

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Guide for Professionals: Attachment

Here's what we know about attachment:

- Infants are hardwired to develop strong emotional connections or attachments to primary caregivers through face-to-face interactions and eye contact.
- Babies need to feel safe, cared for, and protected. When a parent or caregiver responds consistently in a manner that is warm and sensitive, a secure attachment develops.
- The parent or caregiver are the anchor from which young children can safely explore their world and develop to their full potential.
- When secure attachment needs are met, children develop trust and gain the knowledge that they are loveable and important.
- Children require a nurturing parent or caregiver to protect them from harm and the effects of toxic stress.
- A secure attachment is foundational to positive developmental outcomes and future relationships with peers and partners.

Within your professional role and considering the social determinants of health, how do you:

- Support the parent or caregiver to respond promptly and sensitively to their child's feelings and needs.
- Explore the importance of healthy predictable routines for feeding, sleeping, connecting time, play time and outdoor time with a caring parent or caregiver.
- Share with the parent or caregiver, screen time guidelines and the impact screen time may have on brain development and the formation of secure attachments. The Canadian Pediatric Society's Screen time and young children guidelines (June 2017) are:
 - For children under 2 years old, screen time is not recommended.
 - For children 2 to 5 years old, limit routine or regular screen time to less than 1 hour per day. It is important to note that studies show that the less time is better. There is no evidence that shows recreational screen time improves early child development.
- Explore with the parent or caregiver opportunities for the child to safely experience and explore their world (including the outdoor world) with attentive supervision.
- Explore attachment based workshops or services that promote healthy parent child relationships.
- Discuss how the parent or caregiver is coping and their support system.
- Explore opportunities for connecting to informal and formal supports (community, neighbourhood, resources, groups).
- Support the parent or caregiver to have realistic, age appropriate expectations for their child.
- Screen and refer for postpartum mood disorders and other risk factors that may impact attachment.

Where can you find more information:

- Parenting in Ottawa
- Caring for Kids: Screen Time and Young Children
- Caring for Kids: Tips for Limiting Screen Time at Home
- Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development: Attachment
- Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child: Key Concepts, Brain Architecture, Serve and Return, Toxic Stress
- Zero to three: Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health
- Best Start, Healthy Baby Healthy Brain
- Infant Mental Health Promotion, Comfort Play and Teach
- Psychology Foundation of Canada
- Best Start, Life with a New Baby
- Public Health Agency of Canada: Social Determinants of Health
- Parent Resource Centre
- 211 Ontario

References

- Best Start, Healthy Brains Video: Love Builds Brains
- National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004). Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships: Working Paper No. 1.
- Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development: Attachment
- Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child: Key Concepts, Brain Architecture
- Caring for Kids: Screen Time and Young Children
- Caring for Kids: Tips for Limiting Screen Time at Home