

- Encourage funding by concerned donors and governmental entities for vital programs.
- Establish single-source connection for care.
- Central point of contact for information and assistance.

The coalition's goal is to provide a comprehensive and integrated system of care not available in the past for young children with mental health needs and their families residing in the Omaha metropolitan area.

The Coalition for the Advancement of Children's Mental Health is a unique group and a role model for collaboration in the Midlands. We have a powerful mission. As professionals working together, we are building stronger families, heading off future problems for today's children and acting as a source of help for all individuals concerned with the healthy development of our youngest citizens.

WHILE THE UNITED STATES CONTINUES TO DEBATE ABOUT INCREASING ITS INVESTMENTS IN YOUNG CHILDREN, OTHER INDUSTRIALIZED COUNTRIES HAVE ALREADY RECOGNIZED THE WISDOM OF SUCH INVESTMENTS. MANY NATIONS FAR SURPASS US IN MAKING EARLY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE TO ALL



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CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

Why we all need to care.



Informational Paper by the Coalition for the Advancement of Children's Mental Health.

Spring 2007

What does it take for children to grow up happy, productive and prepared for adult, family, and community life? It seems like we are often asking that question as we confront our social failures: family violence, juvenile delinquency, adult crime, school failure, addictions, mental health problems, or poverty. What if we could turn the clock back to the first five years of life? What if we could use everything we have learned about failure to prevent more failures and everything we have learned about success to generate more success?

A Good Start Means Everything.

We know we would be focused on the very first days, weeks, months and years in a child's life and the life of the family. Not long ago, it was thought that many diagnoses such as anxiety, depression, and bipolar began only after childhood. We now know they can begin in **early childhood**. *The human infant has the longest and most complex course of development of any living being;* and we know that success depends on the consistent, loving, and competent care of parents and other supportive caregivers.

What is Early Childhood Mental Health?

"...Early childhood mental health (ECMH) is the optimal growth and social-emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development of the young child in the context of the unfolding relationship between child and parent." (Source: Early Childhood Mental Health: A Report to Nebraska March 2002)

ECMH is not about pathologizing child behavior; but rather promoting the healthy alternative. ECMH is not just the work of psychiatrists or other mental health providers - but the work of every parent, extended family member, child care provider, early childhood educator, medical practitioner, or anyone else who touches the lives of young children and their families.

The core of early childhood mental health is a secure emotional bond between parent and child. This relationship creates a foundation for physi-

cal, social, cognitive, language, and emotional development; and literally promotes the developing complexity of the brain. By the time formal education begins for most children at the age of five, we know that the factors most relevant to educational success have already exerted considerable influence. There are critical needs of young children and their families that must be addressed before the child enters school.

The challenge for all parents and for the community concerned about the productive, healthy and happy adult of the future is this:

- **How to recognize and promote** the healthy social and emotional development of the young child
- **How to navigate** the typical as well as atypical problems of early childhood, finding help, support, encouragement, and resources as needed
- **How to protect** children from the harmful effects of high stress resulting from poverty, parental addiction or mental illness, child maltreatment, domestic or community violence
- **How to recognize** the early signs of abnormal development and find the best early intervention and treatment services available

Consequences and Opportunities

A look at our own neighborhoods shows what our children are facing:

- About **56,000** children ages 5 and younger live in Douglas and Sarpy counties.

A January 2001 report from the U.S. Surgeon General says that one in five children (21 percent) will experience a behavioral health problem. In the two-county area, this equates to:

- **11,200** young children who would have a diagnosable behavioral health problem that hinders their development
- **4,884** would have significant functional impairment
- **2,222** would have extreme functional impairment

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Early identification of problems and provision of preventive or early intervention services greatly improves these children's chances of becoming successful in school and positive, contributing adults.

