

FUND INFANT & EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH



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This could be a pivotal moment in history for California’s mental health landscape and the future of our youngest children.

Support Funding for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH)

First 5 supports a \$250 million budget augmentation for IECMH services to prevent and mitigate mental health concerns, promote healthy social emotional development, and train existing providers of infants and toddlers.

What are the mental health needs of infants and young children?

Infants and young children can—and do—suffer from mental and behavioral health challenges. However, their need for intervention and services is often overlooked, and difficult for providers to identify and address, because young children handle emotional experiences and traumatic events differently from adults and older children.

It is especially critical to address trauma, mental and behavioral health challenges in infants and young children in the early years; 90% of a child’s brain development happens before age 5. In addition, the isolation, stress, and trauma of the Covid-19 pandemic intensified mental health problems, including for young children.

What are Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health (IEMCH) services for children 0-5?

IECMH services range from promotion to prevention, to developmentally appropriate assessment and diagnosis, treatment and maintenance. IECMH interventions use a two-generational approach, helping caregivers to provide a nurturing relationship that promotes children’s social-emotional growth. Services occur with families in the home or at the community level, and might include facilitated playgroups, parenting support classes, or IECMH consultation, among others. IECMH consultation is evidence-based and prevention focused, and pairs mental health consultants with families and adults where young children learn and grow.

The benefits of IECMH services include:

- » Helping families overcome access barriers to mental health care, and connect families and educators with more intensive health, mental health, or early intervention services.
 - » Building adult capacity and supporting the healthy social and emotional development of children—early and before intervention is needed.
 - » Reaching families from historically marginalized communities, including immigrant and low-income families of color, through community-based IECMH programs and services.
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IMPACT OF ACEs ON YOUNG CHILDREN

Forty-two percent of California children have experienced at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE). ACEs are specific types of adversity, including physical and emotional abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, shown to affect later health outcomes. Experiencing multiple ACEs during early childhood, as well as external factors like racism and community violence, can cause toxic stress in children with long-lasting impacts on health and well-being.



California Can Do Better

Despite the growing need, and the importance of reaching children and their families early, the mental health needs of California's young children are not being met by existing programs.

The recently established Children & Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI) offers the promise of transforming and vastly expanding children's mental health services. However, the majority of CYBHI program funding relies on partnerships with K-12 schools. Unless there is dedicated funding focused specifically on the mental health of infants and toddlers, California will miss addressing their needs at the most critical time in their development.

Investing in IECMH would expand culturally-responsive, two-generational approaches tailored to fit the needs of families in the home and in communities. Eligible entities would include Medi-Cal county behavioral health, tribal entities, community-based organizations including early care and education providers, behavioral health providers, county offices of education, and First 5 county commissions. The dedicated funds would also help train IECMH clinical and non-clinical staff.

The First 5 Association of California supports the 58 First 5 county commissions in building the early childhood systems and supports needed to ensure California's young children are safe, healthy, and ready to succeed in school and life. The First 5 vision is that, one day, California's success will be measured by the well-being of its youngest children.

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