

PART 3: A FRAMEWORK TO DESCRIBE MENTAL HEALTH IN INFANCY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD





This section sets out a framework that captures the different elements of mental health in infancy and early childhood. You might adopt or adapt this to develop a shared understanding of mental health in your local area.

Mental health in early childhood has two components: BEING and BECOMING mentally healthy

The framework over the page provides a way to describe mental health in early childhood, which captures what it means to be mentally healthy now, and the capacities that young children develop to enable them to be mentally healthy in the future. It also describes the different emotional, social and behavioural elements of mental health. Whilst it is useful to consider these three different elements of mental health, they may overlap and be intertwined – for example, emotions often manifest themselves as behaviours, and behaviours may depend on social context. There is also significant interdependence between different elements.

Often the drive to improve services for babies and young children is focused on future outcomes, such as school readiness or the prevention of later mental health problems. This framework includes a clear space to consider their mental health in its own right and to capture what is being done to promote wellbeing and reduce stress and distress for babies and young children in the here and now, as well as laying strong foundations for the future.

Being and becoming mentally healthy in infancy and early childhood

	<p>BEING</p> <p>This aspect of babies' and young children's mental health is how they are NOW, which might be described as their wellbeing. It describes their present-day thoughts, feelings, emotions and experiences.</p> <p>Being mentally healthy in this sense involves babies and young children feeling safe and good about themselves and the world around them, experiencing sensitive responsive care from a reliable caregiver(s), and being able to explore and play in a way that is appropriate to their level of development.</p>	<p>BECOMING</p> <p>This aspect of the mental health of babies and young children is related to their development of different capacities that enable them to be mentally healthy. It might be called social, emotional and behavioural development.</p> <p>Being mentally healthy in this sense involves babies and young children developing abilities that will help them to be mentally healthy in the future.</p>
<p>EMOTIONAL ELEMENTS</p> 	<p>Experiencing a range of emotions as appropriate responses to events and the environment but overall, being content, at ease, and feeling safe.</p>	<p>Becoming able to express, understand, and manage a range of emotions</p>
<p>SOCIAL ELEMENTS</p> 	<p>Being engaged in meaningful, safe, caring relationships with others (including both with adults and, as the baby grows, with peers). Trusting they will be cared for.</p>	<p>Becoming able to form and maintain safe, satisfying and trusting relationships, including – as children get older - the ability to play with others and form friendships.</p>
<p>BEHAVIOURAL ELEMENTS</p> 	<p>Being able to enjoy childhood. Exploring, learning, and playing in a way that is appropriate to them.</p>	<p>Becoming able to navigate the world, and work towards goals. Developing independence, confidence, and agency. Becoming able to cooperate and play with others to achieve shared goals.</p>

Young children's mental health & development is dependent on nurturing care which includes their physical health and nutrition, responsive caregiver relationships, safety and security, and early learning - including sensory, motor, cognitive and language skills.

Babies' and young children's unique personalities, identities, needs, experiences, and ages will shape what being mentally healthy looks like for them and the support they need. Due to rapid development in infancy and early childhood what mental health involves will vary greatly at the different stages of development.

Babies' and young children's mental health depends on the core elements of nurturing care that include good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, safety and security, and opportunities for early learning¹⁵, as set out in UNICEF's Nurturing Care Framework¹⁶.



The Nurturing Care Framework, WHO and UNICEF (2018)

Mental health exists in the context of relationships. In very young babies, both the being and becoming elements of mental health are dependent on the presence of adults who can provide sensitive responsive care, and support babies to play and learn. For example, having an adult who can receive, understand, and co-regulate a babies' emotions – such as soothing them when they cry – will improve their emotional state now and support the development of emotional regulation.

As Donald Winnicott famously described, it is only by seeing the baby and their relationships with caregivers together as a unit that one can really understand the baby and their experiences¹⁷. Focusing on the quality of the parent-child^f relationship may be the best way for professionals to understand and support babies' mental health. As children get older, they become able to experience and regulate emotions more for themselves and are subject to more influences beyond their relationship with their primary caregiver (although caregivers and close family members continue to play a key role in scaffolding the young child's emotional experiences throughout childhood¹⁸).

^f In this case, parent refers to whoever is the child's primary caregiver(s) are, which is typically but not always their parent.

Being mentally healthy is dependent on other sensory, motor, cognitive and language capacities and competencies that develop in early childhood (and throughout life). For example, language contributes to being able to understand and manage emotions and communicate feelings¹⁹.

Executive functions, such as attention control and behavioural inhibition, are important in managing social interaction and emotional regulation²⁰. The relationship between mental health and cognitive functions can be bidirectional: to make use of executive functions a baby and young child needs to feel safe and secure, as emotional regulation or relational problems may impact their ability to focus and their levels of impulsivity²¹.

