

Early Childhood Mental Health refers to the capacity of young children to experience, regulate and express emotions; form close, secure interpersonal relationships; and explore the environment and learn. Good mental health in young children is critical to their overall well-being and future success. Unfortunately, achieving good mental health is a struggle for many children in Los Angeles County. Consider the following:

- Postpartum depression, which affects eight to 15 percent of new mothers, also hurts babies. It is associated with maternal drug or alcohol use and disrupts bonds between mother and child. Infants and toddlers of depressed mothers can develop serious emotional and attachment disorders (Onunaku, N., 2005).

- Preschoolers are expelled at a rate three times higher than children in K–12 programs nationwide (Gilliam, W.S., 2005). “About eight percent of all preschoolers (children aged 3–5 years) exhibit behavioral problems severe enough to warrant a psychiatric diagnosis” (Keenan, K., & Wakschlag, L.S., 2004).

- “Unidentified and untreated mental disorders can mean the loss of critical developmental years and can lead to youth suicide, school failure, and involvement with the juvenile justice and criminal justice systems” (NAMI, MHA, CHADD, CABF, FFFCMA, AACAP, 2007).

- Nearly seventy percent of children in foster care will experience a mental illness (Little Hoover Commission, 2001). As of July 1, 2007, more than 7,500 children age 5 and under were in foster care in L.A. County (UC Berkeley, 2007).

- Mental illness can be diagnosed in the early years of life. Depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder can be detected before one year of age (Luby, J., 2000 and Blank, M., 2007) and effectively treated through dyadic intervention with a qualified infant mental health practitioner.

- “Increasing services for children under the age of five would reduce the number of school-age children requiring mental health services for serious disorders” (ZERO TO THREE, 2007).

- “Unlike most disabling physical diseases, mental illness begins very early in life. Half of all lifetime cases begin by age 14; three quarters have begun by age 24. Thus, mental disorders are really the chronic diseases of the young” (National Institute of Mental Health, 2005).

The facts speak for themselves: L.A. County should dedicate 75 percent of MHSA-Prevention and Early Intervention funds to 0–25 year olds and their families or caregivers, particularly for families with children age 5 and under. Supporting effective programs to promote early childhood mental health, preventing the onset of mental illness in children and youth, and supporting early intervention in the earliest years of life is a high yield investment. It will reduce public costs and increase the quality of life for families and communities. Children will experience lifelong benefits and many will require less treatment in future years as a result.

Please share this information with your colleagues and voice your opinion about the needs of children in the MHSA-PEI at local SAAC meetings!

For a schedule of upcoming meetings, see dmh.lacounty.gov. For more information or to get involved, contact Kate Sachnoff at ksachnoff@first5la.org, or Marc Davidson at mdavidson@first5la.org. Full citations at www.first5la.org/Policy-Advocacy. Revised 3/08

