

Video 1: Understanding the Impact of Trauma on Infants and Young Children in Care (Foster/Kin/Customary)

Transcript

Chaya Kulkarni: Hello, my name is Chaya Kulkarni and I'm the director of Infant and Early Mental Health promotion, often called IEMHP, at the Hospital for Sick Children. Our work focuses on early mental health. We translate the science behind infant and early mental health into best practices. In this introductory session, I hope to provide a brief overview of what infant and early mental health is and what contributes to its development, both positively and/or negatively.

Many, including the systems that support mental health, don't typically recognize the fact that mental health is something that begins developing in utero before a baby is even born and is experienced by babies, toddlers, and preschoolers. We reserve the concept of mental health and mental illness for older children, youth and adults.

In fact, today most of our investments in mental health [00:01:00] focus on treatment and are reactive to those who are experiencing a mental health crisis. Today, we also know that mental health is something that begins to develop right from conception and continues to develop throughout our lives. We also know that if we can recognize when a young child, a baby, may be at a greater risk for poor mental health early, and respond early and generously.

We can actually have a positive impact on that child's mental health. Promotion and prevention are key, yet we don't really do nearly enough of either of these things. We also know that even young children can experience both good mental health or poor mental health. We also know that the mental health they experience early in their life will influence their wellbeing across the lifespan.

In this [00:02:00] introductory session, I hope to share with you some of the foundational concepts about infant and early mental health, how mental health develops in the first few years of life, what promotes it and what can derail it, and how it can actually influence mental health across the lifespan. As we explore each of these areas, it will also become clear just how important relationships are to a child's wellbeing and how these same relationships, good or bad, shape a child's brain.

Finally, the relationship between mental health and brain development will be seen as intertwined, codependent.

So let's start with one of the most important concepts about infant and early mental health. For a young child, the primary caregiving relationship, the person who cares for them every day, most of the time, will be one of the most [00:03:00] important and influential relationships a child will experience.

It is through this relationship that a child develops a strong attachment relationship, what we often refer to as secure attachment, manage internal and external sensory inputs, learn to recognize different emotions and how to manage these, communicate their needs and adapt to the world around them. We often refer to these as the tasks of early childhood and accomplishing these will profoundly influence a child's mental health. When young children are able to successfully manage these tasks of early childhood, they're more likely to experience positive mental health. So you might be wondering what positive mental health looks like in a young child. Well, a young child who is experiencing positive mental health is a child who's able to form close relationships, manage [00:04:00] emotions, and feel safe and secure enough to explore their environment.

Ultimately, when children experience positive and responsive relationships, they're more likely to have optimal brain development, be better able to regulate and manage their emotions, and finally be resilient, able to recover when things don't go the way they want or the way they expect it. Positive relationships that are responsive and compassionate, especially when a child is distressed, are incredibly important during these early years. There is literally no situation in which when a

young child, a baby, a toddler preschooler, is crying, distressed, that should not be responded to by a caring, compassionate, and responsive caregiver. A person who offers safety for a child, a haven. When a child comes to us crying and our first words [00:05:00] are, it's okay, you're fine.

We need to recognize that no, the child is actually telling us they're not fine. Our response needs to recognize that they are not happy and should acknowledge that. For a child in the care of child welfare, this is extremely important. The child needs to know they are in a safe place and their emotions need to be acknowledged and responded to in a caring way that creates for them a sense of safety at a very frightening time in their life.

I'd like to now talk about what promotes and derails a young child's mental health. Caring, responsive and compassionate caregiving promote healthy development. Punitive, non-responsive or harsh relationships can derail a child's development and actually prevent them from accomplishing the tasks of [00:06:00] early childhood that we talked about earlier.

For children involved with child welfare, we need to understand that potentially these children have had experiences that may not support healthy development. And the accomplishment of the tasks of early childhood in the care of a foster parent, customary caregiver, or kin. The need for caring, compassionate, and responsive care is amplified even when the child's behavior can seem difficult.

I often tell practitioners that young children have to have two things for healthy development. The first is good nutrition, and the second is healthy, responsive, compassionate caregiving. Oddly, when we see or hear of a child suffering from hunger or food insecurity, we as a society are eager to help and support by providing the food the child needs.

Yet just as important [00:07:00] are those healthy relationships. We can often bear witness to, or, or even be a part of observing, uh, a poor caregiving, unresponsive situation, and we don't respond immediately to what is happening for that child. Yet,

the absence of a responsive caregiver is just as negative, an impact as not having access to food.

So caring, compassionate care is essential for all children. The need amplified for young children in care.

I'd now like to explore the topic of brain development the first three years of a child's life are a period of profound brain development matched by no other time during the course of that child's life.

Every second in the brain of a child from birth to three, there are 1 million connections made between brain cells. [00:08:00] This offers us as caregivers, a million opportunities every second to support that child's development. Because of the rapid period of growth in the brain, every experience, every smile, every gaze, every interaction is embedded into those connections and lays the foundation for that child's future.

Good positive experiences lead to good positive connections, poor experiences that are more likely to lead to poor connections in the brain. So as we interact with a young child, think about whether the quality of our interaction is likely to lead to positive or poor and weak connections in that child's brain.

The interactions we have with a young child literally shape the architecture of a child's brain, like any building. If the foundation is not well designed and [00:09:00] constructed, it can lead to challenges as we build on top of it. And the same way when the foundation is strong and a child's brain and those early connections are well formed, a child is more likely to experience positive mental health.

Earlier I talked about the fact that a young child's experiences are wired into those million connections that are made every second. Some of those experiences include things like how to express emotion, how to recognize different emotions, in themselves and in other people, how to interact with people, how to communicate and can even contain how a child sees themselves in the world, an important and loved child, or a child who is invisible.

These emotions contribute significantly to a child's developing mental health. The wiring in that child's brain is directly connected to their mental health. Even [00:10:00] a young child who has experienced trauma can recover with care and a compassionate, caring, and nurturing relationship, and perhaps, hardest of all is patience and persistence.

For any child who has been removed from the home and placed in another caregiving situation, that new caregiver is going to have to be patient.

In the next two sessions, I'll be joined by Dr. Susan Dundas and Mary Rella, a psychotherapist and director at Mothercraft. Susan and Mary will help us to better understand what trauma is for a young child and what kind of caregiving behaviors are most likely to help a child heal.

Thank you for joining me and if you're looking for more information on infant and early mental health, I invite you to visit our website, at www.imhpromotion.ca, where you'll find a three hour introductory session on infant and [00:11:00] early mental health. And again, thank you very much for joining me.