Supporting a child's good physical health, development, and nutrition is vital for their mental health²². Adequate nutrition affects children's wellbeing now, their early brain development²³ and the likelihood that they will be mentally healthy in the future^{24, 25}. Physical health problems can negatively impact a child's mental health²⁶. Later in life, there are also significant comorbidities between mental and physical health problems²⁷.

Developmental conditions, developmental delay, neurodivergence, disability and ill health will affect what being mentally healthy looks and feels like for different babies and young children. Some diagnoses and disorders may also make it more difficult for children to be mentally healthy without additional support or adaptations. All babies and young children need acceptance for who they are, with their own different profiles, strengths and needs, regardless of diagnosis, disability, and individual characteristics. Being mentally healthy should be about being supported to feel and function well in a way that is appropriate to the individual child.

An example

Autism and mental health

I am an autistic toddler. I am happy engaging in solitary rather than cooperative play. I need professionals to understand my strengths and needs, to be able to understand and support me to be mentally healthy. Being autistic can make it harder for me to be mentally healthy in certain situations and environments, especially those designed for neurotypical children. I feel extremely anxious around unfamiliar people and in new places. With the right understanding, adaptations and support, I can feel at ease. I do not tend to use words or make eye contact to communicate my feelings. I need grown-ups to be attuned to the cues I give and the ways I show how I am doing.



Suggested action

Use and adapt this framework to define mental health

Review this framework with leaders from across maternity, health visiting, mental health, early education, family support and children's social care in your area.

- Does it provide a way of describing mental health that all providers can relate to?
- Could you work together, and with families, to develop your own definition of what being mentally healthy means?

Examples of being 'mentally healthy' in early childhood

Showing, in *italics* how children are supported by adults in their lives.

I am two days old.

When I cry, my grown-up holds me skin-to-skin. *Breastfeeding quickly calms and comforts me. This makes me feel safe, secure and loved.*

I am 9 weeks old.

When I'm feeling calm and alert, I open my mouth wide, my grown-up notices and *does the same with his mouth. I smile at him, and he smiles back, this helps me to feel connected and to develop a sense of myself.*

I am four months old. Getting my nappy changed and cutlery clanging in a drawer can make me cry. I also cry when I'm feeling hungry, uncomfortable, or poorly. When I cry, *I'm soothed and comforted quite quickly by the grown-ups around me who can help me to feel calmer and safer.*

I am six months old.

who is curious about the world around me. I enjoy picking up or touching things that interest me. I most like chewing on my toys and find it funny when my dog wags his tail.

I am 14 months old.

I seek out connections and feel good when I experience *care and love from the grown-up close through eye contact, cuddles and smiles.* Knowing that I have the support of those close to me helps me to gain a sense of security and confidence to explore my world in the way I want to. When I am taken to playgroup, I crawl back to my caregiver if there is something I'm not sure about. After a *quick cuddle*, I'm ready to go again!

I am 18 months old.

I know the grown-ups around me *love me because they smile and laugh at things I do, they give me hugs, and lots of encouragement when I'm trying new things.* I feel happy, safe, and relaxed when I'm at home with my family.

I am two-and-a-half.

I can get frustrated when I have to do something I don't want to. Today I cried and lay down on the ground because I didn't want to walk home from the park. My grown-up *understood that I was tired and sad to be leaving the swings. They gave me a cuddle, told me I'd done a great job walking so far, and reminded me that we could come back to the park tomorrow.* This helped me feel calmer, I stopped crying, continued walking for a little while, and then asked to be carried the rest of the way.

I am nearly three.

I feel capable of trying new things, even when they're tricky. I used to push and hit when I got cross, but now I can breathe deeply and keep going. With the *encouragement of the grown-ups around me*, I know I can try, try, try again.

I am three.

I have a favourite friend at nursery who I like playing cars with. Sharing is something I'm still learning to do, but most of the time I'm able to take turns playing with our favourite cars. She makes me laugh when she pulls funny faces.

I am four.

Sometimes I feel worried when trying out new things. I started Reception a few months ago. I was able to tell my grown-ups at home and my nursery key worker that I was feeling scared. *They helped me feel less nervous by listening to what was worrying me, and we found some ways to make me feel more excited to start school.* In the beginning, I still cried when I had to leave my grown-ups, but my friends and new teacher were kind and comforted me so I quickly felt more settled and happier at school and formed new relationships.

I am four-and-a-half.

I love using my imagination. I enjoy being with other children at school but I'm happiest when I'm playing on my own and creating whole new worlds with my action figures. I'm really good at building towers for my figures to jump between. It can be hard to build the towers, so I need to be calm and careful to make them balance.