Elevating Prevention and Promotion in Early Childhood Mental Health: A Case Study Series

This case study is part of a series that describes evidence-based, innovative, and exemplary practices that support positive mental health for children. The case studies of five organizations highlight key elements of prevention and promotion efforts in early childhood mental health as well as the contextual factors that support implementation. Case study sites were selected from an environmental scan that identified innovative and exemplary practices and approaches to prevention and promotion in early childhood mental health.

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Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Strategy
Using Social Justice to Build Provider Capacity to Support Mental Health in Infancy and Early Childhood

What is this initiative?

Best Starts for Kids (BSK)—a community-driven initiative in King County, Washington, funded by a voter-approved levy—invests in various programs focused on early childhood development, including the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Strategy (IECMHS), which creates a comprehensive network of supports for service providers working with young children and their families.

The IECMHS emphasizes social justice in its approach by prioritizing equitable access to early intervention, building on community strengths, and advocating for policy and systems change. By focusing on social justice, the IECMHS also aims to empower BIPOC providers with the knowledge and resources necessary to promote healthy social-emotional outcomes in young children. Specifically, the IECMHS emphasizes the importance of addressing implicit bias in services and promoting anti-racist, inclusive, and culturally responsive practices. This approach helps ensure services are accessible to all children and families, regardless of their language,

Key terms

Promotion and prevention. Strategies and services to strengthen skills, support resilience, reduce risk factors, and establish supportive environments for mental well-being.[1]

Reflective practice. Process of examining and reflecting on one's actions, values, and approach to engage in continuous learning.[2]

Infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH). The social and emotional development of infants and young children (up to age 5), in the context of relationships.[3]

BIPOC. Black, Indigenous, and people of color.

Social justice. Providing equal access, social opportunities, and rights to all.

[1] Saxena, S., P.K. Maulik, and World Health Organization. "Prevention and Promotion in Mental Health." World Health Organization, 2002.

[2] Andrews, J. "The Value of Reflective Practice: A Student Case Study." *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, vol. 63, no. 8, 2000, pp. 396–398.

[3] Zero to Three. "Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health." n.d. https://www.zerotothree.org/issue-areas/infant-and-early-childhood-mental-health/.

socioeconomic status, culture, or other factors—reducing disparities in mental health outcomes and promoting overall well-being.

Whom does the IECMHS serve?

The strategy supports early childhood service providers working in community-based organizations—such as early care educators, mental health care providers, home visitors, and parent educators, with or without formal training. The IECMHS funds professional development, community building, and mentoring opportunities at no cost for these providers.

A central focus of the strategy is on reducing differences in rates of access to education and ongoing professional support for providers from communities of color, including those in BIPOC communities, recent immigrants, and non-native English speakers. To meet the needs of these providers, the IECMHS created the [BIPOC Community of Leaders Certificate Program](). This reflective practice program teaches the critical connection between social justice and early social-emotional development.

How does the IECMHS use prevention and promotion in early childhood mental health?

The IECMHS fosters children's healthy social-emotional development and promotes early childhood mental health by investing in service providers who care for young children and their families. IECMHS staff host learning and connection opportunities for BIPOC providers that integrate specialized knowledge in infant and early childhood mental health with a social justice perspective—for example, learning sessions on the impact of implicit bias in services. They also provide mentoring through reflective practice to increase the cultural relevancy of providers' work and strengthen their support system. The focus on social justice and cultural relevancy builds a sense of community and trust, which enables providers to prioritize prevention and promotion activities in safe spaces.

What is the IECMHS approach?

Integrative, relational, and collaborative.
By actively engaging with various providers and similar initiatives in the state, the IECMHS aims to break down service silos and foster a more cohesive and comprehensive network of early childhood mental health supports to maximize resources for providers. Collaboration facilitates early identification of issues and timely interventions, which are crucial in promoting positive mental health in early childhood.

Emphasis on equity and social justice.
The strategy centers BIPOC experiences and input by challenging traditional structures that perpetuate inequity and promoting anti-racist and inclusive practices. This supports early childhood mental health by enhancing the quality of care provided to all children, thus supporting the prevention of potential mental health difficulties.

