

Brief Summary: Evidence underpinning Infant Mental Health Service



'The essence of infant mental health lies within the parent-child relationship'

[Solchany & Barnard, 2001]

The Infant Mental Health Service (IMHS) promotes awareness of the importance of infant mental health in Leeds, to advise and support with regard to the development of coherent strategies to meet the needs of infants and pre-school children and to directly support practitioners and parents to best meet the emotional needs of this population.

The IMHS is seen as key to the specialist end of the continuum, which supports and promotes good practice in universal and targeted service delivery through the provision of training and consultation (i.e., the Early Start Service/ FNP/ midwives/ 3rd Sector/ social workers) and undertakes direct (specialist) clinical delivery.

Babies are born pre-programmed to seek out and adapt to the relationship that they have with their parents. The child's first relationship with the primary care giver, acts as a template for all subsequent relationships. The quality and content of this primary relationship has a physical effect on the neurobiological structure of the child's brain that will be enduring. The brain is at its most adaptable, or plastic, for the first two years after birth. Secure attachment is a protective factor conferring confidence and adaptability, although not a total guarantee of future mental health, and without this resource neither child nor adult will be free to make the most of life's possibilities.

Children with problems related to insecure attachment begin to soak up statutory resources from early on when 'externalising' behaviour (aggression, non-compliance, negative and immature behaviours, etc) demands a response. The most sensible and economic time to put in therapeutic resources is into promoting and supporting the primary relationship.

Evidence supports the principle that proactive, strength based programmes beginning either pre-natally or at birth, have the greatest and most sustained effect.

It has been noted that there has been an inverse relationship between investment into resources for mental health interventions and age (*Getting It Right for Children and Young People, Kennedy Review 2010*). Hence whilst infants and young children have the most potential to benefit from appropriate interventions, they receive the least resources. This anomaly has informed the conclusions of the Graham Allen's recent independent report, which charges Government to establish an Early Intervention Foundation (*Early Intervention: The Next Steps 2011*).