

Improving mental health starts with early childhood relationships

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The mental and emotional development of children is just as important as early childhood education, according to Iowa State researchers. Credit: Bob Elbert

Making sure children grow up in a safe and stable environment is the goal of Iowa State University researchers working on a statewide evaluation through the Iowa Department of Public Health and the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting programs.

Researchers want to improve effectiveness as well as access for families to prevention and intervention programs.

Kere Hughes-Belding, an associate professor of human development and family studies at Iowa State, says the work is critical to the mental and emotional development of children. It's an aspect that is often overlooked, but is just as important as [early childhood education](#), she said.

"This is such a critical age and period of development in a child's life. There really is no better age to intervene and get the most benefit," Hughes-Belding said. "The more we can do to promote nurturing and caring relationships between parent and child, the better outcomes for the child."

Researchers will start by interviewing families who participate in the Maternal, Infant and [Early Childhood](#) Home Visiting programs. Many of these families are also dealing with complex problems such as poverty, unemployment and [chronic depression](#), as well as substance abuse issues. Hughes-Belding says parents are generally motivated to do what is best for their children, but may lack the skills or ability to improve the situation without outside support.

The research team also plans to work with the home visitors who provide the services and videotape their interactions with families. They want to get a better idea of what works and what doesn't.

"The results from this evaluation project will give us information about the characteristics, training and support needed for effective home visitation with at-risk families of very young children," Hughes-Belding said.

Training for child care providers and educators

Giving parents the tools to be better parents is just one piece of the puzzle. Hughes-Belding says child care providers and early childhood educators need training to know how to intervene when a child shows signs of behavioral or emotional problems. That is why this summer the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Iowa State will offer a new graduate certificate in Infant and Early Childhood [Mental Health](#).

Ross Thompson, a psychology professor at the University of California-Davis, recently visited the ISU campus to consult with Hughes-Belding and others about the program. He also spoke about the growing importance of early childhood mental health. Thompson says the first step is recognizing that childhood is not carefree, and those formative years provide the foundation for life-long emotional development.

"Contrary to what we once believed, young children not only can experience serious emotional disorders, but they can do so at a prevalence rate that is disturbingly comparable to what we see in older children and adults," Thompson said.

Early childhood mental health is different than adult mental health; therefore, the solution to the problem cannot focus solely on the child, Thompson said. Because children are dependent on the support of their family, their problems are generally a reflection of problems in their environment.

"Kids are growing up in families or in neighborhoods where they are subject to all sorts of stresses. The brain becomes altered by chronic exposure to what we call toxic stress," Thompson said. "It's the stress that's chronic and unpredictable and that children experience when there is nobody there to support them. That's what makes it toxic – nobody's got their back."

The hope is that if child care providers or early educators recognize these signs of stress and have the proper training, they will have the confidence to intervene. In addition to training, there must be a social structure of support in place to connect families with the needed resources.

"As a community, the mental health of our youngest children should be a top priority," Hughes-Belding said. "We should do anything we can to break negative interaction cycles in families and early education settings in order to promote resiliency."

The Iowa State research team plans to use the results from their study to help the Iowa Department of Public Health improve effectiveness in home visitation. There are evaluation teams across the country looking at these services as part of the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting programs. Results from all the projects will provide a national view of home visitation and help effectively utilize resources for young [children](#) and their families.

Provided by Iowa State University

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