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BRIEF



Early Childhood Mental Health Is Key to Georgia Kids' Success

A strong foundation supports healthy brain development and long-term public safety & national security

Early childhood mental health (ECMH) is the developing ability of young children (ages 0-5) to form relationships with adults and peers; experience, express, and manage a range of emotions; and explore the environment and learn.[1] Warm, responsive interactions with caregivers (parents, other family members, early care and education teachers) are necessary for children's brain development and ECMH.[2] For example, when infants experience distress and cry, and adults respond by comforting the infants, they learn, over time, how to manage their emotions.

However, some families face challenges, including Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs; e.g., substance abuse, mental illness, violence). ACEs can derail early childhood development and lead to ECMH challenges. For instance, parental mental illness may render caregivers unable to participate in responsive relationships with their children. More than one-fifth (21 percent) of Georgia infants and toddlers experience ACEs; rates are even higher among children of color and those from families with low incomes.[3] Nationwide, 9.5 to 14 percent of very young children have ECMH challenges[4] (see box).

Early Childhood Mental Health Challenges

- Extreme sleeping or eating difficulties
- Inconsolable irritability or crying
- Inability to establish relationships
- Excessive hitting or biting
- Out-of-control tantrums
- Impulsive behavior
- Lack of emotion
- Social withdrawal
- Abnormal fearfulness
- Inability to adapt to new situations



ACEs and ECMH challenges have implications for community safety and national security

ACEs and ECMH challenges can have lifelong consequences, from mental health issues, to substance abuse, disease, and early death.[5] ACEs can impact later parenting behavior: many parents who are unable to appropriately respond to and care for their young children experienced ACEs themselves.

ACEs can negatively impact children's school performance and decrease the likelihood of high school graduation,[6] which, in turn, are associated with an increased risk of criminal involvement.[7] ECMH challenges are a substantial risk factor for behavior problems and later involvement in crime.[8] For example, a 19-year study found that children who were very aggressive in preschool had high delinquency rates at age 23.[9] In another investigation, high levels of defiance, destruction of property, deceitfulness, and peer problems in preschoolers predicted later conduct disorder,[10] which is often associated with criminality in adulthood.[11]

With regard to national security, a lack of a high school diploma and criminal behavior are disqualifiers for military service. Educational deficits, crime, substance abuse, and obesity prevent 73 percent of Georgia youth from qualifying for service.[12]

Georgia policymakers must support interventions designed to prevent and treat ECMH challenges

Solutions for ECMH challenges can focus on prevention, early identification, and/or treatment. With regard to prevention, interventions to prevent or treat parental substance abuse, mental illness, extreme stress, or child abuse/neglect can prevent these conditions from impacting the young child and becoming an ACE. Interventions that support parents as responsive caregivers of their children, such as home visiting, can also help prevent ECMH challenges.[13]

Early childhood education (ECE) professionals, including home visitors and teachers, can be trained in ECMH to help them identify and address ECMH challenges. Training can occur in both pre-service and in-service professional development sessions. The Georgia Association for Infant Mental Health (GA-AIMH) at Georgia State University[14] offers such training, to increase professionals' knowledge of ECMH content.

There are also interventions specifically designed to treat ECMH challenges. ECMH consultation (ECMHC) is an evidence-based intervention in which highly-trained ECMH professionals are placed in ECE settings to work with teachers and parents to address existing ECMH issues, prevent further difficulties, and support children's mental health.[15] The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL)[16] is currently piloting ECMHC in Atlanta, Savannah, and Macon.

Research demonstrates that ECMHC programs can provide benefits to both children (e. g., decreased behavior problems, fewer children expelled, improved social skills, better learning environment for all children in the class) and early childhood education staff (e.g., reduced stress, enhanced teaching skills, increased involvement with parents). For example, a rigorous study of the Early Childhood Consultation Partnership (ECCP) in Connecticut found that, compared to teachers who did not participate, teachers who received ECCP services for three months reported a significant decrease in children's acting-out behavior in class.[17] ECCP is also cost-effective, costing approximately $2,000 per child, compared to $12,000 per child for placement in a special education class.

It is also critical that young children and their parents can access mental health services, either through ECE programs or elsewhere. These services can improve mental health and provide early identification and treatment for kids struggling with trauma or challenges in early development. Services must be covered by public and private insurance, to ensure that cost is not a barrier to access. Further, to meet the demand for ECMH services, states must invest in developing an ECMH workforce. Georgia is making progress, with our DECAL, Department of Public Health, Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, and Division of Family & Children's Services all investing in training for mental health clinicians to better serve young children and their families. DECAL's pilot programs for early childhood mental healthcare are also a great start.

Conclusion

By preventing, identifying, and treating ECMH challenges, we can prevent the negative short- and long-term outcomes associated with these challenges, as well as enhance community safety and bolster national security in the long run.

Endnotes

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