

Speaking Out

Children's mental health...nurture it every day

Mary Anne Peabody and Amy Baker

During the week of May 4-8, 2009 the nation will turn its attention to recognition of Children's Mental Health Week. Sponsored by the National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, this week of awareness seeks to bring attention to the variety of issues surrounding children's mental health.

For many, the words 'young children' and 'mental health' are not connected. But emotional well-being has its roots in infancy. Before they reach 12 months, children learn whether adults are trustworthy, which emotions they can safely express and whether or not they are loveable.

More is known now than ever before about how infants and toddlers think, learn and grow. Young children rapidly develop capabilities in language, motor development, cognition, relationships and emotional regulation. These capabilities form the foundation upon which all future development is built.

A myriad of life factors shape a child's well-being. These influences include relationships with their parents, relationships with caregivers, biological factors, temperament, learning style, abilities, culture, physical health and ability to regulate emotions and behavior.

The New York Office of Mental Health has worked with several child serving agencies to develop a new way of thinking about the social and emotional needs of children. *The Children's Plan* is built on the premise that the promotion and maintenance of mental health is a universal concern for all individuals, as it is directly linked to future physical health, well-being and longevity. For more information, please visit www.omh.state.ny.us/omhweb/engage.

What can adults do to support children's emotional health? Social and emotional well-being is promoted when babies, toddlers and young children have attentive, responsive, consistent care and interaction from their parents and other primary caregivers. It is promoted when adult caregivers feel supported in their own lives. It is promoted when children have ample opportunities for expressive and developmentally appropriate play and when they have support and encouragement in learning and mastering new skills.

Longitudinal studies show that children who have these supports do better in school, form stronger relationships, have fewer behavioral problems and generally lead happier, healthier and less stressful lives. Early emotional health carries over to the family, the community and into adulthood.

At Children's Institute we work to make the world a better place for children. Our focus is on improving children's social and emotional health by promoting wellness. Most of our work is concentrated on the early years, when children develop and then test perceptions about themselves and the world around them. We work to strengthen and support the systems that surround children, including families, child care providers, schools, out-of-school programs, human service and

healthcare providers. Our strong research base contributes to effective solutions. For more information, please visit www.childrensinstitute.net.

It isn't enough to declare Children's Mental Health Week; children's mental health should be the focus of every day. Let's affirm our commitment to be attuned, responsive, playful, nurturing, patient and good listeners. Parents, teachers, caregivers, grandparents and neighbors all play a part. When we have a positive impact on children's emotional health, we impact our whole community.

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