

Key Messages

General Messages about Social-emotional Development and Mental Health in Early Childhood

- The early years of a child's life — beginning before birth to age eight — are critically important for learning and development as the early years are among the most sensitive periods for brain development.
 - The relationships and experiences a child has in the first years of life — positive or negative — have a profound and lasting effect on how the brain develops.
 - All aspects of a young child's development — cognitive, physical, social and emotional — are interconnected, and healthy development in each of these areas lays a foundation for long-lasting well-being as a child grows.
- Healthy social-emotional development and mental health in early childhood lay a foundation for overall health, well-being and success in school and throughout one's life.
- Just as we all have physical health, we all have mental health — and that includes very young children, even babies.
 - In the same way that we nurture children's physical health -- through nutrition, exercise, hygiene, sleep and medical care -- we must also nurture their mental health with positive experiences and loving, stable relationships, and intentional, direct support that helps develop critical social-emotional skills.
- In addition to being a time of great opportunity, early childhood is also a time of great vulnerability. Children's development and mental health can be negatively impacted by the influences around them, including poverty, abuse or neglect, community or family violence, poor quality child care, or parental substance abuse.

Targeted Messages for Child Care Providers and Home Visitors

- As providers we play an essential role in encouraging the healthy social-emotional development of the children in our care.
- It is important for providers to help parents understand that their child's mental health is a critical part of their overall health and well-being — and to reduce the stigma associated with talking about mental health concerns.
- As providers, parents trust us to provide compassionate care for their children. Part of this role is to ensure parents who have concerns about their child's development receive referrals to screening, evaluation and appropriate treatment.
- Many parents prefer to get information in person from someone they trust, such as their child's doctor, teacher or child care provider, followed by information in writing.

- It is important for providers to recognize that many parents get much of their parenting advice from their own parents or other family members. Therefore, providers should seek opportunities to spread messages about positive mental health and social-emotional development to other caregivers in the child's life including grandparents.
- During infancy and the toddler years, mental health problems may present as difficulty managing or expressing emotions or the lack of secure attachments with caregivers. During the preschool years, mental health problems may result in challenging behaviors, including class disruption or withdrawal.
- Instead of viewing challenging behaviors simply as a disruption, providers should be aware that these behaviors often are the result of social and emotional factors and represent a teaching opportunity (for both the parent and the child), which can be effectively addressed within the home and through external support programs that are available in our community.

Targeted Messages for Parents and Caregivers

- A child's mental health is every bit as important as their physical health.
 - Just as a child's body grows and changes early in life, so too does their brain and the social-emotional aspects of their development.
 - A child's positive mental health and social-emotional development can be supported with loving, stable relationships, positive experiences, and intentional, direct support that helps develop critical social-emotional skills.
- It's important to remember that all children develop differently and at their own pace.
 - Parenting is hard work and children don't come with instruction manuals. It is normal to have concerns about your child's social-emotional development and mental health and it's important to ask your child's doctor or child care provider if you have concerns or need help.
 - For children struggling with emotional or behavioral issues, effective intervention is available that helps children grow up healthy and achieve success in school and in life. If you have concerns, ask your child's doctor, teacher or child care provider about getting more information or a referral to have your child assessed.
- Parents are a child's first and best teacher, yet all parents need support from friends, family and the community in order to raise happy, healthy kids.
 - There are programs and services available in the community to help you build a positive relationship with your child, overcome adversity and help your child develop their potential.

Source: www.ecpac.org/project-launch/

*Boulder County ABCD Partnership outreach/TA materials to be given out to centers