Early Childhood Social and Emotional Development and Mental Health

What is early childhood social and emotional development and mental health?
Early childhood social and emotional development and mental health refers to the development of social, emotional, and behavioral skills in children birth through early school. These skills include a young child’s ability to develop reciprocal interactions, form secure relationships with adults and peers, express emotions, regulate behavior, accurately comprehend emotional states in others, and develop empathy. Social and emotional skills in developing children impact their ability to explore their environments, learn, and communicate. Particularly in early childhood, it is important to remember the interconnections between the domains of development; there are growing interrelations among brain circuits that support social and emotional development. The personal experiences of a young child in different environmental contexts must be taken into account to understand how social and emotional development is proceeding. For these reasons, the assessment of the social, emotional and behavioral skills in the context of a child’s family, social and cultural environments is an important part of the early intervention and early childhood services.

What types of mental health disorders are seen in early childhood?
The Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health and Developmental Disorders of Infancy and Early Childhood, Revised Edition (DC: 0-3 R) (Zero to Three, 2005) and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition-Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR) (American Psychological Association, 2000) provide classifications of types of mental health disorders that may be seen in early childhood and early school age. Some of the common disorders that require an interdisciplinary team evaluation that include mental health service providers to diagnose are found in the chart below.
Common Classification Categories of Early Childhood and Childhood Mental Health Disorders

http://www.psychiatryonline.com/resourceTOC.aspx?resourceID=1

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<tr>
<th>Early Childhood (DC: 0-3 R)</th>
<th>Early School Age¹ (DSM-IV)</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Developmental Disorders</td>
<td>• Intellectual Disabilities</td>
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<td>• Posttraumatic Stress Disorders</td>
<td>• Learning Disabilities</td>
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<td>• Deprivation/Maltreatment Disorders</td>
<td>• Autism Spectrum Disorders</td>
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<td>• Anxiety Disorders</td>
<td>• Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorders</td>
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<td>• Depression</td>
<td>• Tourette’s Disorder</td>
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<td>• Regulation Disorders of Sensory Processing</td>
<td>• Oppositional Defiant Disorder</td>
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<td>• Sleep Disorders</td>
<td>• Conduct Disorder</td>
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<td>• Feeding Disorders</td>
<td>• Language and Communication Disorders</td>
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<td>• Disorders of Relating and Communicating</td>
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<td>• Behavioral Disorders</td>
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<td>• Relationship Disorders</td>
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<td>o Parent-infant relationship</td>
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Categories
The categories of disorders listed above are characterized by a variety of developmental concerns including social, emotional and/or behavioral concerns. Some, like ADHD are high incidence disorders while others are rarer. Some are easier to identify (intellectual disabilities, language disorders) others (depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder) often go undetected for many years. It is important for service providers to:
• be aware of the warning signs that may indicate a behavioral disorder (http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/CA-0004/default.asp)
• know the developmental milestones indicating the typical progression of social, emotional and behavioral development and provide anticipatory guidance to families by suggesting family oriented activities that promote healthy social and emotional behavior (http://www.brightfutures.org/mentalhealth/index.html) and (http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=key_social)
• assist families in developmentally appropriate parenting skills (http://www.zerotothree.org)
• be familiar with mental health service providers in the community to make appropriate and timely referrals

How many children have mental health disorders?
Although the number of young children with mental health problems under the age of 4 is not well documented, approximately 5% of children aged 4-17 have significant concentration, emotional, behavioral, or social difficulties. It has been suggested that the prevalence of problem behaviors in young children is about 10% and as high as 25% of children who live in poverty (Joseph & Strain, 2003).

¹ It is important to note that while the DSM IV diagnostic criteria for this cluster of conditions specifies that symptoms occur It before age 8, preschool aged children can receive some of these diagnoses.
Tools used to help identify young children with mental health disorders
In addition to the medical, educational, and developmental assessments used to determine overall developmental skill acquisition, there are several screening and assessment tools that have been developed specifically to assess a child’s behavior, attention, and social and emotional development. For a comprehensive list and description of screening and assessment tools, see the National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (NECTAC) at http://www.nectac.org/~pdfs/pubs/screening.pdf or the Compendium of Screening Tools for Early Childhood Social-Emotional Development at http://www.first5caspecialneeds.org/documents/IPFMHI_CompendiumofScreeningTools.pdf. Some of the commonly used screening and assessment tools used in early intervention and with early school aged children include:

