# ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES & PRACTICES

## TO SUPPORT HIGH QUALITY INFANT MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Working with young children and their families (prenatal through age 6 years) is a specialized area of practice that carries a unique emotional burden. In particular, working with high-risk families who have multiple problems is complex and demanding.

Practitioners who work with young children and their families come from various disciplines and backgrounds and work in a variety of settings (e.g. hospitals, public health, child welfare, child care, children's mental health centres, family resource centres). These infant mental health practitioners and early intervention specialists are frequently confronted with overwhelming and alarming family situations that can leave them feeling helpless and hopeless. Such experiences can lead to vicarious or secondary trauma. As a result practitioners may "burn out," become ineffective or even leave the field,[1] thus increasing stress for the families and the remaining workers.

Organizations have a responsibility to ensure that practitioners are able to provide ongoing competent support and intervention to young children and their families. This means preventing or alleviating vicarious trauma in the workplace. Such a responsibility involves creating policies and practices that ensure appropriate training and support for their staff. It is essential that this responsibility is recognized and endorsed by senior management, agency boards and all levels of government.

Infant Mental Health Promotion developed this document in order to:

- raise awareness of the challenges faced by practitioners in this field and the responsibility of organizations to recognize, prevent and overcome vicarious trauma in the workplace,
- offer guidelines regarding organizational policies and practices needed to support practitioners in coping with vicarious trauma in the workplace so that they are able to provide competent care to infants and their families,[2] and
- assist agencies in finding ways to retain experienced staff members in order to provide stability and continuity of care for families.

At the current time, it would be unlikely for any organization to have implemented all of the policies and practices outlined in this document. The challenge is for organizations to mobilize themselves and strive towards making these policies and practices achievable within their individual contexts.

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1. See Position Paper, IMHP Task Force on Vicarious Trauma in the Work place, 2004.
2. See Competencies for Practice in the Field of Infant Mental Health, IMHP, December 2002.

## Vicarious Trauma in the Workplace: Supporting Practitioner Effectiveness

IMHP has also published the *Position Paper of the IMHP Task Force on Vicarious Trauma in the Workplace - Supporting Practitioner Effectiveness with Young Children in High-Risk Families.*

The paper defines "high-risk" and reviews literature on the features of high-risk families that create risks for young children living in them. It also summarizes the characteristics of effective interventions and the challenges of providing services to high-risk families. Finally, the paper makes recommendations for policies and practices needed to support practitioner effectiveness and staff retention.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking into account findings from current research, opinions of participants at the IMHP 2003 Vicarious Trauma "Think Tank" and feedback received on the draft of this document, it is recommended that:

1. Government at federal, provincial and municipal levels, and service organizations, managers and practitioners acknowledge:
   a) The complex needs of high-risk families with young children and the amount and kinds of resources and supports required to ensure the best possible outcomes for children
   b) The serious negative impact that this work can have on practitioners
   c) The supports needed by practitioners in order to provide effective services.

2. Organizations develop clear policies and strive towards practices that support the principles outlined in this document.

3. Government at federal, provincial and municipal levels provide realistic service guidelines and allocate appropriate funding to ensure an adequate level of organizational support that enables practitioners to provide effective services for high-risk families with young children.

Organizations responsible for services to young children and their families must develop policies and procedures that ensure:

## Capacity to Meet Individual Needs of Infants and Families

____ Reasonable workloads based on the complexity of cases (e.g. no more than 10 cases when a child is at high risk for compromised development and a family's complex needs require frequent, intensive intervention in the home; more cases when the needs of a child and family are less complex)

____ Adequate time to allow appropriate culturally sensitive observations and in-depth assessments with each family

____ Based on individual family needs, flexibility in the hours of service families may receive and the length of time over which they may receive service

____ Flexibility in when and where families may be seen (e.g. evening home visits and in-centre programs, meeting families in the community, accompanying families to other services)

____ After ending a period of intervention, flexible follow up for further short-term interventions should problems arise at different stages

____ Having realistic expectations and helping families to appreciate their strengths and develop a sense of hope for the future

____ Clarity regarding practitioner roles and boundaries with families

## Solid Staff Training and Supervision

____ Staff: supervisor ratios appropriate to the support and supervision needed by frontline practitioners so that they can reflect on the needs of families and adapt interventions accordingly (i.e. no more than 10 staff per supervisor in most settings)

____ Adequate practitioner training and resources for the work

____ Adequate supervisor training for reflective supervision

## Flexibility in Work Arrangements

____ Flexibility in work hours and time off to accommodate practitioners' family responsibilities and relieve home stress (e.g. childcare, eldercare, medical appointments)

____ Varied responsibilities and opportunities related to worker interests and strengths (e.g. service delivery, research, education, community meetings, rotations among teams, secondments)

## Clear Staff Hiring & Retention Practices

____ Staff selection criteria and procedures that ensure adequate personal and interpersonal skills[2] and responsiveness to language and culture

____ Involving team members in the selection process and ensuring a "fit" with organizational values and beliefs

____ A plan for staff recognition and retention strategies

## Adequate Staff Remuneration

____ Salaries and benefits that adequately recognize the contribution of workers

## Safe Working Environments

____ Guidelines for preventing, identifying and responding to unsafe situations both inside and outside the immediate work environment (i.e. office buildings, agencies, homes)

