strategies that can promote wellness and reduce stress and burnout.

Describes best practices for state, territory, and Tribal leaders, for example:

- Offer training and support to child care programs interested in adopting universal social-emotional screening practices using valid and reliable screening tools.
- Conduct a review of program schedules, policies, and procedures to ensure that all home visiting staff are receiving regular and high-quality reflective supervision.

Suggests potential partnerships that might help advance these efforts, for example:

- Partner with the state's [Act Early Ambassador](#) to raise awareness about developmental milestones.
- Partner with Department of Education, Office of Special Education (OSEP)-funded [Parent Training and Information Centers](#) or [Family Resource Centers](#) that can offer supports to families, including parenting groups, in convenient, community-based locations.

Prioritizes equitable access to programs and use of data to reduce behavioral health disparities, for example:

- Use PDG B-5 statewide needs assessment data to identify gaps in social-emotional screening in your state or territory, such as communities where screening rates are particularly low and/or rates of early childhood mental health disorders are high.
- Prioritize implementation of social and emotional learning curricula in programs and communities with large numbers of children at risk for poor mental health outcomes.

To learn more about how ACF is working to improve behavioral health outcomes for children, teens, families, and communities, visit:

- [ECD Resources on Early Childhood Behavioral Health](#)
- [ACF Resources on Behavioral Health for Young Adults, Families, and Professionals](#)
- [ACF and Behavioral Health Webpage](#)

The program-specific IMs can be found [here](#).
