Workshop 1: In the Beginning: What Happens Early Matters

Overview of Topic

This session offers participants an overview of early childhood mental health through the examination of “Guiding Principles in Infant Mental Health” (Costa, 1996, 2006). These principles establish the remarkable capacities of the newborn and infant during the first three years of life, and examine the forces – both child and parental – that influence the nature of the earliest unfolding relationships. These principles help the participants to focus on approaching early childhood education and caregiving through a thoughtful and principled approach that highlights the infant’s capacities, the parental/familial forces at work, and ways to understand and address challenges when development does not develop smoothly or when there are delays and disabilities. This session sets the stage for developing a reflective and empathic stance towards families, respectful of their strengths, difficulties and cultural background.

Recommended Duration: 3.0 hours.

New Jersey Birth to Three Early Learning Standards

Domain I: Social & Emotional Development
Components: Trust & Emotional Security
Self-Regulation
Relationships with Peers and Adults

New Jersey Association for Infant Mental Health Competency Guidelines

Theoretical Foundations
Knowledge Areas: Pregnancy & early parenthood
Infant/very young child development & behavior
Infant/very young child & family centered practice
Relationship-focused practice
Family relationships & dynamics

Learning Objectives

1. Participants will understand the nature of human attachment and the forces that influence this important process.
2. Participants will learn about the importance of relationships in early development, for emotional, social and brain development.
3. Participants will gain a working knowledge of the Guiding Principles in Infant Mental Health.
4. Participants will be able to identify ways to integrate Infant Mental Health Principles into their practice and roles.
5. Participants will learn about core abilities in children and major influences on the parenting relationship.
What is infant and preschool mental health?

Gerard Costa, Ph.D.

The process whereby infants and parents attach, or have difficulty in attaching to each other, and the unique contributions each member of the dyad makes to this dynamic, yet vulnerable process, constitutes the primary focus of Infant Mental Health. Infant Mental Health is an interdisciplinary field concerned with the optimal physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development of the human infant within the context of his/her family. The infant is principally viewed within a primary caregiving relationship—usually with the mother—and this pair or dyad is the focus of assessment and intervention. Infant Mental Health offers ways of conceptualizing early disruptions in the attachment process, and of organizing interventions which include developmental/parental guidance, systems’ advocacy, supportive counseling, and a unique kind of treatment—infant-parent (dyadic) psychotherapy—where the presence of the infant in the work is essential.

Development continues along multiple lines during the preschool years (3-5), with growth in play, cognition, emotion and communication linked to the nature of the child’s relationships. Emotional and developmental progress and their connection to the child’s relational world are the areas for assessment and intervention in preschool mental health. The child’s capacity to use imagination in play and thought, to communicate in gesture and word, to experience and express the full drama of human emotions and begin to develop ways to regulate very strong feelings, to handle excitement and arousal, to learn how to seek comfort and be self-comforting, to feel safe and secure enough to explore and be curious about themselves, others and the world, to engage in increasingly interpersonal activities, to form loving and reciprocal relationships—all these grow out of adequate infant mental health and constitute elements of preschool mental health.

Why is it important to study infant and preschool mental health?

There are three principal reasons we must study infant and preschool mental health:

1. **Infants’ capacities for relationship are often underestimated.** Infants come into the world with remarkable capacities to establish and regulate human relationships. Infants possess an amazing repertoire of social and emotional capacities, including gestures, facial expressions, gaze, and head turning patterns—all designed to give the caregiver information about the infant’s well being, but which also enable the trained specialist to discern how well the infant and dyad are doing. Infants actively behave in such a way that modifies and regulates the behavior of the caregiver; they seek emotional responsiveness from their caregivers and become disturbed when such displays are not present. Those who work with infants, young children and their families must understand these capacities and the ways they must be supported, particularly when there are difficulties.
2. Prevention and early intervention during the first five years of life are critically important strategies of intervention during a sensitive period of development. Working with infants, young children and their families in the early identification and treatment of difficulties is most effective. If intervention is delayed until emotional and behavioral problems become more obvious, such efforts will require a greater expenditure of resources are may be less effective. Our growing knowledge of brain development and the role experience plays in this process during infancy, makes prevention and early intervention of problems obligatory.

