

# Promoting Children’s Emotional and Behavioral Health in a Changing World

## What is Children’s Emotional and Behavioral Health?

It is widely recognized that emotional and behavioral health is a vital part of overall health and quality of life. In its definition of health, the World Health Organization (WHO) places social well-being and mental health as equal in importance to physical health.<sup>1</sup>

Emotional and behavioral health refers to how the basic human tools of thoughts, moods, feelings, actions and reactions positively contribute to a child’s healthy personal and social development. These tools support how children look at themselves and others, and at the same time help them evaluate their challenges and explore their choices. This includes handling stress, relating to other people, and making decisions.

## Why Focus on Early Childhood?

Research shows that brain development occurs most rapidly in the first 1,000 days of life (first three years),<sup>2</sup> when social and emotional building blocks start to form. Brain development is influenced by many circumstances that can impact a child in different ways—either building the child’s ability to adapt and protect emotional wellness or increasing a child’s risk of developing emotional and behavioral problems.

Research also tells us that:

- Poverty, harsh parenting, parental mental health problems and children’s lack of social skills are only some of the risk factors associated with emotional and behavioral problems in children.<sup>3, 4</sup>
- For young children, the likelihood for developing social and emotional problems increases as the number of economic, social, and psychological risk factors increase. Nearly 32% of young children are linked with one risk factor, and 16% are in families with two or more risks.<sup>5</sup>
- Early behavior problems get worse without intervention and are strong predictors of future health problems like mental illness, chronic health problems, early death, delinquency and substance abuse.<sup>6, 7, 8</sup>
- Promoting optimal emotional and behavioral health in children can not only reduce the risk of children developing problems, but can also contribute to their better physical health, enhanced productivity in life, safer environments, and economic benefits for individuals as well as society at large.<sup>9</sup>

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## About Early Childhood and Emotional and Behavioral Health

A subcommittee of the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine notes<sup>10</sup>

- *All children are born wired for feelings and ready to learn.*
- *Early environments matter.*
- *Nurturing relationships are essential.*
- *Society is changing and the needs of young children are changing.*
- *Interactions among early childhood science, policy, and practice demand dramatic rethinking.*

## EBH Compared to Other Common Childhood Conditions<sup>11</sup>

Parents in Delaware Report

- 18% having children with some level of emotional or behavioral difficulty
- 16.8% having children with asthma
- 0.4% having children with diabetes
- 36% having children who are obese or overweight

## Just What is the Scope of the Problem?

### NATION

#### *Early Childhood Centers*

- Teachers report that between 16-30% of preschoolers exhibit disruptive behaviors in the classroom, with 4-6% exhibiting serious disorders.<sup>12</sup>
- Nearly 30% of low-income preschool children have diagnosable emotional and behavioral problems.<sup>13, 14</sup>

#### *Primary Care*

- According to primary care providers, 10-21% of all young children (birth to six years old) have behavior and developmental problems.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Parents*

- Approximately 9% of parents report that their children (3-17 years of age) have moderate or severe difficulties in the areas of emotions, concentration, behavior or getting along with other people.<sup>16</sup>

### DELAWARE

#### *Early Childhood Centers*

- In the 2006 Delaware Child Care Provider Survey, 40.2% of center-based child care providers reported asking a family to withdraw a child from their care based on social, emotional or behavioral concerns in the past year.<sup>17</sup>
- Delaware ranks fifth nationally for expelling children from state-funded prekindergarten.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Primary Care*

- According to the National Survey of Children's Health (2003), Delaware parents report being told by a physician or health professional that their child has ADD/ADHD at a rate that is 27% higher than the national average.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Parents*

- In 2003, nearly one out of five parents reported having a child with some level of emotional or behavioral difficulty, which translates to approximately 30,000 children in Delaware. Almost half of that group (14,000) have difficulties that are considered by parents to be moderate to severe.<sup>20</sup>

# Behavioral Health in a Changing World



## Where Can Communities Reach Young Children?

Today's children experience childhood and develop in communities in ways that are vastly different from previous generations. Compared to previous generations, many children now spend large parts of their day in early care and education settings.

- Approximately 25% of all four-year old children attended some kind of center-based program in 1970.<sup>21</sup>
- In 2005, 61% of children in the nation and 69% of children in Delaware, aged birth through six (and not in kindergarten) spent time in non-parental childcare.<sup>22</sup>

Children also have frequent connections to primary care providers.

- About 78% of children/youth (ages 0-17) had one or more preventative medical care visits during the past 12 months.<sup>23</sup>
- Regular well child checks are important for giving parents good information about social emotional development and recognizing developmental problems early.

However, parents are their child's first and most important teachers. Nurturing and skilled parents are one of the strongest predictors of a child's success and emotional and behavioral health.<sup>24, 25</sup>

## How Can Communities Be Most Effective?

We all need to act to change the systems and environments that have an impact on how children develop. By bringing together parents, teachers, health care providers, policy makers, and other community leaders and members, children will have trained, caring adults ready to support their social and emotional development.

### *Early Childhood Centers*

- Improve policies and practices in child care centers to support early childhood teachers in promoting emotional and social skills and resilience
- Improve practices in early child care to train teachers to effectively work with children who do have challenging behavior

### *Primary Care*

- Equip primary care providers with the tools and information to share with parents about healthy emotional and behavioral development, systematically screen children for development and behavior problems, and provide referrals for needed services

### *Parent Education and Support*

- Improve services available in Delaware to help parents care for their children's emotional and behavioral health

**Parents are their child's first and most important teachers. Nurturing and skilled parents are one of the strongest predictors of a child's success and emotional and behavioral health.**

For more information about NHPS and our work to make Delaware's Children the Healthiest in the Nation, visit: [www.growuphealthy.org](http://www.growuphealthy.org)

252 Chapman Road  
Christiana Building Suite 200  
Newark, Delaware 19702  
302.444.9100 • 888.494.5252  
email: [nhps\\_info@nemours.org](mailto:nhps_info@nemours.org)  
[www.GrowUpHealthy.org](http://www.GrowUpHealthy.org)

## Notes

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