

# OKLAHOMA'S BABIES CAN'T WAIT!

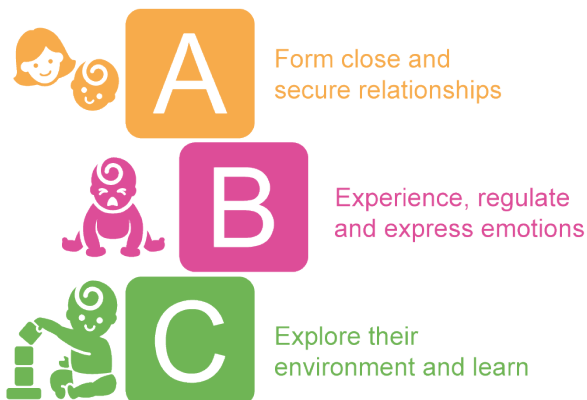
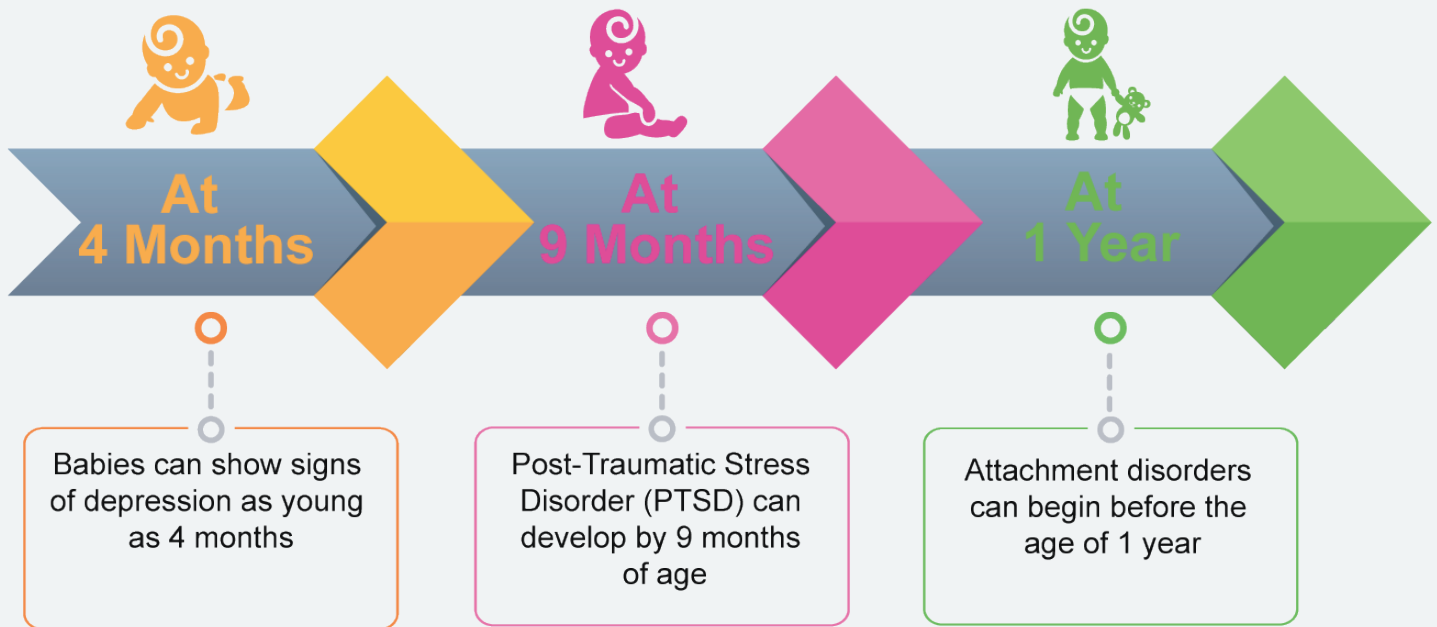
## Infant Mental Health and Why It's Important

### WHAT WE KNOW

In the earliest years of life, babies and toddlers grow and change rapidly, especially during the first three years. They are learning about themselves and the world around them through their experiences and relationships with parents and other caregivers. When these relationships are with responsive, consistent primary caregivers, positive attachments are built that support healthy social-emotional development and the foundation of mental health for young children. For babies and toddlers, the quality of the relationships with parents and other caregivers is the single most significant predictor of their long-term health and well-being.<sup>2</sup>

The foundation for sound mental health is built early in life, as early experiences shape the architecture of the developing brain. Disruptions in this developmental process as a result of postpartum depression, domestic violence, substance use and mental illness, can impair a child's capacities for learning and relating to others with a lifetime impact. Chronic stress negatively impacts babies' development when their primary caregivers are physically and emotionally unavailable. For Oklahoma, many costly problems, ranging from social issues-failure to complete high school, incarceration, homelessness, etc. to health problems-cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, obesity, mental illness, substance abuse, etc. could be dramatically reduced if attention was paid to improving the environments of relationships and early experiences for babies and toddlers.

### FACTS ABOUT BABIES AND TODDLERS:<sup>1</sup>



### WHAT IS INFANT MENTAL HEALTH?

Infant mental health is the developing capacity of the infant and toddler to

- form close and secure relationships
- experience, regulate and express emotions
- explore the environment and learn

all in the context of family, community and cultural expectations for young children.<sup>3</sup>

## WHY IS INFANT MENTAL HEALTH IMPORTANT?

Social-emotional competence develops gradually and is not as obvious as other developmental milestones for babies and toddlers, such as walking and talking. Sound mental health provides an essential foundation of stability that supports all other aspects of human development—from the formation of friendships and the ability to cope with adversity to the achievement of success in school, work and community life.

Significant mental health problems can and do occur in infants and young children and their emotional well-being is directly linked to the functioning of their caregivers and the families in which they live. Parents and caregivers must tune in to young children's cues in order to understand what they may be thinking or feeling to help children learn about themselves and connect with others. It is essential to treat young children's mental health problems within the context of their families, homes and communities.



## OKLAHOMA'S FUTURE BEGINS WITH BABIES

The facts about the 157,634 infants and toddlers in Oklahoma tell an important story about what it is like to be a very young child in this state and the important resources that can change the future life course for the many children who are not getting off to the best start. Adverse early experiences can weaken babies' brain development and follow them their entire lives. 65% of Oklahoma's infants and toddlers have at least one risk factor known to increase the chance of poor health and developmental outcomes.

Oklahoma babies and their caregivers CAN'T wait! There are multiple opportunities to intervene early and impact more infants and toddlers by working to stabilize the environment of relationships and experiences that form the contexts for their development. Oklahoma's future prosperity is at stake when, from the very beginning, all of our children don't share in the opportunity to develop to their fullest potential. Making wise investments in relationship focused supports and services for families with infants and toddlers ensures that the next generation will develop into healthier, more productive Oklahomans. <sup>5</sup>



<sup>1</sup>ZERO TO THREE, Laying the Foundation for Early Development: Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health. 2012

<sup>2</sup>ZERO TO THREE. Infant Mental Health Task Force

<sup>3, 6, 7</sup> ZERO TO THREE, State Baby Facts, 2014.

<sup>4, 5</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2008/2012). Establishing a Level Foundation for Life: Mental Health Begins in Early Childhood: Working Paper 6. Updated Edition. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>