3. There is a large body of information on the ways infants and preschool-aged children develop, how they display problems and work towards adaptation, and how they and their families can best be helped. This information emerges from a developmental model that emphasizes the importance of the nature of early experiences, especially early relationships. Knowledge and methods used with adults cannot be applied to young children. Infants and young children are qualitatively different than adults.
Two Critical Questions

1. What are the fundamental factors that influence the development of good mental health in infants and children?

2. What are the forces that influence us as adults when we interact with infants and children?

Three Core Abilities for Children

1. Capacity for empathy.

2. Ability to control negative emotions – the ability to regulate affect and separate affect and thought from action.

3. Ability to solve problems.

Three Major Influences on Adults in Interaction with Infants & Children

1. The nature of their childhood.

2. Their ability to recall good and bad events and feel the feelings again.

3. Their ability to separate our needs, problems, feelings and thoughts from those of the infants and children.
What do infants and young children need to develop good mental health?

We now have a very good idea.

1. Infants and young children need safety, security, consistency and love. This must begin with healthy prenatal care, safety from exposure to drugs or toxins in the womb, and good parental mental health. After birth, infants require consistent, loving and attuned care. Disruptions in relationships due to parental loss, repeated placement in foster care, or emotional unavailability jeopardize healthy emotional and social development.

2. Infants and young need emotionally rich and reciprocal interactions. At, or soon after birth, infants can see their parents' faces, identify and prefer maternal breast milk and parental voices. Infants possess so many features that are designed to invite attachments, but if these abilities are not met by warm, attuned, respectful and engaging others, these capacities can wither. We need to learn how a unique infant communicates, and respond accordingly. As children develop abilities to use gesture, voice and words to communicate, they need stable, responsive and attuned relationships.

3. Infants and young children must be protected from overwhelming emotional experiences and exposure to violence. The first task of all infants is to learn how to control and regulate their own bodies, levels of excitement and emotions. These are both biological and mental tasks. When infants and young children cry, become upset or experience early feelings, they require a loving caregiver to "feel with" them, and help them restore balance and control. How caregivers help children express and recover from upsets, sets the stage for how the child and adult will learn to express and control their own emotions. In particular, exposure to violence, particularly domestic violence, can lead to difficulties in regular routines (sleep, eating) and can interfere with learning. Such experiences can adversely affect brain development as well.

4. The single most important factor in the life of the infant and child is emotionally healthy parents. Parenting is the most difficult task imaginable. Parenting is a relationship not a skill, and when parents themselves have had difficult lives, or have emotional difficulties, or substance abuse, the demands of parenting can feel overwhelming. This is particularly true when an infant is born with illness or developmental problems. Parents need support without shame or stigma for such problems when they arise.

5. Early identification and treatment of developmental and emotional difficulties. Certainly, when adverse experiences occur, infants and families need help - quickly. This is the case whether the difficulties are due to psycho-social problems (like parental physical or emotional illness, substance abuse, child abuse or neglect, multiple foster placement, exposure to violence) or due to developmental problems of unknown origin. We now also know that although children have a wide range of normal differences in temperament and style. These children may have certain "constitutional" difficulties that can make them more sensitive, difficult to soothe and parent, and may lead to difficulties in communication and social relationships, and in parenting. Early intervention, including psychological intervention can help the family.
Our Personal Promises

1. You will learn something that will change you and the way you work.
2. This will challenge you, stir you up, make you think about your own growing up and your life as a parent or caregiver.
3. This is not “dumbed down” – BUT you will understand everything!
4. You will develop more empathy for parents who have failed in some way.
5. Read Number 1 again.

The Basic Difference between Dogs and Cats

In the Beginning....
Infant Mental Health

Infant Mental Health is an interdisciplinary field concerned with the optimal physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of the human infant within the context of the family.

The emotional capacities

The capacity that infants and children develop to:
- Self regulate
- Experience the full range of human emotions
- Engage in loving, reciprocal relationships
- Represent the world in thought and language
- Engage in shared emotional thinking and relatedness
- Become intimate and care for others interdependently
- Engage in productive activities

Guiding Principle

The human infant comes into the world with remarkable capacities for human relatedness - with Attachment Promoting Behaviors (APBs) - which help invite, inform and regulate relationships with his caregiver.
Guiding Principle

- The greatest period of brain development - the brain “growth spurt” occurs from the last trimester of pregnancy through the first 18 months of life.

