



BACK TO BASICS
INFANT MENTAL HEALTH
ROUNDTABLE EVENT
REPORT

STRONGER
FROM THE
START



Working together to
promote and **improve**
infant mental health
in **Northern Ireland**





THE ORGANISERS

The Stronger from the Start Alliance is a collaboration between the Association for Infant Mental Health Northern Ireland (AIMH NI) and organisations from across the community & voluntary sector in Northern Ireland.

We're calling for full funding, implementation and enhancements of government commitments on promoting and improving infant mental health.

We've committed to collaborate across statutory, community and voluntary sectors to improve their life experiences and outcomes of infants and their families by making them #StrongerFromTheStart.



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HEALTH**

THE EVENT

This one hour online event for MLAs was hosted by the Stronger From The Start Alliance.

Our aim was to create a 'room' in which a small group of MLAs engaged on this issue could be updated on the alliance and our work and hear from leading academics on the evidence base for prioritising infant mental health (IMH) on a cross-government basis.

We invited MLAs to share with us what resonated most with them, to consider what the implications might be for them and to identify an action that they could take to support this important work.

The event was chaired by Roberta Marshall, Barnardo's, in her role as Chair of AIMH NI and as convenor of the Stronger from the Start Alliance. Koulla Yiasouma, NI Commissioner for Children and Young people, facilitated a panel discussion and Q&A session with MLAs.

You can view excerpts of the event using the links below:

- ▶ [What is Infant Mental Health?](#)
- ▶ [Professor Siobhán O'Neill, Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland, on the context and imperative for this work](#)
- ▶ [Professor Nicola Doherty, Consultant Clinical Psychologist & Chair of the Paediatric Psychology Network of the British Psychological Society in the UK, on the First 1001 Days of Life](#)
- ▶ [Dr. Dominic McSherry, Developmental Psychologist & Editor in Chief of the International Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma, on the relationship between attachment, parenting stress and poverty.](#)



EVIDENCE SHARED

Infants need trusting, secure and reliable relationships with their parents or main caregiver. The infant can recognise these qualities through the way they are held, talked to, touched, and cared for (Shonkoff et al, 2004).

The first 1,001 days include pregnancy and the first two years of a child's life. **This is an age of opportunity**. Early interactions during this time prepare the way for strong, healthy cognitive, social and emotional health and wellbeing across the lifespan (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

There is clear, compelling evidence that **this period lays the foundation for every child's future health, wellbeing, learning and earnings potential** (HM Government, 2021). These can be benefits or challenges which can last a lifetime and carry onto the next generation.

Some level of stress in parenthood is to be expected (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003) and can have a positive influence up to a certain point, after which become problematic (Abidin, 1992). High levels of parenting stress are particularly problematic because of the **direct influence on parenting behaviour and consequent child outcomes** (Webster-Stratton, 1990; Ello & Donovan, 2005).

Poverty amplifies the negative effects of all types of stress (APA, 2012). The stress of poverty can lead to increased or impaired caregiving and to increased use of inconsistent, erratic and harsh discipline (Ghate et al, 2008). **Poverty and the associated parental stress and poor parent-child relationships have a negative impact on the child's future cognitive abilities, behaviour and health** (Kalil, 2015).

Experts in child development suggest that Early Childhood Intervention Programmes (ECIPs) are more beneficial when they target parental stress relief, attachment and education (Shonkoff & Garner, 2015).



ISSUES DISCUSSED

Just as infants exist and grow in and through relationships, infant mental health is connected to and inter-dependent on a host of other factors and circumstances.

