

STRONGER FROM THE START

MANIFESTO 2026



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



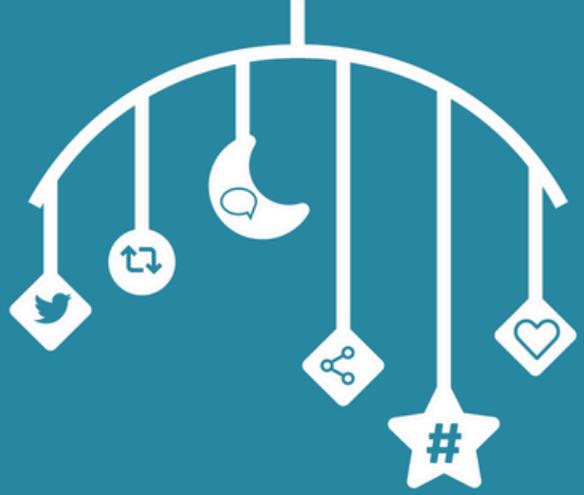


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WHO WE ARE

Stronger from the Start is an alliance of organisations from across the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland, working together to promote and improve infant mental health.

Our Alliance is committed to collaborating in the best interests of infants and their families. We are working together to amplify the importance of infant mental health in Northern Ireland and to campaign for meaningful change in policy, practice and life experiences. Since August 2021 many of our partners have worked in the development and implementation of the Infant Mental Health Framework for Northern Ireland.

The Alliance successfully campaigned for and welcomed the explicit inclusion of infants within the Mental Health Strategy for Northern Ireland 2021-2031, particularly those actions which promote and improve early mental health, which sets the foundation for life. We continue to lobby for the recognition of the importance of the first 1001 days and the need to take a prevention and early intervention approach to policymaking, strategy development and service delivery.

We look forward to working with elected representatives, civil servants and local champions and families to deliver on our vision.



**Our vision...
Every baby and infant in
Northern Ireland enjoys
the best start in life**



WHAT IS INFANT MENTAL HEALTH?

"Infant mental health is the social and emotional wellbeing and development of children in the earliest years of life. It reflects whether children have the secure, responsive relationships that they need to thrive."

[Parent-Infant Foundation, 2022](#)

When we talk about infant mental health what we mean is infants requiring secure attachments and positive relationships to prepare the way for strong, healthy social and emotional health and wellbeing across their lifespan. In the early years, an infant's foundational relationships and environments fundamentally shape their capacity to feel secure, express emotions, and begin to engage with the world.



Early Emotional Wellbeing and Brain Development

- Rapid brain growth and development during the first 1001 days makes this period different than any other time in life. Early experience shapes the brain, affecting lifelong health, behaviour and learning. No other stage depends more on environment and experiences for growth and development.
- Early relationships are fundamental to early emotional wellbeing. Young babies need sensitive, responsive adults to help them to bring difficult emotions under control (for example, through soothing them when they cry). Parents' responses shape how babies experience their emotions and how they learn to regulate and express these emotions.
- Although children's futures are not fully determined by the age of two, wellbeing in the early years is strongly linked to later outcomes. Research shows a strong connection between exposure to stress in pregnancy and early life, and negative outcomes later in life*.
- Through strengthening parent-infant relationships, the physical and emotional wellbeing and development of babies' can be protected and promoted. Therefore, we have an opportunity to put children on a positive developmental trajectory, better able to take advantage of other opportunities that lie ahead.

* Prenatal maternal stress: triangulating evidence for intrauterine exposure effects on birth and early childhood outcomes across multiple approaches > bit.ly/4pEMRMn



WHY DOES INFANT MENTAL HEALTH MATTER?

By investing in early support, society not only safeguards the wellbeing of babies and young children today, but also lays the foundation for a healthier, more resilient future generation.

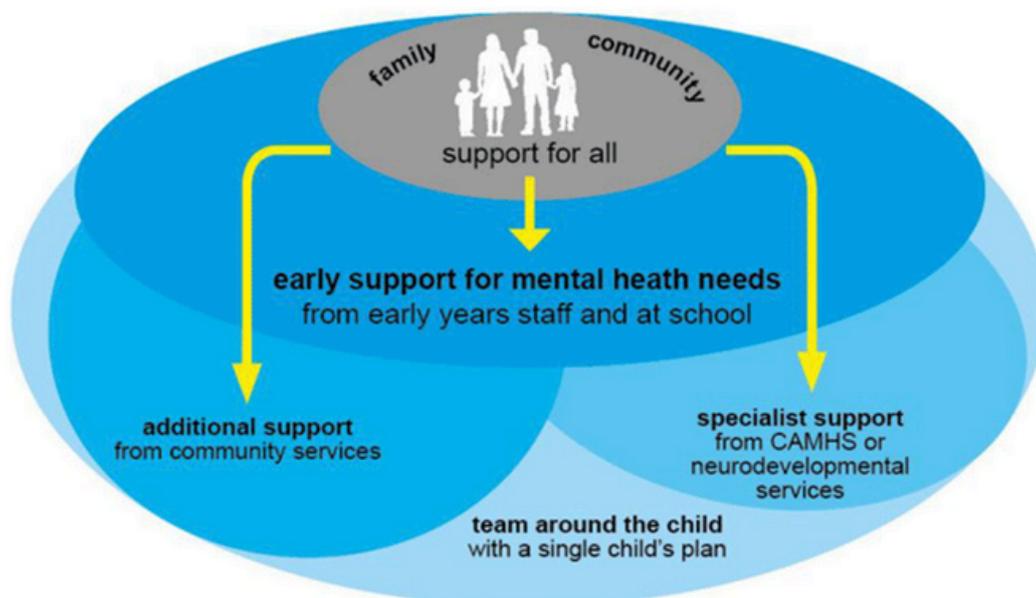
The benefits of investment in the earliest years of life is supported by a wealth of research and evidence and is a cost-effective way of transforming child and family outcomes.*