During this period nutritional, physical, social and emotional satisfactions and failures will be “biologized” - actual changes occur in the physical structure of the brain.

Guiding Principle

- Pregnancy and childbirth are powerful conscious and unconscious reminders in the parent of childhood issues, which can help or hinder the parent in responding to, caring for, and loving the infant.

- Parenting is a relationship not a skill, and the belief that parenting can be “taught” as we do other skills is not clearly supported.

Always
BELIEVE
that something
WONDERFUL
is about to
HAPPEN
The Motherhood Constellation

Pregnancy, Giving Birth, Becoming a Parent

- Relationships can begin before birth
- Every baby can be a transference object
- The arrival of a baby and giving birth can activate many emotions, feelings, memories
**Motherhood Constellation**

**RELATEDNESS**

- Can she emotionally engage the baby?
- Can she promote emotional development?

**IDENTITY REORGANIZATION**

- Can she transform her identity to become a “mother”?
- What does it mean?

**SUPPORT**

- Can she create the support systems to meet these new themes?
- (It takes a village....)
“Ghosts in the Nursery” - Selma Fraiberg

Are there ever just two people in the relationship?

Group Activity

What is your birth story?

Enhancing the First Relationship
The First Relationship

- For infants and young children, “inner security is based on the outer relationship”  
  Dr. Nils Bergman

Breastfeeding not only reduces stress for mothers; it also lowers stress that babies experience when their mothers are depressed.

(Kendall-Tackett, 2007)

Reflect on your reaction to the 2 images......
The Relational and Contextual Life of the Infant

Life begins within the context of a relationship.

Reflect on this baby......

Reflect on this baby......
“Persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit and self-confidence, are more crucial than sheer brainpower to achieving success…… and these non cognitive skills are deeply impacted by the prenatal and infant relationships.”

Why is conception to age two so important?

“The First 1,001 Critical Days” —research published Sept. 2013 by the United Kingdom
Early Brain Development

“WHAT HAPPENS EARLY MATTERS”

The Science of Early Childhood Video

• Center on Developing Child @ Harvard University

Brain Numbers to Know!

• By 5 months gestation, the fetus has 100 billion neurons – the amount of the adult cortex.

• Connections (synapses) can occur at the rate of 1 to 2 million a second in the first years of life.

• 20% of the neurons are related to genetics and intrauterine life.

• 80% of the connections are formed through the nature of experiences and interpersonal relationships.
Relational-dependent neurology

The nature of the earliest relationships organizes brain development and influences the way in which experiences “wire” or “sculpt” the neural connections.

Infant brains are wired to respond to the faces, feelings, movements and actions of others (i.e. affective, gestural and intonational cues).

“Serve & Return”

- Repeated and consistent emotional and gestural give and take with caregivers sets the stage for development.
- This relational interaction actually builds the brain!
- Healthy early brain development requires nurturing and dependable relationships.
Still Face Paradigm: Serve and Return

Dan Siegel’s “Handy Model” of the brain

Allan Schore

The mother’s limbic system communicates directly to the infant’s limbic system!
Attunement

Mother’s mood can induce an emotional state in the infant

Field 1997

Attunement

“If the mother’s face is unresponsive, then a mirror is something to be looked at but not looked into.” (Winnicott, 1971)

What Does This All Mean?

The developing infant NEEDS a consistent emotional connection (attunement) with an attachment partner.
"Jack in the Box"

Why?

The pre-verbal infant categorizes events based on whether they create pleasurable or not pleasurable feeling states

Meharabian (1981)

Affect and gesture are communicative drivers-
- 55% - facial expressions
- 38% - vocal tone
- 7% - words
What's Going On Here?

IMH and Superstorm Sandy...perfect together??

How is learning about infant and early childhood mental health connected to the response to Superstorm Sandy in New Jersey?

IMH and Superstorm Sandy....perfect together??
For the children and families:

Disruptions or instability in attachments as a result of disasters, trauma or stress, can have negative effects in the brain and on behavior

For us as the providers:

Your facial expressions, tone of voice, movement and gestures are more powerful than your words

So if you are stressed, upset, sad, mad, anxious, it can affect the relationships in your life and your work

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