Why Focus on Infant and Toddlers?

Baby Daniel and Baby Brianna

What Happens Birth to Three Matters more than any other time...

- Substantiated research demonstrates, when we can prevent abuse and neglect and/or intervene during the first few years of a child’s life, children will have much better outcomes as adults.
- If we concentrate efforts early while the child’s emotions are forming, birth to three, many major psychological disorders into adulthood could be profoundly diminished or erased altogether.
- The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine published a report in 2000 that states “What happens during the first months and years of life matters a lot... because it sets a sturdy or fragile stage for what follows.”
- Yet our current system tends to intervene after the worst psychological/emotional damage has occurred. Furthermore, when systems do intervene, they often cause further damage by negatively effecting attachments through multiple foster care placements.
Early Emotional Development

- Advances in neuroscience over the last two decades have clearly demonstrated that the first few years of a child’s life are critical.
- “Windows of Opportunity” are presented that create the “blueprint” for all later learning and emotional development.
- Early care has decisive and long-lasting effects on how people develop and learn, how they cope with stress and how they regulate their own emotions.

Emotional Development continued.....

- One of the strongest influence on the emotional development of a child is a process called attunement. This is a process when a caregiver plays back a child’s inner feeling. An emotional mirroring if you will.
- This is a critical process because research has shown us the brain uses the same pathways to generate an emotion as to respond to one. If an emotion is reciprocated, the electrical and chemical signals that produce it are reinforced. But if emotions are repeatedly met with indifference or a clashing response, circuits become confused and fail to strengthen.

- Calm down circuits: Parental soothing trains the child’s brain circuits to do the same. Without this interaction the child fails to learn to “calm down.”
- Babies are dependent on sensitive and nurturing care from a primary caregiver - when this is absent “toxic stress” occurs.
- This stress has the potential to compromise most areas of development, including emotions, behavior, cognitive functioning, and health.

Why is this Stress Such a Problem?

- High levels of stress are tolerable for short periods of time.
- Cortisol helps us regulate stress
- When the system that was designed to handle “short-term stress” is chronically activated, the system breaks down leaving the person more vulnerable.
Why is this Stress Such a Problem for Infants?

- The experience of neglect is extremely common among infants in care, and this is a very clear source of toxic stress.
- The stress of neglect is often compounded by abuse and trauma that the infant may have suffered prior to entering care.

Why is this Stress Such a Problem for Infants?

- Toxic stress is also made worse by another very common experience—caregiver transitions.
- There is evidence that infants and children show dysregulated cortisol levels immediately following a move between foster homes, or moving from foster care to a permanent placement (such as being reunified with biological parents or adopted).

Prenatal Stressors

- Rates of drug and alcohol problems are extremely high among child welfare system-involved parents (as many as 80% of these individuals are substance abusers, and it is unlikely that many of them discontinue use during pregnancy).
- Many infants who end up in out-of-home care enter the world already affected by toxic stress and continue to be exposed throughout infancy to environments and events that render healthy development quite challenging.
The “Good News”
- There is extremely promising evidence that a large amount of recovery is possible following exposure to early stress if:
  - Adequate support is provided to parents, foster parents, or other caregivers, and if
  - The proper therapeutic techniques are employed.

- It is possible to promote developmental progress among foster infants and young children.
- It may also be possible to mitigate toxic stress effects on specific brain and biological systems, producing more typical functioning in these systems.

Cautions
- Research in this area doesn’t indicate that it is possible to completely “undo” the effects of what has occurred.
- It may be that foster infants will remain sensitive to future stress, regardless of whether environments subsequently improve.
- It is not clear whether there is a limit to plasticity, and an amount of past adversity that makes recovery less likely.

Incidence
- The risk of placement was four times greater for infants than for older children in the year 2000.
- This disparity actually increased by the year 2008. Advances in neuroscience over the last decade have clearly demonstrated that the first few years of a child’s life are critical.
Duration in Care

- Infants are the group who spends the greatest amount of time in care once admitted.
- This is particularly true for the youngest infants.
- The long length of stay is partly due to the fact that infants are more likely to be adopted than older children and
- Reunification must be ruled out in order for adoption to take place.

Birth Families of Infants in Care

- 65% of families of infants had prior involvement with the child welfare system, this is comparable to the 66% of families of older children who had prior involvement.
- For almost 61% of infants there was active alcohol and/or drug abuse identified as being present with the primary caregiver, the secondary caregiver, or both. This was almost 41% for older children.

Birth Families of Infants in Care

- Families of infants were also more likely to have had a prior or active incident of domestic violence (46% of families of infants compared to 37% of families of older children).
- Recent arrests were reported for approximately 41% of primary caregivers of infants and for almost 24% of caregivers of older children.
The Role of Family Stress
- Caseworkers indicated that over 79% of families of infants were experiencing high stress (compared to 62% of families of older children).
- Financial stress was also more prevalent in the families of infants. Caseworkers reported that 57% of infants’ families had difficulty paying for necessities but only 39% of the families of older children had difficulty paying for necessities.

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Parental History of Abuse
- Over 48% of infant caregivers and 28% of caregivers of older children—that is, primary caregivers, secondary caregivers, or both—had a history of abuse or neglect themselves.

Similarities Among Families
- In other ways, the families of infants and older children were similar:
  - Low levels of social support: 46%
  - Poor parenting skills: 70%
  - Likely to come from a neighborhood that has serious problems.
So What Can We Do?  
REALIZE Project

• In August of 2011 at the First Promoting Resiliency in Infants and Toddlers Summit, experts from across the State came together along with Dr. Ira Chasnoff from The Children’s Research Triangle to answer this key question.

• They came up with Four Key Recommendations for our State...

Four Recommendations:

• Build Capacity to Further Develop the Infant Mental Health Teams to work with Child Protective Services

• Provide every pregnant Mom with a screening for Alcohol/drugs. Link into services immediately. (Clearly NM will have to develop capacity to provide treatment for parents with young children)

• Launch a Media Campaign: No Amount of Alcohol in Pregnancy is EVER Safe.

• Support/Develop the Therapeutic Childcare Model.

Sources

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