



FOR PROFESSIONALS

First 1000 Days

Why are the first 1000 days important to an infant's mental health?

The first 1000 days of life - between conception and a child's 2nd birthday - is a unique window of opportunity to shape their social and emotional development and long-term mental health and wellbeing. This includes their experience, expression, and management of emotions, as well as their ability to establish positive and rewarding relationships with others.

What can parents do to support their infant's mental health?

The emotional context that parents (or primary caregivers) create to communicate with their infant is an important early experience. Having a strong emotional bond, or secure attachment, with their infant provides them with a base from which the infant can thrive.

When supporting a pregnant woman or parents, it is important to emphasise the need for the developing infant to have calm and responsive parent/s (or primary caregiver/s) even before the baby is born. In utero, the fetus begins to show distinct patterns of rest and activity. Mothers who recognise and respond to them in an increasingly synchronized fashion provide the basis for a secure attachment to develop after birth.

Secure attachment occurs in infants whose parents (or primary caregivers) are sensitive to their distress, and respond in a consistent, caring, and timely manner. They can do this through simple actions such as picking their infant up and reassuring them when they cry. In these instances, infants learn that their parents (or primary caregivers) are a dependable source of comfort, and in turn the infant learns how to manage their own feelings and behaviours.

What is conflict, and why does it matter to an infant's mental health?

Conflict between parents (or primary caregivers) is a normal part of relationships and family life. Not all conflict is damaging, but the way that it manifests - namely, that which is frequent, intense, and poorly resolved - can be harmful to the developing infant.

Mothers who experience conflict with the other parent (or primary caregiver) during pregnancy can over-produce the stress hormone, cortisol, which can lead to greater reactivity to stress and difficulty forming a strong emotional bond after birth.

Infants as young as a few weeks also recognise and react to conflict between their parents (or primary caregivers). As they are not born with any ability to control or escape the stress they feel, to cope, they become watchful and jumpy, or withdrawn.

Conflict may interfere with sensitive care and/or undermine the infant's confidence in the parent (or primary caregiver) as emotionally available, or a secure base, interrupting the formation of secure attachment and increasing the likelihood of developing social and emotional maladjustment in later life.

How can I help parents repair any harm to their infant's mental health from conflict?

British paediatrician, psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Donald Woods Winnicott (1896 -1971) wrote that an infant cannot exist alone – they are essentially part of a relationship. He introduced the idea that parents (and primary caregivers) do not need to be perfect, but “good enough”. As family support workers and child specialists in the community sector, you must promote what infants need for their mental health.

Reversing the impacts of early adverse experiences gets progressively harder after the first 1000 days therefore investing in services that support parents, infants and toddlers during this time is vital.

Relationships Australia South Australia provides a number of resources, specialist programs and services to help parents work through difficult issues of relationship and family conflict to reduce the effects of that conflict on infants and children.

Relationships Australia South Australia

Offices: www.rasa.org.au/locations | 1300 364 277 or 1800 182 325 (country callers)

We also provide a range of professional development courses to support your work with families. Please visit the AISR website to find out more www.socialrelations.edu.au

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