

Advocating for a national policy on infant and early childhood mental health within the Irish Health Services

Affiliates Corner

By Catherine Maguire

The early years provide a unique opportunity to intervene. Investment in infant and toddler social and emotional health not only benefits the physical and psychological health of our young but also has long lasting benefits for the future of society and the economy (Dube, Feletti, Dong, Giles, & Anda, 2003). Extensive evidence based research, especially neuro-scientific studies stress the critical importance of this developmental period, however its integration into clinical practice within the Irish Health Services has to date, been a slow and difficult process (Centre for Effective Services Report, 2010).

Current legislation and strategy documents (Vision for Change, 2006; The Agenda for Children's Services, 2007) underpinning service delivery, all advocate an early intervention and prevention approach for the promotion of childhood mental health. However, policy documents lack the necessary specificity regarding what precisely this early intervention prevention approach should constitute of, or the model of service delivery to achieve this objective. Furthermore, policies directing clinical practice tend to have a reactive focus following prevalence of pathology or crisis and targeted preventions for infants and toddler mental health have become less visible in service delivery or in budget allocations.

Policies too, struggle to incorporate research and neuro-scientific studies into practical strategies, often policy makers may not having the appropriate clinical backgrounds to succinctly interpret how research translates into practical applications (Nelson & Mann, 2011) at primary secondary and tertiary levels of service provisions.

Similarly, indicators of infant and toddler risk and problem presentations are often not recognised, raising questions regarding training and workforce capacity for all disciplines in frontline clinical service.

It is from this context and the absence of early childhood mental health policies globally (WHO 2005; Shatkin & Belfer, 2004) that a Working Group comprising

of Statutory, Voluntary and the Irish Association of Infant Mental Health have now joined together to advance a policy for infant and toddler mental health. It is a first step towards a collaborative working relationship with Government Ministers responsible for the national policies and strategies which underpin health, mental health and children services.

The work of this Group will support legislators and policymakers to translate scientific research knowledge into a strategic policy on early childhood mental health. It is anticipated this document will clearly define and specify the range of services and workforce capacity required to enhance mental health and wellbeing in early childhood.

This work will also be supported at local level by the Irish affiliate presidency, which has commenced a consultation process with fellow affiliate presidents of WAIMH to seek their ideas and experiences to date in developing infant and early childhood policy.

It is anticipated that this process will not only nurture and support early childhood policy initiatives in Ireland, but also stimulate other affiliates to also expand their range of activities towards advocacy.

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