



PARENT-INFANT MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK CYMRU

Key Priorities for Supporting Infant Mental Health in Wales

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Background

What is infant mental health?

- Infant mental health is the term used to describe the social and emotional wellbeing and development of children in the earliest years of life.
- During the first 1000 days of life, sensitive, nurturing relationships, between parents / primary caregivers and their babies are fundamental to good infant mental health. This is often described as the parent-infant relationship.
- Supporting early parent-infant relationships can have a positive impact on children's lifelong development, wellbeing, mental and physical health.

The importance of parent-infant relationships

The first 1000 days (conception – 2 years old) is a period of rapid human development, which lays the foundation for children's social, emotional, behavioural, cognitive, and physical development and for lifelong mental health. Good infant mental health starts in pregnancy and is nurtured when babies experience sensitive, safe, and attuned relationships with their primary caregivers. Conversely, where these relationships are absent, abusive, or regularly mis-attuned, then babies can be vulnerable to experiencing adversity, the negative impact of which can be significant. Exposure to early adversity can have long-lasting effects across the lifespan, including an impact on school attainment, future careers, and physical and mental health. Research indicates that experiencing adversity in the earliest months and years of life has the most detrimental impact.

Existing policy framework in Wales linked to infant mental health

Parent-infant relationship work that promotes good infant mental health connects to, and is supported by, a wide range of cross cutting national strategies and pieces of legislation, including:

- Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 – in 2011, Wales became the first country in the UK to incorporate children's rights into domestic law. The Measure places a duty upon the Welsh Ministers to have due regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child when exercising their functions. This reflects Welsh Governments on-going commitment to children's rights.
- The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (2015) – includes a legal obligation for public bodies to work together towards seven well-being goals, including creating a healthier Wales and a more equal Wales.
- Programme for Government – a commitment to prioritise investment in mental health and prioritise service redesign to improve prevention, tackle stigma and promote a no wrong door approach to mental health support
- Children and Young People Plan – includes an explicit commitment to giving children and young people the 'best start in life.'
- Healthy Child Wales Programme (2016) – includes a core aim to 'promote bonding and attachment to support positive parent-child relationships resulting in secure emotional attachment' (p. 5).
- Together for Mental Health (2012) – Welsh Government's current 10-year cross governmental strategy to improve mental health and wellbeing, aims to improve access to support for the emotional and mental health wellbeing of babies, children, and young people, and prevent poor mental health.
- A Healthier Wales: our plan for Health and Social Care (2019) – Plan which sets out a vision of a 'whole system approach to health and social care', which is focused on health and wellbeing, and on preventing illness.

The 'Baby Blind Spot' in mental health services in Wales

Whilst there is a wide range of universal and targeted parenting support available for families across the whole of Wales (e.g., Flying Start, Families First, Parenting Give it Time, additional third sector support, etc.), babies have extremely limited access to mental health services. There are currently only two specialised parent-infant relationship teams in Wales: one in Cardiff (Cardiff Parents Plus) and one in Gwent (Gwent-Parent Infant Mental Health Service). These teams provide specialist therapeutic parent-infant relationship support, where babies' and infants' development and mental health is most at risk due to severe, complex and/or enduring difficulties in the parent-infant relationship. These services work to strengthen and repair these early relationships.

Key Priorities

Welsh policy and legislation recognises the importance of giving every child the best start in life, however, currently infant mental health is often framed solely as being about supporting mothers' mental health needs, to help encourage good bonding and attachment. As such, babies and infants are overlooked in mental health policy. Current policies fail to recognise the wider factors (e.g., parental ACES and trauma, abuse and neglect, wider environmental stressors, etc.) that can impact on the quality of the parent–infant relationship and healthy child development across the life course. Support for babies who are experiencing distress due to problematic early relationships has been too limited for too long. Now is the opportune time for Welsh Government to implement changes that will have health and wellbeing benefits for children, families, and society as a whole.

Parent–Infant Network Cymru are calling on Welsh Government to better support infant mental health by addressing three key priorities:

1. Explicit recognition and support for parent–infant relationships / infant mental health within the new Welsh Government's Mental Health Strategy

The new Welsh Government Mental Health Strategy, and any associated action plans, must include an explicit commitment to promoting and improving infant mental health and, particularly, to identify and address the needs of the most vulnerable babies and young children in Wales. A named person, to oversee and coordinate all aspects of this strategy, at an all–Wales level, will be essential for this to be successful.

2. Investment in parent–infant relationship/infant mental health support services across Wales:

Ensuring that early parent–infant relationship / infant mental health support is available at the universal, targeted, and specialised level, for all families across Wales. This includes securing investment for a specialist parent–infant relationship service to be established in every area of Wales. Achieving this priority will require a revision of services to appropriately respond to the needs of infants (0–2 yrs), with clearly defined pathways, to ensure a holistic family centred approach to care and to ensure that families receive the right support at the right time.

3. Upskilling the workforce to support parent–infant relationships and infant mental health at every level:

The recently launched Strategic Mental Health Workforce plan for Health and Social Care highlights 'parent–infant' as an urgent workforce development priority. The implementation of Phase 1 of this plan must now set out a clear and detailed road map for securing sufficiently trained practitioners, who have the competence and confidence to support parent–infant relationships, at all levels, across Wales. This should include increasing the infant mental health literacy of practitioners in health, social care, local authority and third sector, in order to better equip them to understand, identify and support parent–infant relationships. This training pathway would run from a foundational to a specialised level, to ensure that there are enough suitably qualified parent–infant mental health practitioners here in Wales to lead specialist parent–infant services. This training pathway should be based on a recognised Infant Mental Health competencies framework. For more information on a proposed training pathway to meet this need see: 'Growing the Health of Lifelong Development: An Infant Mental Health and Early Child Development Training Pathway for Wales' (Canale & Martin, 2022).

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