Some of the related policy and practice issues were discussed in this roundtable event. The list below is not exhaustive but demonstrates the breadth and depth of work to be done in creating systemic and generational change:

- ▶ Mental health as a continuum and **the importance of the early childhood period** and early attachment in shaping lifelong mental health and wellbeing
- ▶ Opportunity and urgency of understanding and supporting **the parent-infant relationship during pregnancy**
- ▶ Changes in how we live and are supported, including in family and community networks and in relationship with midwife. Ask for **greater continuity of care** throughout the first 1001 days
- ▶ Role of data in supporting decision making and **importance of sharing data** across departmental, system and age thresholds to improve outcomes
- ▶ Need for **inter-departmental, cross-government approaches** to maximise the impact of early intervention
- ▶ **Role of education and continued necessity of awareness raising** especially with and for parents, ensuring fathers are included and supported as well as mothers
- ▶ **Support for all parents, families and communities** is as important as providing discreet mental health interventions for those who are clinically in need/at risk
- ▶ Power of positive relationships has not yet been harnessed in policy in practice. Need for **34% funding uplift for implementation of the Mental Health Strategy 2021-31**; this estimate has been provided by the Mental Health Champion
- ▶ Recognition of how **workforce gaps, particularly in health visiting**, impact on the system capacity to support as many people as early as possible
- ▶ Urgency of **tackling wider social determinants of health**, primarily poverty and housing stress
- ▶ Greater awareness of **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)** and of trauma more widely; **need to link the IMH agenda with work on domestic violence & other harms in the home**
- ▶ Acknowledgement of work underway to develop **perinatal mental health teams and services** as well as **Mother & Baby unit** for Northern Ireland; opportunity here to add infant mental health expertise to the service/workforce offer

NEXT STEPS

We campaigned for, and welcome the explicit inclusion of infants and infant mental health within the Mental Health Strategy for Northern Ireland 2021-2031. However, actions and resources beyond those committed to in the Strategy will be required if every infant and family in Northern Ireland are to enjoy the best start in life.

Our key asks are set out in the #StrongerFromTheStart Manifesto. We're inviting politicians, organisations and individuals – particularly those with lived experience – to publicly make a commitment to join us by endorsing the [Manifesto](#) and using our [Pledge Card](#) to raise awareness of the work.

We look forward to working with politicians, civil servants and local leaders and managers to shape and support the implementation of the commitments we believe are required. We'll share updates with our members and through other relevant networks.



CONTACT US

The Stronger from the Start Alliance is open to all community and voluntary groups based or working in Northern Ireland. Please get in touch if you'd like to join us!

We're also available for meetings and briefings with political representatives and statutory bodies who want to know more about our work and ways to support our calls for action on the promotion of infant mental health in Northern Ireland.

Whatever your interest, we'd love to hear from you. Please contact eilish.robinson@barnardos.org.uk using 'Stronger From The Start' in the subject of your email.

THANKS

To all the contributors, for your support in prioritising this issue:

Professor Siobhán O'Neill, Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland; Professor Nicola Doherty, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, WHSCT; Dr. Dominic McSherry, Developmental Psychologist, UU; Koulla Yisouma, NICCY.

To all MLAs, party officials and the NI Youth Assembly rep who attended:

Paula Bradshaw MLA, Alliance; Robbie Butler MLA, UUP; Liam Duggan, Sinn Féin; Mark H Durkan MLA, SDLP; Orlaithí Flynn MLA, Sinn Féin; Colm Gildernew MLA, Sinn Féin; Oran Melaugh, SDLP; Laura Whinnery, NI Youth Assembly.

To the Stronger From The Start Steering Group members who supported delivery of the event:

Roberta Marshall, AIMH NI/Barnardo's; Tracey Ripley-McElvogue, AIMH NI/East Belfast Sure Start; Joy Poots, AIMH NI/South Belfast Sure Start; Sheena McMullen, Action for Children; Rachel Long, Barnardo's; Jayne Murray, Home-Start NI; Celine McStravick, National Children's Bureau; Caroline Cunningham, NSPCC; Sally Hogg, Parent-Infant Foundation; Laura Feeney, Save The Children; Alison McNulty; Tiny Life.

To all the Stronger from the Start agencies who continue to engage their collective efforts and resources in the best interests of infants and their families.

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We are working together to amplify infant mental health in Northern Ireland and to campaign for meaningful change in policy, practice and life experiences.

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MEMBER AGENCIES

