

PART 1: THE CASE FOR ACTION

This section of the toolkit describes why the mental health of babies and young children matters now, and for their future outcomes. It contains links to other resources to help you make the case for action in your local area.

Being mentally healthy

All children, including babies and young children, have a right to the best possible health and development – including mental health[°] - as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)^{2,3}. **It is important that the mental health of babies and young children, and their current experiences, are valued in their own right.**

Getting things right for babies and young children ensures they are healthy, free from prolonged stress and distress, and having a good life, from the start. **The earliest years of life also provide the foundation for later development. What happens during this time can have a significant impact on children’s future health and happiness, and therefore the health and happiness of our society.**

During pregnancy and the first years of life the brain is developing more rapidly than at any other period in life and is particularly susceptible to environmental influences⁴. **This is a unique period of opportunity and vulnerability, when a child’s experiences can have long-lasting consequences.** Physiological systems, such as how the body responds to stress, are shaped during this period. Babies and young children also develop important capacities, such as language and emotional regulation, during this time⁵. These systems and capacities are the foundations for later functioning, learning and development.

When children are mentally healthy in infancy and early childhood, they develop capacities that support mental health throughout life. For example, when babies have sensitive, nurturing relationships with caregivers

[°] Article 6 of the UNCRC highlights the States parties’ obligation to ensure the survival, growth and development of the child, including the “physical, mental, moral, spiritual and social dimensions of their development”.

who co-regulate their emotions, this supports them to build self-regulation skills, which are key to being mentally healthy throughout life⁶.

Mental health in infancy and early childhood also plays an important role in children’s wider development and a range of later outcomes. For example, if young children can regulate their emotions, feel safe to explore, and can make friends, they are more likely to be able to learn, engage and achieve in early education and in school. The ability to regulate behaviours and emotions, and to develop healthy relationships, which develop in infancy and early childhood, are strongly associated with good physical health, healthy behaviours and socio-economic outcomes⁷.

Supporting babies and young children to be mentally healthy increases the likelihood of a child achieving their full potential and contributing to society and decreases the risk that they will need to rely on a range of public service support throughout life. Therefore, investing in mental health during infancy and early childhood brings economic returns through increased contributions to the economy and reduced public spending. Researchers have calculated that in England, £16 billion per year is spent on remedial action to address issues that result from a lack of high-quality interventions in infancy and early childhood⁸.

Factors that can cause poor mental health early in life – such as a lack of stable, nurturing care and/or exposure to significant adversity^d – also increase the risk of a range of other poor outcomes in childhood, and mental and physical health problems later in life⁹. **Paying attention to, and being curious about a baby or young child’s mental health can help us to identify concerns about their relationships, wider health, development, and safety and to act to address these issues quickly.**

^d Nurturing relationships can “buffer” children from the impacts of adversity. External adversity in the absence of a nurturing relationship is particularly likely to impact on babies’ and young children’s mental health.



Useful resources

Case for investment and action in the earliest years

- [Big Change Start Small](#) (The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood, 2021) sets out the economic case for investment in early childhood.
- [Early Moments Matter: Guaranteeing the best start in life for every baby and toddler in England](#) (UNICEF UK, 2022) brings evidence around the investment case in early childhood, including recent local data on services that support babies and young children.
- [Early Moments Matter for every child](#) (UNICEF, 2017) makes the global case for investment.
- [First 1001 Days Evidence Briefs](#) (First 1001 Days Movement, 2021) set out the case for action in pregnancy and the first two years of life, and provide a compelling case for national and local decision makers across the UK.
- [The best start for life: a vision for the 1,001 critical days](#) (Department for Health and Social Care, 2021) outlines the importance of this life stage, and six areas for action to improve health outcomes of all babies in England.

The science behind early childhood and mental health

The **Havard Centre for the Developing Child** has a number of papers unpacking the science of early childhood and mental health:

- [InBrief: Early Childhood Mental Health](#)
- [InBrief: The Foundations of Lifelong Health](#)
- [Health and Learning are Deeply Interconnected in the Body: An Action Guide for Policymakers](#)
- [Connecting the Brain to the Rest of the Body: Early Childhood Development and Lifelong Health Are Deeply Intertwined](#)
- [The Foundations of Lifelong Health Are Built in Early Childhood](#)

The **Encyclopedia of Early Childhood** also has a range of useful information and articles, including [this piece on why mental health matters for young children](#).