



Children's
Advocacy
ALLIANCE

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health in Nevada

POLICY BRIEF

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In the first years of life, the development of an infant and young child is heavily influenced and molded by the interactions and relationships they have with their caregivers. Decades of research has shown that nurturing your child's mental health from birth produces positive outcomes. This can be achieved by highlighting the importance of infant and early childhood mental health.

Infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) is defined as the capacity of a child to form close relationships with parents/peers, to fully express and regulate emotions, and to explore their environment. The purpose of IECMH is to support healthy relationships between young children and their caregivers so they can flourish in the future. IECMH includes children prenatal to eight-years-old—with the first three years of age being the most crucial period for social and emotional development. Approximately 9.5%-14% of children birth to five years of age experience emotional, relational, or behavioral disturbances (2). Risk factors include stressors such as loss of a parent or caregiver, abuse, living in poverty, or having a history of mental illness or substance abuse in the family.

The support of IECMH services not only minimizes the chances of developing mental health disorders in adulthood, but it also minimizes the costs of future interventions. The Heckman Equation is an example of a preventative program developed to show investments in prenatal care build strong relationships that later help to break the cycle of poverty (3). Early actions of investing in IECMH services leads to reduced crime and grade repetition, increased high school and college attendance, and prevention of unwanted teen pregnancy (3).

Because IECMH is gaining increased recognition in child mental health, core areas of focus include growing, training, and supporting IECMH providers. IECMH consultations are an example of a preventive intervention to improve children's social, emotional, and behavioral development. The consultations occur between mental health professionals and staff across multiple areas such as childcare and primary pediatric care, in order to develop activities that promote healthy social and emotional development (1). Advancement of IECMH can also be obtained through policies that ensure Medicaid coverage for IECMH services and investing in prevention and treatment services.

IECMH in Nevada

Development of IECMH services in the state of Nevada began in 1975 and continues to be provided through the Division of Child and Family Services' Early Childhood Mental Health. Services include evidence-based family therapy, targeted case management to link young children to additional services, child care consultation to assist youth experiencing challenges in early education settings, and day treatment services for higher level needs intervention. Despite IECMH services in Nevada dating back almost 50 years, awareness of the specific mental health needs of young children is limited among the public and child serving professionals. To address this concern, thirty-eight other states have developed IECMH associations to bring together professionals across disciplines. These associations utilize universal competencies as provider standards for the endorsement of IECMH supporting professionals.

Advocacy for IECMH supporting services is crucial in Nevada given the increased risk for mental health concerns for young children living in poverty. In 2019, 42.8% of households with an infant made less than twice the Federal Poverty Level - less than \$44,000/annually for a family of three, putting them in an economic disadvantage (4). Nevada also has a higher average (8.7%) of late or no prenatal care administration compared to the national average (6.2%) (4). The more adequate care provided throughout and after pregnancy, the greater likelihood the child will have improved social and emotional outcomes.

According to 2018 data provided in the *State of Babies Yearbook: 2020*, Nevada Medicaid currently covers social-emotional screenings for young children, ages birth to six, using a tool designed specifically to identify behavioral health problems in this population. The Nevada State plan also covers family therapy, care coordination, and day treatment for families with young children experiencing mental health challenges when provided in office, in home and in pediatric or family medicine settings. Nevada Medicaid does not reimburse for IECMH services when they are provided in early care and education programs (*State of Babies Yearbook: 2021*).

In 2018, Nevada became 1 of 20 states involved in the ZERO TO THREE's IECMH Financing Policy Project. The project was put into place to support improvement of IECMH policies through a focus on financing (5). The states currently involved in the project place importance of mental health for infants, toddlers, and young children and the crucial period of time for social and emotional development and future success.

Recommendations for the Future:

- Increase the number of IECMH providers in Nevada through training, consultation, internships, and by creating curriculum in higher levels of education systems
- Secure and sustain funding and payment strategies for IECMH prevention and treatment services
- Expand endorsement to include Medicaid coverage for early care and education
- Raise public awareness with campaigns that encourage parents to have open communication about their child's mental health and healthy development
- Develop an IECMH association and invest in endorsement to unite child serving professionals on IECMH supports and coordinate provider standards

References

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