Centers cultural relevance and respect.
The strategy was created by and for underrepresented providers and leaders in the field, including those from marginalized racial and ethnic communities. It is grounded in and responds to the needs of providers by ensuring their early childhood mental health supports reflect the values and needs of the community they serve. This enhances family engagement and therefore effective promotion of early childhood mental health.

- **Creating safe spaces to build community and a sense of belonging.** IECMHS staff believe that the more connected and supported BIPOC providers are, the better equipped they are to build trust and meaningful relationships with families. Safe and supportive environments where positive connections and healthy emotional expression can flourish has a cascading effect, benefiting both the providers themselves and, ultimately, the children and families they serve.

- **Grounding social justice in reflective practice.** The reflective practice groups support provider well-being (for example, by reducing burnout) and help build their professional skills. Providers engage in guided self-reflection, examining the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and intentions underlying their work. Providers also problem-solve and learn alongside their peers. They intentionally explore the relevant societal issues that influence their work and the lives of the children and families they support—such as systemic inequities, implicit biases, power dynamics, privilege, and generational trauma. Reflective practice can strengthen the relationships between providers and parents or other caregivers, which can in turn strengthen the relationships between parents or other caregivers and their infants, ultimately promoting healthy social-emotional development.

Fostering equity by centering social justice and provider experiences

> **Promoting mental health by emphasizing a relationship of trust**
>
> *"We are finding that families are sharing more with us about their thoughts and their concerns about their children—where, without that [trust], maybe they wouldn't have brought up the subject. And when they bring up the subject, that gives us the opportunity to offer ideas or whatever the parent might just be needing...."*
>
> —IECMHS trainee

The IECMHS uses a "provider-grounded" approach that (1) centers providers' knowledge and honors their expertise and input, (2) invests in mentoring that empowers providers, and (3) creates and sustains family-provider relationships. By integrating providers' knowledge, IECMHS staff increase their own understanding and responsiveness to the social inequities communities experience (for example, structural barriers to accessing mental health service). Being responsive to these realities enhances their credibility, increases the reach of their strategy, and fosters genuine community engagement.

Further, the strategy's emphasis on reflective practice strengthens providers' ability to address challenges and advocate for continuous systemic change. This helps ensure the IECMHS approach to mentoring resonates with the dynamic social contexts and unique priorities of a given community of providers. IECMHS staff and trainers also strive to build meaningful relationships with providers and leaders in the community by creating professional development spaces where strong and meaningful connections can grow. Strong connections among providers are an avenue to address their own mental health, which ultimately impacts the quality of care they provide. Thus, addressing providers' mental health better positions them to promote the mental health of the children they serve and helps create sustainable change at the community level.

Reflective practice is one way to support providers' overall health

"*[Providers] feel supported, talk about how their work impacts them, express concerns about inequities of system, etc. ... [when you have] people to talk to, [you] are already better off, reduce burnout, reduce [the] impact of vicarious trauma.*"

—IECMHS leadership member

How does the IECMHS find and manage resources to sustain the initiative?

What are barriers to implementing the IECMHS?

The main barrier to implementation relates to personal and systemic challenges experienced by BIPOC providers in the early childhood mental health field—such as the lack of affordable and culturally relevant professional development. By providing no-cost professional development (in at least nine different languages), community-building spaces, and mentoring opportunities, the IECMHS tries to address these challenges and improve providers' capacity to engage in meaningful work supporting the healthy emotional and developmental well-being of young children and their families.

The IECMHS is an investment in the long-term training and capacity-building of providers. The providers who engage in training and mentoring opportunities eventually mentor other providers, creating a network for delivering and maintaining professional development in the community.

Another factor contributing to the strategy's sustainment is BSK's ability to maintain voter interest in the initiative since its inception in 2015. This is partly because of BSK's extensive efforts to partner with providers and gather their input, which has informed its strategic planning and fostered trust.

In addition, the IECMHS is intentional in fostering and maintaining critical relationships within the community by participating in provider coalitions and legislative subcommittees. This has helped the IECMHS expand its network of supports for providers and services for families. The IECMHS uses these relationships to form critical partnerships to obtain additional funds that support its goals and activities as well as its expansion.

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