

# PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH

## SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Early Childhood Mental Health = the social and emotional development of the child.
- At the core of children's mental health is social and emotional development which includes the development of relationships, empathy, affect regulation, and coping skills.
- Emotional and intellectual development cannot be separated. Social and emotional skills are fundamental for success in school.
- Play is the natural context for social and emotional development. Children learn by doing.

## RELATIONSHIP BASED

- Optimum growth and development occurs within the context of positive relationships. Children learn to feel safe and secure and to regulate their bodies and emotions with the nurturing support of trusted, responsive caregivers.
- Feeling loved, connected, and valued is basis for normal development and learning. Children's early relationships have a long-lasting impact on how they develop and their capacity to learn.
- Building relationships with parents and families takes time. It starts with spending the time to get to know the family and develop a sense of trust and caring.
- Communication and building relationships with children and families involves positive communication, respectful attitudes and beliefs, and LISTENING.

## STRENGTH BASED

- Focusing on positive strengths and resources for children and their parents is empowering and key to positive outcomes.
- Protective factors for children include supportive family environment, community support, and child attributes. These contribute to resilience and positive outcomes.

## FAMILY CENTERED

- Children are viewed, understood, and supported in the context of the family.

- Interventions with high-risk families are more successful when they address the parent child relationship and the extenuating problems parents face, such as poverty, unemployment, housing, and substance abuse.

## TRAUMA INFORMED

- We must consider exposure to violence and chronic stress as a core area of early childhood programming. Traumatic experiences affect the brain. Children who suffer traumatic stress develop reactions that linger and affect their daily lives long after the traumatic event has ended.
- For children, trauma is often about more than physical harm. For instance, separation from a caregiver, emotional neglect, and lack of a stable home are often very traumatic.
- Traumatic stress is overwhelming, and children are flooded by strong emotions and high levels of arousal. They may have difficulty managing, or regulating feelings and behavior.
- Children who have experienced ongoing trauma may have many different reactions, such as
  - expectation that bad things will happen
  - fearful or withdrawn
  - hard time forming relationships
  - try to over-control or shut down emotions
  - try to manage feelings through harmful behaviors
  - feel damaged, powerless, ashamed, and/or unlovable
  - triggered by positive experiences, such as praise, intimacy, or feelings of peace

## ENVIRONMENT

- The environment – materials, space, routines, activities, interactions, attitudes, etc – directly influence the child’s emotions and behaviors.
- With planning, preparation, and team work, social and emotional difficulties can be prevented.

## SELF AWARENESS

- We need to manage ourselves when relating to children. This includes self awareness; our attitudes, beliefs, expectations, relationships, attunement, and communication with children.
- Emotional availability, our warm and empathic presence, and attentiveness to the child and family are essential healing elements of the helping relationship.