



Healthy



Minds

by Dr. Dina Lieser

Helping kids through mental challenges.

Young children, from infancy on, are learning and absorbing at every moment. Most brain development occurs in infancy and early childhood, and 85 percent of a person's intellect, personality and social skills are developed by the age of 5. Yet, as a parent, you are your child's first teacher. You can have a huge influence on your child's life by encouraging early learning and establishing a close, nurturing relationship with your child, thereby supporting his or her social and emotional development.

Positive early relationships and attachments are critical to the social and emotional development of young children. Infant mental health, synonymous with social and emotional development, refers to a child's increasing ability to experience and regulate emotions, form close and secure relationships, explore the environment and learn. Healthy social and emotional development forms the foundation for understanding oneself as well as others.

Infants depend on the adults in their lives to meet both their physical and emotional needs. They learn to trust that caring adults will provide what they need. Routines, such as meals, naps and predictable transitions, provide comfort and a sense of security for children. As children grow and learn, they become more self-sufficient. They are able to communicate and understand language, and actively explore their environment. These explorations also present the child with challenges, such as sharing toys and being told "no" or "wait."

These conflict situations test a child's ability to control emotions and impulses. Problems in social-emotional development often manifest themselves as challenging behaviors. Children may test the rules, refuse to cooperate with family routines or become aggressive.

Such behaviors may confuse, frustrate or even frighten you. However, it is estimated that 20 percent of young children experience significant psychosocial or mental health problems. Unfortunately, only one-third of these children ever receive treatment. Estimates of national prevalence rates of young children with psychosocial problems are between 10 and 21 percent. Rates of young children who outwardly display aggression, delinquency or hyperactivity can be as high as 25 percent. Studies show that there are multiple risk factors for behavior and social-emotional problems, including poverty, prenatal exposure to tobacco and drugs, exposure to violence or other trauma, low birth weight and familial mental health disorders.

When untreated, mental health disorders can lead to school failure, family conflicts, drug abuse, violence and even suicide. Untreated mental health disorders can be very costly to families, communities and the health care system.

Docs For Tots (DFT), a national child advocacy organization made up of doctors advocating for young children, is currently working to educate children's doctors, parents, early childhood education and care providers, and the general public as to the scope of problems related to maternal depression and childhood mental health issues. Many of DFT's New York doctors are sharing information about infant and toddler mental health as it relates to early learning, development and school readiness, offering information on prevention, screening and referrals, and strongly advocating for the expansion of mental health outreach activities and services. By working with other local advocacy organizations in New York, doctors hope to increase awareness and build stronger social policies to help children in need of mental health services. Docs for Tots encourages you to visit its Web site at www.docsfortots.org.

According to Docs For Tots, parents can do a lot to support healthy social and emotional growth:

1. Spend time with your child. Time is more precious than any material gift you can give a child.
2. Nurture your own mental health and well-being by ensuring time for yourself and recognizing when you personally need help.
3. Help to teach social skills. Be a role model and verbalize respect and good manners to the children and adults in your life. Children see and hear what goes on around them, even if it isn't directed toward them.
4. Praise your child for good behavior. Be specific about observed behaviors.
5. Set limits and be consistent. It is important for children to learn how to regulate their behavior and to understand your expectations.
6. Give your child unconditional love.
7. Know that healthy children learn, so ensure that your child's physical and emotional health are being cared for on a routine basis and that you know where to seek help.
8. Communicate with your child's teacher, pediatrician and caregivers. Work as a team and support each other.
9. Remember that the way you are feeling has a tremendous influence on your child's well-being and early learning. Recognize when you need help. Parenting is rewarding, but it's also hard work.
10. Ask about community resources, including high quality early care and education, parenting groups and activities, and mental health support.

Although each child is unique, all children face social and emotional challenges in early childhood. It's an essential part of learning and growing. If you are concerned about your child's behaviors or his social-emotional health, seek professional help.

Talk to your child's pediatrician about your child's social and emotional health. As a pediatrician, your child's doctor is a skilled facilitator of mental health services and may be able to make a referral on your behalf.

Use these resources for more information:

- NYU Child Study Center, www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/child/childhealth.asp
- Mental Health America, www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/children
- (800)273-TALK

If you are interested in participating in advocacy about early learning and education, sign onto www.winningbeginningny.org and become a parent advocate.

A graduate of the NYU School of Medicine and the New York Presbyterian Hospital Residency Program, Dr. Dina Lieser is the interim executive director of Docs For Tots national organization and the director of Docs For Tots New York (DFT NY). She continues to practice pediatrics. Dr. Lieser has a commitment to child advocacy and a great passion for ensuring that the mission of Docs For Tots is realized and the organization continues to make great strides for our youngest children.