

# Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Professional Endorsement in Colorado

## An Information Brief

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The Colorado Association for Infant Mental Health (CoAIMH) and JFK Partners, in partnership with other involved stakeholders are actively exploring the adoption of the MI-AIMH Competency Guidelines and Endorsement. We are laying the foundation to determine the need and potential benefit to Colorado. This partnership expects to provide recommendations for leadership, guidance, and trainings to meet the requirements of the Endorsement process, including guidance regarding the skill and knowledge areas of the competency guidelines.

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## The importance of consistent professional development expectations in infant and early childhood mental health

Ongoing training in multiple disciplines that work with infants and young children and their families is essential to ensure that professionals understand infant and early childhood mental health (I/ECMH) in order to promote positive practices to support these children, prevent problems when risk is identified, and intervene when necessary. In Colorado, there has not been a set of I/ECMH standards for those who offer services at multiple levels across many systems to infants and young children. Training guidelines help in providing information about the skills and knowledge that a person incorporates into their profession, and provide a framework for what good practices in working with infants, young children, and their families looks like.

As we develop a consistent set of training and professional development standards for the workforce, the competencies that are expected will be aligned no matter where the professional works in our state, and in other states using corresponding competency guidelines. When core competencies that are expected related to I/ECMH vary across disciplines and at varying levels of practice, it makes it more difficult for families, employers and referral sources to know how the people working with children in their care have been trained. Consistent professional standards in the field are more likely to produce a workforce that is prepared and consistent in their practice.

## What is infant and early childhood mental health?

In recent years, research on young children's early brain development has underscored its importance for later development. Identification of, and an effective response to, the first signs of social/emotional difficulties and symptoms of serious emotional or behavioral difficulties are essential to enable early intervention.

The concept of infant and early childhood mental health is based on the understanding that infants and very young children do not exist in isolation, but rather in the context of relationships and environments. I/ECMH has been defined as the developing capacity of very young  
*(continued)*



## What is infant and early childhood mental health? (continued)

children to experience, regulate and express emotions; form close and secure relationships; and explore the environment and learn in the culture and context of their family and other caregivers (adapted from ZERO TO THREE Infant Mental Health Task Force, 2002).



### The landscape

Some children experience mental health problems even at a young age. We know that infants can experience depression at four months of age and that maternal depression, anxiety disorders, and other forms of chronic depression affect approximately 10% of mothers with young children<sup>1</sup>.

Project BLOOM data show that of the children eligible for BLOOM who presented with significant emotional difficulties, 81% of their caregivers reported a family history of depression, 66% reported a family history of mental illness and 65% reported a family history of substance abuse<sup>2</sup>.

Of Colorado's 350,000 children under the age of 6, approximately 31,500 are

estimated to have serious emotional difficulties<sup>3</sup>. Approximately 4,000 of these children receive services through Colorado's public mental health system. Many other children may have difficulties in the social and emotional realm that do not reach the level of "serious" but interfere with the child's ability to grow and develop, ultimately affecting the child's ability to be ready for school and life.

There are a variety of environments in which caregivers have opportunities to support the prevention and early identification of social and emotional difficulties. Many children spend time in child care settings, yet in Colorado, 11% of

children have been identified as having "challenging behavior," and 10 out of every 1000 children are being removed from child care because of behavioral challenges – a rate that is three times higher than in the K-12 public school system<sup>4</sup>.



## What is an Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Endorsement process?

An endorsement in I/ECMH is a verifiable process that supports the development and acknowledgement of infant and early childhood professionals, within a framework that recognizes knowledge, training and criteria for best practice standards. The Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health (MI-AIMH) completed a professional endorsement system in 2002 based on the MI-AIMH Competency Guidelines developed in 1997. By 2008, six states' infant mental health affiliates purchased a license to

use the MI-AIMH Competency Guidelines to develop an endorsement process.

This Endorsement is not a license or certification, but instead is an overlay onto a person's professional credentials that recognizes achievement of knowledge and training in the area of infant and early childhood mental health.

### Why use this endorsement process?

The MI-AIMH Endorsement for Culturally Sensitive, Relationship-Based Practice Promoting Infant Mental Health has received a national award for innovative educational practice in improving workforce development. The foundations of this work have been nationally recognized for over 20 years. The MI-AIMH (continued)

<sup>1</sup>Zero to Three. Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health: Promoting Healthy Social and Emotional Development. Zero to Three Policy Center, 2004

<sup>2</sup>Colorado Department of Human Services. Evaluation of Project BLOOM. Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center For Mental Health Services. Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services Programs for Children and Families, 2008

<sup>3</sup>Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. 2006 Behavioral Health Prevalence Estimates for Colorado. Colorado Department of Human services, January 2008

<sup>4</sup>Hoover SD. Children with Social, Emotional and Behavioral Concerns and the Providers who Support Them: A survey of licensed early care and education settings in Colorado. Report presented to: the Colorado Department of Human Services, Division of Child Care, July 2006.

## What is an Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Endorsement process? (continued)

Endorsement is one of the first and most comprehensive efforts to identify best practice competencies at multiple levels and across disciplines and to offer a pathway for professional development in the infant, early childhood and family field. It is a process that is not exclusive to any one discipline, making it relevant for policymakers, home visitors, teachers, para-professionals, social workers, pediatricians, psychologists and child care professionals among others. It

provides an endorsement within a framework of promotion of practices that support all children and families, prevention when there are risk factors, and intervention when treatment is indicated.



*"Every child begins the world again."  
Henry David Thoreau*

## How have other states used this process?

As of 2008, seven Infant Mental Health affiliates of the World Association of Infant Mental Health use this Endorsement in their state, including Arizona, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas.

### What policies have other states put in place to encourage infant, early childhood, and family professionals to earn the Endorsement?

- Arizona's First Things First, the new state agency tasked with creating a statewide system for early childhood, is including the Endorsement in its planning for professional development and as a factor in the quality rating system for child care providers; new RFP's for Healthy

Families contracts strongly encourage contractors to help home visitors and supervisors earn the Endorsement.

- Michigan's Department of Community Health, Division of Children's Services, requires staff in all Medicaid funded, 0 to 3 home-based services, to meet Endorsement requirements; their Department of Community Health, Child Care Expulsion Prevention Program, requires all consultants in programs receiving state funds to earn Endorsement.
- New Mexico's Children, Youth and Families Department is referencing the competencies as the framework for training home visitors to first time parents and requiring that they receive reflective supervision.

- Oklahoma included the Endorsement as a requirement for the new position of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Coordinator for the Oklahoma Department of Health.
- Minnesota is promoting the Endorsement within Head Start and Public Health.
- Texas will include a provision in "Raising Texas" initiatives that professionals seek the Endorsement.



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