The case to protect and promote early emotional wellbeing is strong.

The cumulative impact of recent challenges, including political instability, the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, continues to exacerbate the vulnerability of infants and children.

Investing in infant mental health is not only a matter of promoting individual wellbeing; it is a strategic approach to improving population health outcomes, reducing long-term service demand, and fostering a more equitable and compassionate society.

Babies/infants deserve a whole system response to protect and promote their early emotional wellbeing**. We are confident that a joined-up approach can create the change necessary for babies/infants to fulfil their potential. Investing in such support will reap rewards for our families, communities and services in the future.



* Parent Infant Foundation > bit.ly/44BFT2q

** Adapted from the Children's Neurodevelopmental Pathway Practice Framework 2024



OUR ASKS

There are four key areas of focus for the promotion and improvement of early emotional wellbeing in Northern Ireland. We're calling on all political parties to join us by signing up to the following priorities:

Leadership & Collaboration

Outcome:

There is a clear commitment to improve early emotional wellbeing. This is supported by investment and action in all relevant strategies and policies to reduce adversity in infancy and support early relationships.

Actions:

- Make early emotional wellbeing and brain development everyone's responsibility with a clear messaging campaign. This includes promoting a clear, shared understanding of what infant mental health is and understanding and elevating infants' voice.
- Ensure there is cross-departmental collaboration setting out key strategy objectives in relation to early emotional wellbeing with clear lines of accountability.
- Increase investment in early emotional wellbeing across the Executive, including:
 - Acknowledgement of cross-departmental nature of early emotional wellbeing
 - Comprehensive funding and implementation of Infant Mental Health Strategies
 - Fully grasping the opportunity of multi-year budgets to improve prevention and early intervention
- Promote positive parenting to ensure that children's rights are recognised and protected.



OUR ASKS

Improving Evidence & Policy

Outcome:

Insights, data and evidence about early emotional wellbeing and brain development are collected, shared and used to inform policies and service delivery.

Actions:

- Launch a public awareness campaign to educate on the importance of early emotional wellbeing and brain development.
- Invest in research programmes to understand the infants' emotional wellbeing needs, experiences and risk/protective factors, at both local and national level.
- Ensure policy development incorporates the voice of voluntary/community sector representatives, infant and parent voice, at a stage where they can actively inform development.
- Prioritise prevention and early intervention in policy and practice to prevent the need for costly crisis intervention.
- Collect clear, consistent, and comparable data on the prevalence of early emotional wellbeing across Northern Ireland.
- Encourage an agreed regional approach and tools (e.g. Alarm Distress Baby Scale) to develop an evidence base to inform service planning and delivery.
- Disseminate evidence and good practise across Northern Ireland, ensuring accessibility of information for all audiences.



OUR ASKS

Workforce Development

Outcome:

There is a skilled and supported multidisciplinary workforce with capacity to meet the early emotional wellbeing and brain development needs of pre and postnatal infants and their families.

Actions:

- Develop and fund an infant & early childhood workforce strategy.
- Recognise the importance of and prioritise commissioning around the first 1001 days.
- Recognise the voluntary and community sector's important influence and work with babies and parents.
- Ensure the DE Early Years standardisation enables sector wide understanding of responsive relationships and brain development.
- Focus on baby and infants' rights to a nurturing and responsive environment within the Early Learning and Childcare strategy.
- Recognise the importance of the early years' workforce, including job security and appropriate remuneration.

OUR ASKS

Service Development

Outcome:

An infrastructure of resourced, evidenced and high-quality services to ensure all babies, young children and their families can access the right support at the right time to protect and promote their early emotional wellbeing and brain development.

Actions:

- Develop and resource a regional model for early emotional wellbeing with a range of universal, targeted and specialist support.
- Ensure services are accessible and effective. They must be locally available, high-quality, culturally appropriate as well as evidence and trauma-informed, neuro-inclusive and relationship focused.
- Enable services to understand behaviour as communication and therefore identify potential indicators of early stress and trauma. (ie capacity building model)
- Ensure the regional minimum standards includes consideration of early emotional wellbeing, brain development and early relationships.

STRONGER FROM THE START ALLIANCE

At the time of publishing, this manifesto is endorsed by the following organisations:



Save the Children



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**Colin
Neighbourhood
Partnership™**

