

Definitions from the Alliance

Infant Mental Health

An interdisciplinary field dedicated to understanding and promoting the social and emotional well-being of all infants, young children, and families within the context of secure and nurturing relationships. Infant mental health also refers to the social and emotional well-being of an infant or toddler within the context of a relationship, culture, and community.

Infant Mental Health Practices Relationship-focused interventions with **both** the infant/young child and his/her biological, foster, or adoptive parent on behalf of the parent-infant relationship. Infant mental health practice includes case management; advocacy; emotional support; developmental guidance; early relationship assessment; social support; and parent-infant/young child, relationship-based therapies and practices. These therapies and practices may include but are not limited to interaction guidance and child-parent psychotherapy and are intended to explore issues related to attachment, separation, trauma, grief, and unresolved losses as they affect the development, behavior, and care of the infant/young child. Work is aimed at the relationship between the infant/toddler and his/her primary caregiver to explicitly address any unresolved separations, trauma, grief, and/or losses that may be affecting the emerging attachment relationship between a caregiver(s) and the infant/toddler. The unresolved losses or “ghosts in the nursery” might be from the caregiver’s own early childhood or may be more recent, as in a difficult labor and delivery or a diagnosis of a chronic illness, delay, or disability for an infant/toddler.

Professionals from a variety of disciplines, not only licensed mental health professionals, may practice infant mental health. However, the practitioner must have received the specialized IMH training necessary to provide this level of intervention AND receive RS/C from a qualified professional about the intervention. Work on unresolved losses does not have to be explicit with every family with whom the applicant works. However, the applicant must have had the specialized IMH training and RS/C to prepare them to provide that level of intervention when it is appropriate for a referred family.

Infant mental health practice can be conducted in the home, in a clinic, or in other settings.

Infant Mental Health Principles The theoretical foundations and values that guide work with or on behalf of infants, toddlers, and families. Theoretical foundations include knowledge of pregnancy and early parenthood; infant/young child development and behavior; infant/young child and family-centered practice; relationship-focused therapeutic practice; family relationships and dynamics; attachment, separation, trauma, grief, and loss; disorders of infancy and early childhood; and cultural competence. Values include the importance of relationships; respect for ethnicity, culture, individuality, and diversity; integrity; confidentiality; knowledge and skill building; and reflective practice.