____ Safety plans for working after hours, working in homes, managing client crises (e.g., mental illness, suicide), travel, animals in homes, drug/ alcohol concerns, domestic violence, criminal activity

____ Directions for reporting incidents that have an impact on staff physical and psychological health and well being

## STAFF SUPPORT & SUPERVISION

Organizations responsible for services to young children and their families must provide adequate support to increase staff satisfaction and ability to adapt practices appropriate to each child and family. Such support involves:

## Valuing Staff

____ Creating an atmosphere of appreciation (e.g. recognition for accomplishments and hard work, incentives)

____ Recognizing that self care is necessary and offering health promotion practices (e.g., time off for family responsibilities, workshops dealing with stress, Employee Assistance Programs)

____ Ensuring staff input into the day-to-day organization of their own work arrangements as well as organizational policies and procedures

## Reflective Practice

____ Providing regularly scheduled reflective supervision appropriate to the needs of individual staff members (i.e. atleast bi-weekly for most practitioners)

____ Clear separation between supervision for administrative requirements and supervision to nurture and encourage practitioner reflection on work with families (e.g., at separate times or by separate supervisors)

____ Creating opportunities for reflective peer support (e.g., regular team meetings, mentoring)

____ Identifying primary support persons for challenging situations (e.g., a peer mentor, team leader or supervisor)

____ Regular clinical consultation from experts to support work with individual cases

## Supporting Staff Members During Organizational Change, Conflict & Case Crises

____ Ensuring that all levels of staff are kept informed of proposed changes

____ Taking steps to encourage the ownership and investment of all staff in organizational plans

____ A process for managing conflict between workers, between a worker and supervisor, and with other agencies

____ A defined debriefing and/or peer support process for dealing with traumatic incidents involving work with clients

# ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES FOR HIGH QUALITY SERVICES

## Relationships With Families

Organizations responsible for services to young children and their families must ensure appropriate practitioner-family relationships. This involves:

_____ Clear recognition and support for the time needed to build therapeutic relationships with families that are responsive, respectful and family-centred.  Such trusting relationships open family receptivity to services that help them establish the responsive relationships needed by young children

_____ Clearly defined procedures for specifying goals and contracts with families, both on initial contact and again later in the intervention process when families are more able to hear and integrate information

_____ Support to establish and manage empathic boundaries with families

_____ An atmosphere of warmth and welcome within the agency that encourages families to feel safe and allows for continuity when there are staff changes

## Collaboration, Coordination & Consultation

Organizations responsible for services must ensure capacity for effective networking and collaboration with a broad range of services.  This involves:

_____ Recognition that no one agency can meet all family needs and that multiple interventions may be needed

_____ Appropriate training in the process of smooth and effective service coordination

_____ Ensuring adequate staff time for effective collaboration with other agencies

_____ An organized system of readily available specialized consultation and assessments regarding infant and young child mental health, adult mental health services for parents, and parenting capacity

## Staff Training

Organizations responsible for services to young children and their families must provide or support participation of both frontline practitioners and supervisory staff in speciaized initial training and ongoing continuing education to achieve the broad range of knowedge and skills needed in this field.[2] Training is needed in the following areas:

_____ Child development and parenting practices

_____ Atypical child development and the supports needed by young children with special needs and their families

_____ Recognition and reporting of child maltreatment

_____ Parent mental health including unresolved loss and trauma

_____ A variety of theoretically and clinically sound and evidence-based screening, assessment and intervention approaches designed for work with young children and their families

_____ Cultural competence when working with families

_____ Peer support and reflective practice

_____ Recognition of signs & symptoms and management of vicarious trauma

_____ Self-care to deal with stress and find a balance for mental, physical, spiritual and emotional well-being in self and clients

_____ Networking, collaboration and service coordination

_____ Personal safety

# SUPPORTING RESOURCES

Infant Mental Health Promotion has developed a series of documents and practice guidelines relevant for program managers, child care and front-line service providers, and organizational staff to support high quality services in the field of infant and young child mental health.

These documents address the following topics:

**Competencies for Practice
in the Field of Infant Mental Health**

**Core Prevention and Intervention for the Early Years**

**Organizational Policies & Practices
to Support High Quality Services in the Field of Infant
and Young Child Mental Health**

**Vicarious Trauma in the Workplace
- Supporting Practitioner Effectiveness with
Young Children in High Risk Families**

## Interactive Learning Modules

Each *Best Practice Guidelines* document has an accompanying web-based Interactive Learning Module which presents the information in an interactive and accessible format that can be used for trainings and individual learning.

Visit the IMHP website at

***www.IMHPromotion.ca***

to access these and other

resources or contact

**imp.mail@sickkids.ca**

for more details.

**Infant Mental
Health Promotion**

**IMHP**

*Supporting the
social, emotional
& cognitive well
being of infants
and young children*

**Infant Mental Health Promotion (IMHP)** is a professional coalition dedicated to promoting optimal outcomes for infants (prenatal to 36 months)through developing and supporting best practices for enhancing infant mental health through education, dissemination of information, networking, and advocacy.