

Referring Infant and Toddlers for Psychological Services

By Lianne Lennert, PsyD

Many people believe that infants and toddlers are too young to have emotional problems, or, if they have problems, are too young to treat. This is unfortunate, because during the first few years of life, appropriate treatment is more effective, and requires less effort, than at any other time of life.

The reason for this is that infants and toddlers are (with the help of their caregivers) creating a foundation for emotional health that will last a lifetime. Addressing mild problems in parent-child interactions during these formative years can result in a much stronger foundation that will serve as a resource for preventing emotional disorders throughout the life span.

In the book, ¹From Neurons to Neighborhoods, the researchers from the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine describe three developmental tasks during infancy and toddlerhood. These tasks include:

- Negotiating the transition from external to self-regulation, including learning to regulate emotions, behavior, and attention;
- Acquiring the capabilities that undergird communication and learning, including early language development, reasoning, and problem solving skills;
- Learning to relate well to other children and form friendships, including the capacity to trust, love, nurture, and resolve conflict constructively.

Healthy parent-child relationships are key to facilitating all of these developmental tasks, because:

- A parent's presence and engagement with the infant to moderate distress, communicate delight, and allow the infant to "feel felt" help develop the parts of the brain that will later support regulation of emotions, attention, and behavior
- Attachment to parents provides a secure base for exploring the world, and facilitates language learning
- Emotional communication with parents through facial expression, touch, and tone of voice is the precursor for spoken language and will continue to add depth and nuance to conversation throughout life
- Attachment-based interactions develop the brain regions that later support empathy, self-regulation, attention skills, intuition, and "mindsight," all capacities that are crucial for making friends and resolving interpersonal conflict
- Attachment relationships to parents form the basis for a person's "working model" of relationships that guide expectations and behavior when interacting with others

¹ National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000). *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Shonkoff, Jack P. & Phillips, Deborah A. eds. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, p. 92.

There is a wide variety of problems that can interfere with the development of healthy parent-child relationships, including:

- Difficult child temperament or mismatch between parent and child temperament
- Sensory or regulatory problems
- Parental depression or other mental health problems
- Lack of social and emotional support for mothers
- Psychological stressors such as financial problems, marital discord, or work pressures
- Poor quality non-parental care
- Parents have difficulty reading infant cues
- Child neglect or maltreatment, or family violence
- Parents themselves had poor parenting models

A psychologist familiar with infant-toddler mental health can:

- Evaluate the health of the parent-child bond
- Improve the attachment relationship by:
 - Coaching parents to recognize infant cues
 - Help parents eliminate, reduce, or modify stressors
 - Help parents change beliefs or practices, or resolve experiences that interfere with sensitive parenting
 - Treat parental mental health issues that are affecting the relationship
 - Help parents understand and accommodate temperament, regulatory, or sensory difficulties
 - Train parents in behavior management techniques

Referral to a mental health provider for infants and toddlers is appropriate whenever there are high levels of risk factors for poor attachment or current indicators of problems in the attachment relationship.

Risk factors for attachment difficulties:

- Suspected maternal depression (or other mental health problem)
- Infant is extremely irritable, colicky, or sleeps less than 10 hours out of 24
- Family has high level of social stressors—financial difficulties, work problems, family discord, frequent moves
- Lack of social support such as extended family, friends, church
- Infant or child is in poor quality nonparental care
- Family circumstances interfere with parent-infant interaction

Indicators of possible mental health or attachment problems:

- Failure to thrive with no medical cause
- Parent handles infant in a way that seems rough, hurried, withdrawn, disengaged, or unaware of infant needs or signals
- Infant avoids eye contact, does not cling for comfort, is difficult to soothe, does not seek out parent when distressed
- No evidence of stranger anxiety for infants 10-18 months of age

- Excessive clinginess or unwillingness to move away from parent to explore the environment in the parent's presence, especially past the age of 24 months
- Parent unable to describe positive interactions with infant or positive characteristics of infant ("What I like about my baby is...")
- Parent expresses unhappiness about relationship with infant
- Feeding problems, sleep problems, and/or behavior problems may be related to mental health or attachment issues, especially if there is no medical cause