EW of us can remember the first two or three years of our life. Despite this, we now know that the nature and quality of our early life experiences are very important and can have lifelong consequences. It is during this stage of our development that the foundations for positive mental health and wellbeing across the lifespan begins. Our early experiences really do matter. Infants are very social beings who come into the world ready and expecting to establish a relationship. Therefore, it is important there is a significant adult person, most often the parent, ready and waiting to respond and attune to this relationship with them.

**WHAT IS INFANT MENTAL HEALTH?**

INFANT mental health refers to how well a child develops socially and emotionally from birth to age three years. This includes their capacity to express and regulate their emotions, begin to form relationships, and explore their environment. When one hears the phrase ‘infant mental health’, there may be a tendency to be concerned that it is connected with mental illness and be puzzled as to how the term mental health could be associated with the stage of infancy. Others may not realise that infants can experience very strong emotions long before they have words to express what they are feeling. In these early years, children cannot manage their feelings on their own – they need their parents and other caregivers to help them soothe, settle and manage these feelings.

**WHAT QUALITIES OF THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP ARE KEY TO INFANT MENTAL HEALTH?**

INFANTS need a trusting, secure and reliable relationship with their parents or main caregiver. The infant can recognise these qualities through the way they are held, talked to, touched, and cared for. These early interactions during the first weeks, months and years of life are very important and prepare the way for strong, healthy social and emotional health and wellbeing across the lifespan.

**I’M A PARENT - WHAT CAN I DO TO PROMOTE MY INFANT’S MENTAL HEALTH?**

THERE are a number of important interactions that help to support and promote infant mental health:

• Make time to connect and communicate with your baby - through smiling, talking, touch and massage.
• Take time to understand your baby’s behaviour – this will enable you to think about what your baby is experiencing which will make it easier for you to respond to their needs.
• Respond to your baby when they are unsettled. This isn’t ‘spoiling’ them, you are helping them return to a calm emotional state. When you respond, it will help stop this behaviour from escalating, and support your child in developing self-soothing and coping skills.
• Follow your baby’s lead - looking away and small blinks are ways your baby shows you that they may need a rest. A soft soothing voice or gentle cuddling in your arms can help settle and soothe your baby.
• Babies need sensitive, responsive caregiving environments. You can make this happen by making sure your responses and routines with your child are nurturing and predictable.

• Be mindful of your own feelings and experiences as a parent. This is important for your own self-care, but what you are going through can also impact on your child. Remember, parents don’t have to be perfect, babies just need their parents to be good enough.

**WHY IS INFANT MENTAL HEALTH SO IMPORTANT?**

WE now have considerable research that tells us that the first three years of life provide the foundation for a child’s social and emotional
What is infant mental health and why is it important?

Giving a child the best start possible

Useful links

HSE Caring for your Baby: hse.ie/caringforyourbaby
yourmentalhealth.ie
publichealth.hscni.net/publications/getting-know-your-baby
Your-baby.org.uk
zerotothree.org
developingchild.harvard.edu/
albertafamilywellness.org

Useful reading

Diary of a Baby
Touchpoints 0-3 years
Your Baby is Speaking to You

Nine-week-old baby Jack is on his way to developing positive social and emotional health

He already understands that his cooing and smiling will be responded to by his mum and dad who are very attuned to Jack’s desire to communicate.

When Jack is feeling hungry, his mum and dad recognise his feelings and respond with food, comforting touches and soothing words. Though not yet able to understand his mum and dad’s words, Jack is able to interpret their responses though his senses from their sounds, touches, tone of voice, smell and sight. These everyday interactions between the baby and his parents evoke feelings that assure him he is safe, secure, loved and valued. They are building the foundations of a secure attachment and provide the baby with a capacity to begin to understand himself and others around him.

How do early relationships shape the brain and influence development?

A baby’s brain is only developed 25-30% at birth but almost fully grown by three years of age. There is no other period of brain development that is as critical to setting the stage for human growth, development and positive or negative mental health as these first years of a child’s life. Social interaction with infants as well as stimulation such as holding and touching are crucial in the establishment of their essential brain pathways. When a baby consistently experiences daily warm, sensitive interactions with their caregiver, their brain and neural pathways are developing with patterns of understanding that assure him or her that their environment is safe, predictable and responsive.

If you’d like to learn more about this topic, the baby brain map at www.zerotothree.org/resources/529-baby-brain-map offers fascinating insight into the development of babies’ brains over time and how caregiving can influence brain development.

Positive social and emotional development in infancy can also have an impact on children’s cognitive development—when a child feels safe and secure, they are better equipped to learn from their day to day experiences. When infants are provided with predictable and nurturing caregiving environments they are afforded the best possible opportunity for optimal development. This enhances their capacity to make healthy transitions into education and to sustain their positive health and wellbeing across later developmental stages of childhood, adolescence and adult life. Which is why it is essential that infant mental health is recognised and understood with the same importance as infant physical development.

In our next article on Infant Mental Health we will explore: Developing Your Relationship with Your Baby

This article is produced as part of The Nurture programme – Infant Health and Wellbeing which will build on the existing Child Health programme, strengthening a cohesive, integrated Child Health and Wellbeing service for children aged 0-2 years and their families.