

# What About The Children?

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## RESEARCH SUMMARY

### **The Leeds Infant Mental Health Service: Early Relationships Matter (2020)**

Hunter, R, Glazebrook K, Ranger S

*Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology* <https://doi.org/10.1080/02646838.2020.1828842>

Since the 1960s attachment theory and its research base have grown into one of the most grounded theories relating to infants and their carers. Attachment relates to the fundamental relationship between the infant and their parent, which is essential to both the infant's development and survival. When an infant feels a threat or danger their attachment system is activated and the infant responds in a way that promotes proximity to, and/or contact with, their attachment figure. In the early months these attachment behaviours can include smiling, vocalising or crying, whilst as the child becomes older they may include crawling and walking. Experiences with their carer lead to the development of internal working models of the self and the attachment figure.

The development of attachment security is dependent on the attachment figure's sensitivity in responding to the infant's signals. Increasingly secure attachment relationships are more likely to be developed if the parents are better able to notice, and respond to, their infant's states and cues in a timely and adequate way. Secure attachment means an infant can be confident that the attachment figures will be available and be responsive in times of stress, and the carer becomes a secure base from which the infant can explore their world. Over time, the infant learns to see the carer as consistent and loving, and to view their self as valued and worthy of care. In the early years therefore, the infant's experience of their environment is fundamental to the development of positive emotional well-being, emotional regulation skills and good social relationships.

Infant mental health relates to how a child develops socially and emotionally during the critical period of the first 1001 days, or birth to two years. An infant's brain goes through significant development in this period, with connections being formed in the brain twice as fast as they are in an adult's brain. Such connections are highly influenced by external signals, such that the infant's experiences have a direct impact on their neurological development. This means, therefore, that the way in which an infant's carers respond to them in the first 1001 days helps to shape their brain and their future outcomes for life, including their ability to maintain positive relationships with others, as well as their capacity for learning.

Having a baby is a significant life event which may provoke a range of emotions in new parents. Some people may have existing mental health problems or unresolved loss or trauma which is revived or exacerbated by becoming parents themselves, which may in turn impact their relationship with their baby. Early intervention in the perinatal period for vulnerable families is crucial to help develop positive parent-infant

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relationships for the well-being of both the parent and the development of the child. Targeted intervention for high-risk families is necessary to reduce transmission between generations of difficulties, disadvantage, inequality, dysfunction and child maltreatment. Support services should be prioritised which emphasise preventative principles, with an emphasis on both the fostering and the encouraging of secure attachments and thus the positive emotional wellbeing of the child. Training of professionals working with children and families should also include teaching about the importance of the first 1001 critical days for social and emotional development.

The Leeds Infant Mental Health Service (IMHS) works with families from conception to a child's second birthday where there is concern about the primary attachment relationship. They use consultation and training alongside working directly with infants and in families to promote secure attachment relationships and optimal outcomes for infants. The service emphasises the importance of prevention and early intervention. By training health visitors to administer the Early Attachment Observation (EAO) screening tool with families, infants who are potentially at risk of poor attachment can be identified.

All expectant or new parents are given a booklet by the IMHS that includes information on infant states and cues as well as providing training for practitioners to support parents in forming good quality relationship with their infants. Interventions are often delivered on the specific infant-caregiver relationship and their needs. The IMHS can also offer specialist consultations to health professionals working with infants and their families, encouraging professionals to hold the infant's needs and well-being in mind.

An infant's experience in the early years of their caregiving environment is therefore vital to the development of positive socio-emotional development. Services should be based on preventative principles such as encouraging secure attachments and positive emotional wellbeing. The Leeds IMHS aims to support families to establish positive relationships with their infants through early intervention, alongside development of the knowledge and understanding of the relevant workforce in Leeds. The implementation of good practice by this IMHS is well-received, but more evidence would help to support the validity of the interventions described. Further research is needed to look at the factors affecting the implementation of interventions and the effectiveness of these types of courses and training sessions among others. Once the validity and reliability of the screening tool has been better established, the service should be shown to be a cost-effective and feasible way to meet the needs of infants and their caregivers.

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