**Screening tools**
- Ages and Stages Questionnaires, Social Emotional
- Devereaux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) (infant/ preschool)
- Infant- Toddler Symptom Checklist
- Mental Health Screening Tool (MHST 0-5)
- Brief Infant Toddler Social Emotional Assessment (BITSEA)

**Assessment tools**
- Devereaux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA- C)
- Behavioral Assessment System for Children, Second Edition (BASC II)
- Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment, Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL)
- Disruptive Behavior Diagnostic Observation
- Disturbance of Attachment Interview

**Evidence-Based Practices in Prevention, Promotion, and Intervention**

*What are the services that are available for young children?*
Evidence based practices used to promote healthy social and emotional development, prevent serious behavioral or mental health disorders, and intervene if a child is identified with a specific mental health consideration are:
- Individualized
- Family-centered
- Culturally and linguistically competent
- Generalizable
- Socially accepted
- Relationship based
- Supportive, responsive, sensitive, and nurturing
- Positive
- Build the capacity of families and early care and education providers
- Provided in the natural context
- Coordinated with other supports and services as appropriate
The evidence-based practices promoted by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel) are based on five guiding principles:

- **Individualization**: Based on a child and family’s unique strengths and needs.
- **Intensity**: Services should be designed and delivered at a level that will produce changes.
- **Normalized and Naturalistic**: Strategies should be implemented in naturally occurring activities and routines.
- **Fidelity of Use**: Strategies should produce successful outcomes, when they are used in a systematic way.
- **Cultural and Linguistic Competence**: Strategies should match the child and family’s interests, values, culture, and language.

**The Pyramid Model**

The Pyramid Model, developed at the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning builds upon a public health approach to providing services and supports to young children. It is a widely accepted model of prevention, promotion, and intervention. It is based on a three-tiered approach:

1. **Universal level of prevention**: All young children and their families should receive ongoing support, high quality early education and caregiving, monitoring and screening of development, and anticipatory guidance.
2. **Secondary prevention**: Community programs such as parenting classes, home-visiting for at-risk families, community education and awareness activities, and early intervention resources, services, and supports should be available.
3. **Tertiary prevention**: Focused intervention of evidenced based practices should be available and accessible when a child is identified with delays in social and emotional development or behavioral challenges.

- **Yellow Foundation**: The foundation for all of the practices in the pyramid are the systems and policies necessary to ensure a workforce able to adopt and sustain evidence-based practices.
• Blue Tier: **Universal supports** for all children through nurturing and responsive relationships and high quality environments.
• Green Tier: **Prevention** which represents practices that are targeted social emotional strategies to prevent problems.
• Red Tier: **Intervention** which is comprised of practices related to individualized intensive interventions.

**References**

**Screening and Assessment Tools**

Devereaux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) (infant/ preschool) and the Devereaux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA- C) [http://www.devereux.org/site/PageServer?pagename=deci_index](http://www.devereux.org/site/PageServer?pagename=deci_index)


Mental Health Screening Tool (MHST 0-5) [http://www.cimh.org/downloads/ScreeningTool0-5.pdf](http://www.cimh.org/downloads/ScreeningTool0-5.pdf)


Disruptive Behavior Diagnostic Observation [http://www.psych.uic.edu/DBDOS/research.shtml#dbdos](http://www.psych.uic.edu/DBDOS/research.shtml#dbdos)

Disturbance of Attachment Interview

**Other References**


Resources

American Psychiatric Association
http://www.psych.org/

Bright Futures at Georgetown University
http://www.brightfutures.org/georgetown.html

Brief Infant Social Emotional Assessment Tool

Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Act Early
http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/actearly/default.htm

Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behavior
www.challengingbehavior.org
Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning
http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/

Maternal and Child Health Bureau Bright Futures
http://www.bright futures.org/
http://www.bright futures.org/mentalhealth/

Mental Health Screening Tool

National Child Care and Information Technical Assistance Center
http://nccic.acf.hhs.gov/poptopics/ecmhealth.html

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities
http://www.nichcy.org

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)
http://www.nichd.nih.gov

National Institutes of Mental Health

National Mental Health Information Center
http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/child/childhealth.asp

National Technical Assistance Center for Children’s Mental Health
http://gucchd.georgetown.edu/programs/ta_center/index.html

Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention
http://www.challengingbehavior.org/index.htm

Zero to Three, Early Childhood Mental Health and Social Emotional Development
http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=key_mental
http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=key_social