



Why Advocates Should Elevate the Importance of Social and Emotional Development for Young Children

What is “social and emotional development”? Why is it important for young children?

“Social and emotional development” describes a young child’s ability to experience, express, and regulate emotions; form close, secure interpersonal relationships, and explore his or her environment and learn within the context of family and cultural expectations. Also called [infant and early childhood mental health](#) (IECMH), these milestones underpin each child’s overall development and greatly influence his or her lifelong trajectory.

What challenges to healthy social and emotional development do young children face?

Infants and toddlers’ rapid brain development makes them especially vulnerable to the effects of stress. Infants and young children can experience mental health disorders including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety. Children’s mental health is also affected by exposure to adversity. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)—such as illness or family death, a parent’s mental health disorder (e.g. maternal depression) or substance abuse, neglect, parental absence, discrimination, or exposure to other trauma—can impede children’s healthy development. The more ACEs children encounter, the higher their risk for physical and mental health problems (heart disease, depression, suicide risk) as adults. ACEs are also linked with poorer school readiness and educational outcomes and involvement with the juvenile justice system.

Why should advocates focus on the social and emotional development of young children?

Research suggests that as many as one in five U.S. children suffers from some kind of emotional impairment or disorder, including an estimated 10 to 14 percent of children under age 6. However, between half and two-thirds of those identified as needing mental health services do not receive timely treatment. Disparities are larger for children who develop a mental health disorder at a very young age or who come from rural and/or minority backgrounds.

The strong link between healthy social and emotional development and school readiness makes this focus more urgent for advocates and offers potential to bring additional voices to the table.

What can advocates recommend to Medicaid agencies to prioritize infant and early childhood mental health?

Medicaid provides health insurance to nearly half of all infants and young children. While Medicaid alone cannot solve broader system challenges, such as stigma or the shortage of qualified mental health providers, small changes made by state Medicaid agencies can have large ripple effects across payers and systems. Advocates can encourage their state’s Medicaid agency, in close collaboration with mental health and other systems, to:

1. Improve preventive screenings based on expert-recommended schedules and guidelines.
2. Adopt diagnosis guidelines specific to young children’s mental health ([DC:0-5™: Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health and Developmental Disorders of Infancy and Early Childhood](#)).
3. Update or clarify payment policies and processes for IECMH services.
4. Consider new settings or provider types appropriate for IECMH promotion, prevention and treatment services, such as child care or early intervention settings and home visiting programs.
5. Include IECMH in broader Medicaid improvements and reforms, such as delivery system changes or new payment models (e.g. behavioral health integration into primary care, value-based payment).

For more information about Medicaid and young children’s social-emotional health, see [“Using Medicaid to Ensure the Healthy Social and Emotional Development of Infants and Toddlers”](#) by Georgetown Center for Children and Families with support from ZERO TO THREE Think Babies™ campaign.

How Advocates Can Support Healthy Social and Emotional Development for Children in Medicaid

Child advocates don't have to be experts in brain development or mental health to jumpstart the conversation in their states about Medicaid's role supporting young children's social and emotional health.

The child advocacy community can raise its credible voice to highlight the rapidly evolving science around early brain development, infant and toddler health, and the critical importance of parent-child bonding. Advocates can also call attention to the need for early interventions and policy and practice changes that support children's healthy social and emotional development, which underpins their mental and physical health throughout life.

Building on their reputation as trusted partners, advocates can bring together individuals who touch the lives of young children and families—such as state infant mental health association members, parents, early care and education providers, child welfare groups, pediatricians, university faculty, home visitors, and Medicaid officials—to talk through common challenges and opportunities for action.



To call attention to the social and emotional needs of young children in Medicaid, advocates can serve as:

- ▶ **Dot Connector** – Link up state Medicaid officials, whose program insures 44 percent of all U.S. children under 6 years old, with early childhood leaders and other systems leaders to ensure services are being offered in pediatric offices, early care and education centers, foster care or home visiting and to discuss how to coordinate the systems so that children receive the screenings and treatment they need.
- ▶ **Knowledge Broker** – Leverage relationships with content experts, providers, and state agencies to find solutions to practice-level challenges, such as billing problems or kids missing out on services or interventions. Educate policymakers about the ways in which social and emotional development is foundational to other issues they care about, like school readiness, health outcomes, and juvenile justice.
- ▶ **Convener** – With a reputation as trusted partners, advocates are uniquely situated to bring together physical health and mental health providers, agency officials, health plans, early childhood educators, and parents to identify common goals and challenges, and develop solutions.
- ▶ **Child/Family Partner** – Because of advocates' connections to the families touched by early childhood systems, they can uniquely support parents' understanding of the importance of social and emotional development, and solicit parent feedback on how public systems are working to support young children. Advocates can also use these family connections to keep parent and child needs at the center of any policy changes.

ZERO TO THREE created the [Think Babies™ campaign](#) to make the potential of every baby a national priority. Funding partners for Think Babies™ include the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which supports the campaign's public education aspects, and the Perigee Fund, which supports the campaign's public education and advocacy aspects. Learn more at www.thinkbabies.org.