

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT of CHILDREN

Research has demonstrated that a young child's ability to learn is grounded in a sense of security and stable, continuous relationships with adults, including their families and communities. According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, "Early experiences determine whether a child's developing brain architecture provides a strong or weak foundation for all future learning, behavior or health." Policies must promote strong, healthy social-emotional development throughout a child's life in order to impact positive school achievement, economic stability and responsible citizenship.

The impact of early childhood social-emotional problems may be reflected in child distress and suffering, interference with learning, trouble with play, poor peer interactions and sibling relationships, and future mental health problems. Nationally, fewer than 25% of children with clinical mental health problems receive treatment. Historically, due to a lack of available resources and capacity, public mental health services in Louisiana have been provided only to citizens who are homicidal or suicidal. As investments in early childhood efforts progress, and in light of the trauma many children and families experienced in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the need for focused attention on the emotional well-being of our young children has become more evident and critical.



Research shows that **16-21%** of preschoolers meet criteria for psychiatric disorders

According to a recent study, **39%** of preschool teachers had expelled at least one child for behavioral problems

Louisiana must also address the chronic shortage of child mental health professionals in our state. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Greater New Orleans area experienced a substantial loss of child and adolescent psychiatrists and psychologists, while at the same time experiencing unprecedented levels of depression, anxiety and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It has been estimated that over 260,000 Louisiana citizens, one fourth of them children and adolescents, will develop PTSD following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita based on research from other disasters. Without a stable and consistent workforce of mental health professionals, these problems will continue to escalate and be evidenced through increased school disruptions, substance abuse, and juvenile delinquency.

Public policy to ensure our state has the capacity to address the emerging needs for the social-emotional development of Louisiana's children should include the following:

- expand early childhood mental health interventions/programs that are based on best practices, such as the Louisiana Office of Mental

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Health's Early Childhood Supports and Services program (which provides a coordinated system of screening, evaluation and referral services and treatment), the mental health component of the Nurse Family Partnership program, and specialized infant mental health programs for children in foster care

- expand the number of mental health clinicians trained to address early childhood mental health issues
- provide mental health consultation to early childhood programs to address challenging behaviors
- embed training on emotional, behavioral and social development of children and relationship-based practices into all programs serving children birth through age 5 with special emphasis on the birth to age 3 population
- ensure that foster and adoptive parents have training on emotional, behavioral, and social development for children
- expand reimbursable Medicaid services to include relationship-based mental health treatment and services including psychotherapy to address the infant-parent relationship and attachment; individual and/or group therapy for caregivers/children; in-home treatment intervention and treatment for children who have been abused/neglected or have witnessed violence
- include pregnant and post-partum women in the target populations for the Louisiana Office of Mental Health's Early Childhood Supports and Services program
- develop and provide training for Part C-Early Steps' (Louisiana's Early Intervention System under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act for children from birth to 3-years-old who have developmental delays) to ensure appropriate screening for social-emotional impairment, delays and challenging behaviors and how to make referrals for appropriate services
- provide infant mental health services in Part C-Early Steps
- encourage programs, professionals, and agencies who diagnose mental health conditions to adopt the Research Diagnostic Criteria – Preschool Age (RDC-PA) for defining the need for mental health services for children under age 5
- increase specialized interventions to address the potential negative impact on social-emotional development resulting from child abuse or neglect, severe maternal depression, parental substance abuse or domestic violence

**According to
the 2007
Louisiana Task
Force on Foster
Care, only
7-14% of
children with
mental health
disorders in
Louisiana are
receiving
needed
services**

For additional information please go to www.lapartnership.org.