

Believe in
children



Barnardo's
Northern Ireland

Promoting Good Infant Mental Health

**Supporting Emotional
Wellbeing for 0-3 Year Olds**



INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

Barnardo's NI believes that children and young people should grow up feeling happy, resilient and confident to take on life's challenges.

“ The most enjoyable aspect of parenting is watching this small infant grow ... and watch their personalities take shape. It's the most rewarding thing in life to be part of. ”

- Parent

Introduction

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland and has been working for more than 100 years to improve the lives and opportunities of children, young people and families in communities across Northern Ireland.

We run more than 40 different services and programmes and reach children in over 200 schools. We also provide a range of family support through our Sure Start services for under-four year olds and their families, outreach community programmes for pre-school children and their parents, support for children and families from an ethnic minority background, and specialist services for children with disabilities.

We know that the early years of a child's life are important for their life outcomes: the first three years represent a crucial time for a child's social, emotional and cognitive development.

Parents are central to this development, as a warm responsive caregiver facilitates an infant's sense of safety and helps to build good infant mental health.

This short booklet aims to support parents to think about ways to promote good infant mental health. Drawing on research which Barnardo's NI conducted with parents of children aged 0 – 3 years old about how digital technology is used at home¹, this booklet also highlights issues that parents raised about parenting in a digital world and the potential impact of digital technology on interactions between parents and infants.

¹ For full report see Kernaghan, D. (2018) *Connections: Parenting Infants in a Digital World*, Barnardo's NI: <http://www.barnardos.org.uk/connections-parenting-infants-in-a-digital-world.pdf>

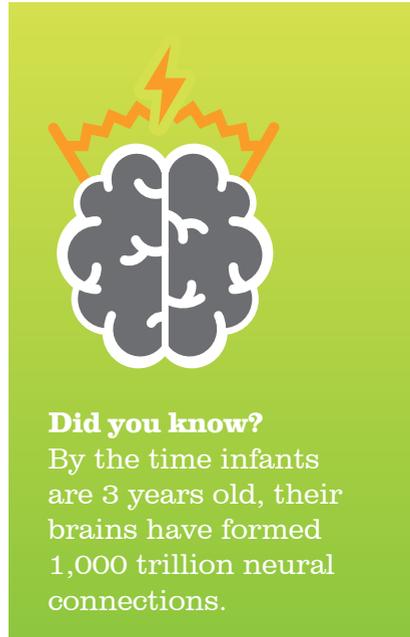
What is infant mental health?



When we talk about infant mental health we mean how well a child develops, socially and emotionally, during the first three years of life. Simply put, good infant mental health is the ability to grow well and love well.

Central to positive infant mental health is the relationship an infant has with you and other family members or carers. The first three years of a child's life represents the greatest period of growth in all aspects of their development. This time provides 'windows of opportunity' to support infant mental health in terms of brain, emotional and social development.

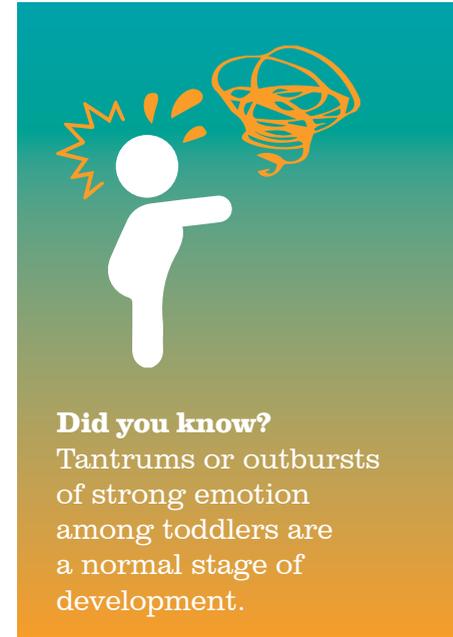
Brain development



Did you know?
By the time infants are 3 years old, their brains have formed 1,000 trillion neural connections.

Infancy marks the fastest growth in brain development for humans. These connections are developed and strengthened through repetition and practice and are the building blocks upon which all social, emotional and cognitive development depends in both the short and long term. 'Toxic stress', caused by negative experiences in early childhood, can impact on cognitive development and can act as a barrier to good infant mental health.

Emotional development



Did you know?
Tantrums or outbursts of strong emotion among toddlers are a normal stage of development.

Secure attachment is encouraged through the *quality* of interactions between parents and infants, rather than the *quantity* of time spent together. The quality of interactions refers to how sensitive parents are to their infants' signals, their actions with their infants' ongoing behaviours and how psychologically and physically accessible a parent is. This type of exchange is often described as a 'serve and return' interaction in which the infant 'serves' through facial expressions, verbal communication or gestures and the parent 'returns' by responding in a sensitive and consistent manner. Secure attachment acts as a 'buffer' when children experience stressful situations in life.

Social development



Did you know?
New born babies are ready to socialise with you. They enjoy watching your face, listening to your voice and being held.

The early home learning environment is the single biggest influence on a child's social development. The quality of relationship between a parent and child is more important than material circumstances or parental income, occupation or education.

Potential barriers to good infant mental health

There are some things that can negatively affect the development of secure attachment and good infant mental health.

For example, adverse childhood experiences (or ACEs) have the potential to damage brain development and cause long term health and emotional problems. Experiences such as abuse, neglect or trauma can alter how the brain develops, leading to short and long term health problems. When a child experiences frequent and/or prolonged adversity – and doesn't have adequate adult support – a 'toxic stress' response can occur, which can increase the risk to the child's development and infant mental health.

