
HALTON EARLY YEARS MENTAL HEALTH TOOLKIT

8 Areas of Focus For Healthy Social-Emotional Development of Infants/Young Children



Brain Development & the Environment

Nurturing environments help to shape the developing brain.

The foundation for healthy brain development starts prenatally and is influenced by genes, experiences and the child's environment. Positive caring relationships and healthy, stimulating environments help to shape the developing brain and influence gene expression with positive outcomes seen through to adulthood.



Stress & Brain Development

Toxic stress interferes with healthy brain development.

Stress is a normal part of healthy development. However, toxic stress in childhood has the potential to interfere with healthy brain development. Supportive and caring relationships help to buffer the effects of stress for children.



Executive Function & Self-regulation

Executive function and self-regulation are a child's 'air traffic' control systems.

Executive function and self-regulation helps children to manage emotions, control impulses, plan and prioritize, stay on task, problem solve and master new skills such as numeracy and literacy skills. A child's capacity to develop these 'systems' is dependent upon caregivers who can model these skills within safe and supportive environments.



Temperament

A child's 'temperament' can change over time.

A child's emerging dispositions such as their activity level, emotional expression, attention and self-regulation are the result of complex interactions between genes, biology and environmental factors. It is important for caregivers to understand their child's natural strengths and adopt caregiving strategies that build on those strengths so they can thrive in different environments.



Resilience in infants/young children is fostered through healthy relationships, supportive communities and the prevention of adversity.

Resilience is not a 'fixed trait'; it can be promoted, strengthened and compromised throughout the lifespan. A person's ability to remain resilient in the face of adversity is dependent upon the presence of protective factors within themselves, their relationships and the society in which they live.



Positive Caring Relationships

Positive, caring relationships in the early years are the 'building blocks' for a child's social-emotional development.

In the early years, responsive adult relationships affect brain architecture through reciprocal serve and return interactions. Warm and responsive caregivers lead to greater social competence, fewer behavioural problems and enhanced thinking and reasoning in a young child.



Attachment

Consistent and responsive caregiving fosters secure attachment in infants/young children and sets the stage for healthy child development.

An infant/child who is securely attached to their caregiver(s) feels safe, secure, and confident, promoting their exploration of the environment and ability to take on new challenges and experiences necessary for healthy development.



Play

Play is the work of children. Learning happens through play.

Play positively supports children's social-emotional, fine motor, gross motor, cognitive, language and literacy skills. Play has an essential role in building children's resilience across adaptive systems; pleasure, emotion regulation, stress response systems, peer and place attachments, learning and creativity. Integrating play into everyday moments fosters critical skills for learning.

For more detailed information go to [Social-Emotional Development in the Early Years: A Common Message Paper \(2nd, Ed.\)](#), published by the Halton Early Years Mental Health Committee (EYMHC) to provide professionals with common messages on early social-emotional development.

Our Kids Network (OKN) and EYMHC work in partnership to manage the Early Years Mental Health Toolkit at ourkidsnetwork.ca.