

Washington Association for Infant Mental Health

By Nina Auerbach, Executive Director
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The Washington Association for Infant Mental Health (WA-AIMH) was founded in 2001 by a group of infant mental health practitioners and parents who experienced first hand the positive impact of infant mental health services for children and families and wanted to strengthen their skills as a community of experts. This group of professionals became a WA-IMH affiliate at this time and received their non-profit status from the IRS. The first Board president was Colleen Huebner, PhD. a professor in the University of Washington's Department of Health Services.

For the first 11 years of operation, the organization functioned primarily as a learning community. It provided networking, educational meetings, and an annual conference with local and national speakers to a diverse group of professionals, primarily in the Puget Sound region of Washington state. In 2011, the Board embarked on an extensive planning process with its membership. As a result, the Board made two critical decisions to grow the role and impact of WA-AIMH:

1. Hire an Executive Director to lead statewide expansion efforts. This person would help the organization expand its scope to be statewide and to be increasingly interdisciplinary in keeping with the development of the field.
2. Bring Infant Mental Health endorsement to Washington. Endorsement is a way for professionals to validate their education and experience related to a set of competencies addressing dyadic work with very young children and families.

To advance these goals, a dedicated member of the Board stepped forward and provided a substantial five year declining grant that enabled the organization to hire its first Executive Director, Nina Auerbach, MSW, MBA. Ms. Auerbach came to the organization with over 30 years of administrative experience and solid expertise in early child development and

learning.

When the Executive Director was first hired, the organization was operating very much as a start-up. In a short time, the new Executive Director implemented a number of critical changes to formalize and build WA-AIMH including:

- Traveling throughout the state to engage people from many different disciplines who were working with young children and their families, including professionals from child care, public health, home visiting, early intervention, mental health, physical and occupational therapy, and caseworkers;
- Working with the Board to develop the organization's first Strategic Plan;
- Creating a work group from the Board and community that researched endorsement systems throughout the nation and ultimately recommended purchasing the Michigan Endorsement of Culturally Sensitive, Relationship-Focused Practice Promoting Infant Mental Health®;
- Creating agency infrastructure so that the organization could better function as a viable non-profit;
- Raising significant funds in order to raise awareness about infant mental health, bring endorsement to Washington, and tackle policy issues in the field.

Members of the Board and other community colleagues were extremely supportive to the organization as it underwent this expansion. Dr. Lisa Menett, the Director of Cooper House, a collective of therapists working in the IMH field, donated space so that the Executive Director could have an office. Dr. Susan Spieker, Chair of the Board, and Director of the Barnard Center for Infant Mental Health and Development, provided excellent oversight of the Board and support to the Executive Director as she developed relationships in the community. Other Board members helped to make connections with important colleagues in the field. They tackled complex issues regarding endorsement and policy. In addition, state leaders from the Department of Early Learning, Department of Health and Department of Social and Health Services all engaged in collaborative discussions about integrating infant mental health into Washington's evolving early learning system.

A bright light in Washington has been the

presence of the Barnard Center for Infant Mental Health and Development that offers an on-line four-quarter graduate level certificate in Infant Mental Health. The Barnard Center was founded by Dr. Kathryn Barnard, a pioneer and leader in the field of infant mental health. Over the years, since its inception, the Barnard Center has graduated many well-trained practitioners in the field, helping to grow awareness of infant mental health and preparing the State for endorsement. The curriculum of this program was developed with endorsement in mind – the course work closely mirrors the competencies needed for someone to become endorsed. The Barnard Center continues to be an important resource in our State.

WA-AIMH launched its endorsement system in May, 2015, and in just the first few months had over 40 people register for WA-AIMH Endorsement®. In order to help candidates for endorsement receive the training that they need, the organization has begun to sponsor targeted trainings that map to the competencies that are foundational to this process. WA-AIMH has been focusing on bringing training that will help professionals develop their skills as reflective supervisors, learn the basics of infant mental health, and participate in training on working cross culturally with families there are adult mental health issues.

Although visibility of infant mental health and endorsement has increased substantially due to the efforts of WA-AIMH, there are still significant issues that



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need to be resolved so that the state's youngest and most vulnerable children and families get the support they need and deserve:

The state's mental health system is not solid in its recognition that very young children can have mental health issues that need intensive mental health treatment. Some of the state's Regional Service Networks (RSN's) do not accept Medicaid billings for very young children. The DC-03R crosswalk with the DSM has not been recognized throughout the state, and as a result, many young children are not meeting the state's Access to Care Standards. There is a working group of state and local leaders that are working on this issue, and WA-AIMH is involved in advocating for change.

There are pockets of the State, notably east of the Cascade Mountains and in rural areas, where there is a shortage of professionals with specific training and experience in infant mental health. Professional development opportunities need to be expanded so that they are readily available throughout the State.

In addition to training, there is a need to develop more professionals who can provide Reflective Supervision that meets the standards of WA-AIMH Endorsement®. WA-AIMH has been "vetting" supervisors and will make the list available on their website, but there is a need to train and support more supervisors. In addition, the cost of reflective supervision can be prohibitive for some.

In spite of these issues, there is great interest at the state and local levels in infant mental health and in endorsement, and WA-AIMH is playing a leadership role in supporting the emerging work force in infant mental health in Washington.

Bob Emde as a Plenary Speaker at 15th World Congress of WAIMH

Robert N. Emde, is Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Colorado, School of Medicine, in the US, and currently serves on the faculty at the Centers for American Indian and Alaska Native Health in the Colorado School of Public Health.

His CV lists over 300 publications in the fields of early socio-emotional development, sleep research, infant mental health, diagnostic classification, early moral development, evaluation of early childhood intervention, psychoanalysis, behavioral genetics, and research education.

He served as President of the World Association of Infant Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines from 1986-1989 and currently serves as Honorary President of WAIMH. He has also served as President of the Society for Research in Child Development and on the boards of many organizations that deal with infant development, mental health and research training.

Bob Emde's Plenary is titled "Infant Psychiatry and the Origins of WAIMH; Remarkable early contributions that energized our field"



Bob Emde will be a Plenary Speaker in the WAIMH World Congress in Prague. Photo with courtesy of Bob Emde..

The presentation will address the following questions. Why did Infant Psychiatry, for many a worrisome designation, become a rallying point for our field? Why were psychoanalysts early leaders? Why were our congresses from the start international, being centered in Europe? The presentation will examine historical trends leading up to the first World Congresses of our organization and its two influential volumes "The Frontiers of Infant Psychiatry". It will also remind us of vital contributions given then of some pioneers who are no longer with us now, but continue to inspire and lead us with questions.



Rene Spitz 1970 with young Infant Mental Health investigator Robert Emde. Photo with courtesy of Bob Emde.