To feel secure and have good mental health, it is important that infants experience safety and attachment through positive parent-infant interactions. This attachment can be promoted through approaches such as 'Five to Thrive'. This is explained in the next section.



Five to Thrive

Barnardo's Northern Ireland has embedded the Five to Thrive approach across our services which work with parents who have babies and young children.

The Five to Thrive approach was developed by KCA Training². Based on the same idea of having 'five a day' as the recommended daily intake of fruit and vegetables, the Five to Thrive approach identifies five key everyday activities as the "building blocks for a healthy brain" that promote good infant mental health and secure attachment between parents and children.

The five building blocks are:

■ Respond ■ Cuddle ■ Relax ■ Play ■ Talk

The blocks are designed to be used in sequence, starting with 'Respond', so that each builds on the one before. This is to help both the adult and the child get the most out of their interactions and develop healthy attachments.

We asked parents who used a Barnardo's NI service what they thought of the Five to Thrive approach:



98.9% reported that they understood child brain development better



97.7% reported that they had a better understanding of their influence on their infant's emotional development



94.9% reported that they had a better understanding that early interactions with their child could have a long term impact on their infant's development

² KCA Training: <https://fivetothrive.org.uk/>

The Science

THE BUILDING BLOCKS

Activities you can do

Being responded to feeds the brain while responding to others exercises the brain.

Both need to take place for healthy brain development.

Respond



Respond to your child by copying their facial expressions and sounds and give them time to respond back.

Engaging through physical touch helps infants feel safe and builds strong connections in the brain to regulate emotions.

Cuddle



Pretend your child's favourite toy needs cuddles for comfort because it is upset or ill. Show your child how to comfort and talk calmly to the toy to make it feel better. This game teaches different types of positive touch and how to give and receive cuddles and love.

Infants are less able than adults to relax when stressed. They need responsive adults to help them self-regulate.

Relax



Take your child out for a walk and talk about everything you see and hear. Stop to touch hedges and trees, collect a few sticks and leaves. If you can't go outdoors, look out of the window and talk about the things both of you can see.

Playfulness is a non-verbal form of communication between parent and child.

As children are much more affected by how we communicate than what we communicate, playfulness activates their brains.

Play



Engage in simple games such as Peekaboo. Hide your face behind your hands and then pop your face out with a smile, saying 'peekaboo'. Encourage your child to copy you and take it in turns to play this game.

Words powerfully shape the human brain. Reassurance and praise through verbal communication build strong patterns of self-worth and resilience.

Talk



Read a book to your baby or toddler and give your child a chance to join in. If your child is older, ask them to turn the pages, predict what is happening next or get them to act out the story with their toys.

Infants and digital technology

Digital technology is a normal part of families' everyday lives. Our research³ found that more than ninety seven percent (97.5%) of participants reported having access to the internet at home, with households owning an average of 8.5 devices each. This embedding of digital technology in our daily routines presents both opportunities and challenges.



As digital technology is a relatively new issue, many questions remain unanswered about the physical, mental, emotional and social consequences of digital use amongst infants and their families due to the lack of high quality evidence. Very little research has been conducted into young children's use of technology or the potential risks or opportunities relating to their development. The use of digital technology has the potential to distract parents from engaging with infants in ways that encourage and nurture a trusting secure attachment, such as making eye contact, talking and playing. This is called 'technofence', which means parents interrupt interactions or spend less time with their children due to their own use of digital technology. The long term effects of this behaviour on children are currently unknown.

How our children use technology, how our children see us using technology, and how we share information about our children on digital platforms are all things parents in today's digital age need to consider. This section offers some tips and suggestions of what to think about.



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WHAT IS SCREEN TIME?

Screen time refers to the **amount of time** spent viewing a screen, whether it be watching television, playing on a games console, using a tablet or computer or using an app on a smartphone. It is also important to think about the **quality of activities** a child is taking part in when thinking about screen time.



Parents told us they limit the use of digital technology for infants in a range of ways:

- by limiting the time their child spends on devices
- by only allowing the child to watch children's programmes
- by only allowing the child to use devices with adult supervision
- by not allowing digital technology at family mealtimes

Using the **three 'C's** below can help you think about how your child uses screens:

- **Contexts:**
How is the digital technology being used?
This includes where and how infants use technology and whether it is active interaction or passive viewing.
- **Content:**
What is being viewed?
For infants, digital content should be high quality and age appropriate.
- **Connections:**
What is beyond the screen?
What happens after switching off? Does your infant's use of digital technology boost or reduce their social interactions?

USING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

Digital technology is part of everyday life today. If you choose to use digital technology with your child, here are some things to consider, based on the 2016 guidance from the American Academy of Pediatrics⁴:



- For children **younger than 18 months**, use of screen media other than video-chatting should be avoided.
- Parents of children **aged 18 to 24 months** who want to introduce digital media should choose high-quality programming and applications (apps) and use them together with their child to help them understand what they're seeing, because this is how toddlers learn best. Letting infants use media by themselves should be avoided.
- For infants **older than 2 years**, media limits are appropriate. Limit screen use to no more than 1 hour or less per day of high-quality programming. Co-view or co-play with your child, and find other activities to do together that are healthy for the body and mind.
- Keep bedrooms, mealtimes and parent-child playtimes 'media free' for both children and parents and ensure screens don't replace sleep.

Whether or not you choose to use digital technology with your infant, the key thing to remember is that you are the best thing for your child's development: by applying the principles of Five to Thrive and providing positive, attentive and consistent interactions, you can help support your infant to develop secure attachment and good mental health.

⁴ American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Council on Communications and Media, 'Media and Young Minds', Pediatrics, 2016; 138(5):e20162591

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