

Early Days Project

Promoting Infant Mental Health

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There is increasing concern about the high levels of emotional distress among children and the inadequacy of current services to meet their mental health needs. At the same time there will not be a more appropriate time to raise awareness of the mental health needs of infants. The Government's Sure Start initiative recognises the importance of the early years in the development of children into healthy adults and the impact of social and economic deprivation on families and aims to support families in looking after young children. Attention is focused on understanding better what it is about the first months and years of a child's life that matter for their healthy development. In recent years there has been extensive research in many countries about what contributes to difficulties and distress in early childhood, and observation studies about how babies and infants develop. Factors include the inborn nature of the baby, the earlier experiences and characteristic ways of each parent or caregiver, and the overall socio-economic and environmental circumstances of the family.

Much of this new thinking supports the need for continuous, consistent and attentive care and nurturing early attachments by a small and number of primary care givers. First and foremost babies need their mother, and father

The first few months and years of life are a sensitive period when children develop attachments and learn about emotions and social interactions in their family. This lays the foundations for future social, emotional and cognitive development. Children who do not have secure relationships early in life are at greater risk of significant mental health problems, educational difficulties or conduct disorders. Though parents generally want to do the best for their children, they may be prevented by many different factors.

Some parents or caregivers cannot give the consistent nurturing that every baby needs.

Early support and intervention may prevent damaging patterns being established within families. Later remedial action may be more difficult, more expensive and less effective.

At the Child Psychotherapy Trust we have been thinking about how to add our voice to those promoting the importance of parent/infant relations and linking into the development of services and support for children and families and early intervention. With this in mind we have produced a review of the literature on early intervention and attachment in a publication *Promoting Infant Mental Health* to stimulate thinking and debate about potential for the establishment of a local parent/infant support service for young families and others caring for babies and infant. Such an integrated infant mental health service could focus on the child's needs and on promoting the quality of the relationship between parents or caregivers and baby and encourage parents to have confidence in their own resources. It could support work in the community with families and young children and enable early intervention where difficulties for infants are developing.

Services provided by general practitioners and health visitors could provide the focus for a dedicated infant mental health service, working with child and adolescent mental health teams, community paediatricians, social services, early education, day care and the voluntary sector. To develop an integrated service, all those working with infants and their families will need training to increase their understanding and expertise in meeting the developmental and emotional needs of young children, which are, of course inextricably linked.

We hope to continue working with the Association for Infant Mental Health and other organisations to promote a wider understanding of the early life of infants and their emotional development.

Louise Pankhurst, Director