Building Healthy Relationships

The most important people in a baby's life need to monitor mental health just as they are vigilant to the child's physical health. It is easy to identify a child's physical needs: nutritious food, warm clothes when it's cold, bedtime at a reasonable hour. However, a child's mental and emotional needs may not be as obvious. *Good mental health allows children to think clearly, develop socially and learn new skills.*

Basics for a child's good mental health:

- Unconditional love
- Self-confidence and high self-esteem
- The opportunity to play with other children
- Encouraging teachers and supportive caretakers
- Safe and secure surroundings in both the home and their community
- Appropriate guidance and discipline

You Should Know:

Myth: Children do not experience mental illnesses. Their actions are just products of bad parenting.

Fact: A report from the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health showed that in any given year 5-9 percent of children experience serious emotional disturbances. Just like adult mental illnesses, these are clinically diagnosable health conditions that are a product of the interaction of biological, psychological, social, and sometimes even genetic factors.

Myth: Children misbehave or fail in school to get attention.

Fact: Behavior problems can be symptoms of emotional, behavioral, or mental disorders, rather than merely attention-seeking devices. These children can succeed in school with appropriate understanding, attention, and mental health services.

Myth: Once people develop mental illnesses, they will never recover.

Fact: Studies show that most people with mental illnesses get better, and many recover completely. Recovery refers to the process in which people are able to live, work, learn, and participate fully in their communities. For some individuals, recovery is the ability to live a fulfilling and productive life. For others, recovery implies the reduction or complete remission of symptoms. Science has shown that having hope plays an integral role in an individual's recovery.

Myth: Mental illnesses are brought on by a weakness of character.

Fact: Mental illnesses are a product of the interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors. Research has shown genetic and biological factors are associated with schizophrenia, depression, and alcoholism. Social influences, such as loss of a loved one or a job, can also contribute to the development of various disorders.

- A parent's relationship with their child is the foundation of his or her healthy development.
- Children's development depends the traits he or she was born with (nature), and what he or she experiences (nurture).

THE MOST IMPORTANT PEOPLE IN A BABY'S LIFE NEED TO MONITOR MENTAL HEALTH JUST AS THEY ARE VIGILANT TO THE CHILD'S PHYSICAL HEALTH.



- All areas of development (social / emotional / intellectual / language / motor) are linked. Each depends on, and influences, the others.
- What children experience, including how their parents respond to them, shapes their development as they adapt to the world.

Resources, Solutions, Support

The Coalition for the Advancement of Children's Mental Health (CACMH) works as an all-inclusive team in the Omaha area. Coalition members cover nearly the entire spectrum of health care professionals, early childhood educators, child care providers, nonprofit organizations and many others.

CACMH envisions a community that:

1. **Promotes knowledge and skills** necessary to support healthy social and emotional development of young children. It is their goal that anyone who touches the lives of young children and families can support that family in finding appropriate screening, assessment and services needed.
2. **Provides Early Identification** through screening for social, emotional, and developmental progress for all young children.
3. **Supports Intervention** with sufficient community resources existing to provide developmentally appropriate mental health services for young children and families.

What do we need in our community?

- *A comprehensive system of mental health care for young children and their families.* As the State of Nebraska progresses in development of a statewide infrastructure for children's mental health services, we need to be sure that the needs and interests of young children and their families are clearly identified and actively incorporated into the plan. ECMH services need to be strength based, culturally specific, and family centered.
- Screening for social, emotional, and developmental progress for all young children.

- Family system advocates assessing and providing support services for family.
- A database of mental health services for young children, including prevention services such as *Head Start* and *Early Start*.
- Training and technical assistance provided to early childhood service providers and mental health professionals.
- Steering committee to provide support and guidance.
- Identification and elimination of gaps in children's mental health care coverage.
- Establish communications and public relations program. Educate the community about what Early Childhood Mental Health means, why it matters, and why we literally can't afford to ignore it. *(continued on page 4)*

NURTURING, RESPONSIVE AND INDIVIDUALIZED RELATIONSHIPS IN THE EARLY YEARS BUILD HEALTHY BRAIN ARCHITECTURE THAT PROVIDES A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR ALL FUTURE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT.

