



## Technical Assistance Series: Supporting Early Childhood Mental Health

### Brief 1: Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation



Through its Project LAUNCH grant program, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) supports selected states, tribes, and local communities in promoting behavioral health in young children (ages 0-8) and families, by implementing a series of evidence-based strategies. This brief provides information on one of those strategies: Early childhood mental health consultation.

Approximately 9 to 14 percent of all young children, from birth to age five, experience social and emotional problems that negatively affect their functioning and development.<sup>1</sup> These early problems are related to a variety of health and behavior problems in adolescence, including juvenile delinquency and dropping out of school.

Early childhood mental health consultation (ECMHC) is an approach that can offset these challenges by promoting infants, young children's and families social, emotional and behavioral health and intervening early to prevent longer term risk.

Research studies show positive outcomes related to ECMHC services, including a decrease in parental and teacher stress and an increase in the competence among childcare and preschool staff to recognize and address challenging behavior, reduce young children's expulsions and reduce children's externalizing behaviors such as aggression.<sup>2</sup>

### What Is Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (ECMHC)?

Early childhood mental health consultation involves a professional consultant with mental health expertise working in partnership with early childhood programs, staff and families to (1) enhance the mental health climate of the environments where children learn and grow and (2) build adults capacity to support the individual mental health needs of children in their care. Consultant activities can include:

- Observing *individual* children in their homes or early care and education settings (e.g., preschool, child care, public school) to assess and interpret their social-emotional strengths and needs
- Helping parents and/or early childhood providers to identify and use strategies that promote *individual* children's social and emotional development and health
- Observing *teaching/caregiving* practices to assess their impact on the social and emotional health of all children in the classroom and/or the home
- Ongoing consultation to families and early childhood providers on social and emotional topics and strategies
- Linking families to additional community resources and services that will benefit them and their children
- Modeling practices to strengthen all relationships in children's lives: adult-adult, adult-child, and child-child

### Lessons Learned: ECMHC in Project LAUNCH

The examples below illustrate how Project LAUNCH grantees integrate ECHMC across a variety of early childhood settings. These efforts can provide guidance for others interested in supporting the unmet mental health needs of children and families across child-serving systems.

### ECMHC Resources

- » [Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation](#)
- » [Creating Practice-Based Principles for Effective Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation](#)
- » [Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation: An Evaluation Toolkit](#)
- » [Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation: Promotion of Mental Health and Prevention of Mental and Behavioral Disorders](#)
- » [Georgetown University ECMHC Webinar Series](#)
- » [Special Issue: Infant Mental Health Journal, Current Issues & Practices in Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation](#)
- » [What Works? A Study of Effective Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Programs](#)

## Strategy 1: Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation within Home Visiting

*Wisconsin Project LAUNCH, City of Milwaukee.* Home visiting is shown to be an effective service delivery model for at-risk children and their families. However, home visitors are often unequipped to meet the complex needs of families with such risk factors as substance use, mental illness, and domestic violence. These risks can impact families' ability to support children's development, and they may contribute to behavioral problems in children as young as age three.<sup>4</sup> Wisconsin's Project LAUNCH program is addressing this concern by providing ECMHC support to home visitors. In this use of the approach, a masters prepared mental health consultant provides ongoing reflective and clinical supervision to home visitors to increase their capacity to recognize and support the mental health needs of families. This approach also minimizes the effects of any secondary traumatic stress on home visitors that result from their efforts to support others through ongoing crises. As one home visitor reported, *"The support of the mental health consultant has empowered me to put control into an out-of-control situation, and I now know how to incorporate social-emotional strategies to help my families, where before I was hitting a wall."*

## Strategy 2: Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation within Early Care and Education

*District of Columbia Project LAUNCH.* Studies show that childcare providers are struggling with managing young children's challenging behavior. Preschoolers are expelled at a rate three times that of school-age children.<sup>5</sup> Frequently there is no place for childcare providers to refer children who do not meet mental health diagnostic criteria. Project LAUNCH in the District of Columbia is meeting this need for mental health prevention services by providing weekly ECMHC consultation to assigned childcare sites. Licensed consultants with a master's degree or higher work to increase the capacity of childcare staff to recognize and support young children's mental health. Consultants provide workforce development (e.g., specific information on temperament, attachment, biting) and onsite consultation, for example modeling strategies for supporting social and emotional health and for integrating child screening tools, such as the Ages and Stages Questionnaire for Social Emotional Health.

## Strategy 3: Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation within Child Welfare

*Michigan Project LAUNCH, Saginaw County.* More than half of all child abuse and neglect victims are under age 8.<sup>6</sup> Many of these victims end up in foster care where, because they are so young, they often spend long periods of time and have frequent placement changes. To decrease these placement disruptions and to increase the quality of care, Michigan's Project LAUNCH program has integrated a mental health consultant into the child welfare system. The consultant works directly with foster care families in the home setting to help them use and complete tools that screen for the needs of the child as well as the family and for safe environments. The consultant then works collaboratively with the foster care family to develop strategies to enhance the caregiving experience for both the child and the family.

## Endnotes

1. Brauner, C. B., & Stephens, B. C. (2006). Estimating the prevalence of early childhood serious emotional/behavioral disorder: Challenges and recommendations. *Public Health Reports* 121, 303–310.
2. Perry, D. F., & Linas, K. (2012). Building the evidence base for early childhood mental health consultation: Where we've been, where we are, and where we are going. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 3(4).
3. Cohen, E., & Kaufmann, R. (2005). *Early childhood mental health consultation: Promotion of mental health and prevention of mental and behavioral health disorders*. U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services.
4. Whitaker, R. C., Orzol, S. M., & Kahn, R. S. (2006). Maternal mental health, substance use and domestic violence in the year after delivery and subsequent behavior problems in children at age 3 years. *Archives of General Psychiatry* 63. 551–560.
5. Gilliam, W. (2005). *Prekindergarteners Left Behind: Expulsion Rates in State Prekindergarten Programs*. (Policy Brief No. 3.) Foundation for Child Development.
6. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. (2012, August). Washington, D.C. Retrieved from [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm08/figure3\\_3.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm08/figure3_3.htm).

*"We have home visitors working with really complicated and significant mental health situations with no formal training, and they lose the energy to keep going."*

—Project LAUNCH State Wellness Coordinator, WI.

## Recommendations for Quality ECMHC Programs Include:

- » Working to develop a strong ECMHC infrastructure, including a multidisciplinary leadership team and a clear model design
- » Hiring, training, and supporting high-quality consultants
- » Recruiting consultants from underrepresented groups to serve families more effectively
- » Developing a strong evaluation component and using its results to enhance quality of services
- » Integrating ECMHC services across child-serving systems
- » Maximizing all sources of funding including private, federal, and state

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