

A close-up photograph of a young child's face, focusing on the eye and forehead. The child has dark skin and curly hair. The image is framed by a white border and set against a background of blue and light blue geometric shapes.

# **ACCELERATING PROGRESS** *for* **INFANT AND EARLY** **CHILDHOOD MENTAL** **HEALTH IN WASHINGTON**

A Series of Issue Briefs

May 2021

## DEFINING INFANT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH

**Relationships are at the heart of our quest to be happy, healthy, safe, and thriving.** For infants, toddlers, and young children, all development occurs within the context of relationships with parents and other caregivers. These relationships nurture the foundational social and emotional development needed to learn and thrive. Healthy social-emotional development is also known as infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH). In an affirmative sense, IECMH is *the capacity of children ages 0-5 to experience, express, and regulate emotions, to form close relationships with peers and adult caregivers, and to explore and learn in the context of family, community, and cultural expectations.*<sup>1</sup> Building this social-emotional capacity is essential to strong early development and to success and well-being in life.

**Social-emotional well-being for babies is rooted in the well-being of families and communities.** The experience of bringing children into the world and caring for them is transformative. It can be both joyful and incredibly stressful. Drs. Pilyoung Kim and Sarah Watamura of the University of Denver call the transition to parenting a time of “two open windows,” an exceptionally sensitive period when both infant and parent are especially receptive to being shaped by their environments and mutual interactions.<sup>2</sup> A secure, warm, responsive, and predictable relationship with at least one caregiver influences the formation of neural structures in the brain that lead to positive infant well-being. But this is also a time when families are often overloaded with stressors as they seek to respond to their child’s needs and hold everything else together.

**Trauma and stress get in the way of healthy development.** Many stressors related to caring for very young children are experienced by all families, but stress is particularly acute for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC), who both navigate and help their children navigate a world defined by structural racism. Many in the early childhood and mental health community talk about the negative impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, across a lifetime. Yet

underlying ACEs are layers of racialized, intergenerational, and historical trauma stemming from structural racism, classism, and other forms of oppression. All parents strive to protect their children from adversity, and caregivers’ ability to buffer stress for their children is immensely powerful—but caregivers need and deserve better and more equitable supports.<sup>3</sup>

**A continuum of IECMH services and supports can help families.** While IECMH refers to children’s social-emotional well-being, it is also used to describe the continuum of services and supports for children and their families and communities. With IECMH supports, ACEs and the impact of racism, trauma, and other forms of oppression can be prevented or addressed in the moment, creating space for families and babies to care for each other with confidence and joy. IECMH supports exist along a continuum that **promotes** healthy social-emotional development, **prevents** disruptions to mental health, and **treats** mental health conditions effectively before they can lead to more severe challenges.

**PROMOTION**

Promotion services are universal and focused on distributing information and resources to support strong child-caregiver relationships, healthy development, and early learning.

**PREVENTION**

Prevention services identify and reduce conditions that lead to disruptions in social-emotional well-being and strengthen the capacities of young children and their families.

**TREATMENT**

Treatment services are designed to alleviate distress and facilitate healthy development and behavior for young children and families who are experiencing trauma and other mental health challenges.

Ensuring that families are supported by a range of racially and culturally concordant IECMH services in nurturing close, caring, joyous connections during the first few years of children's lives is essential. Families need support that meets their needs, reduces stress, and makes room for the transformational power of connection with young children in the context of their family, community, and culture. That connection is not only a critical buffer against adversity but also a core element of lifelong success for children and families.

The state of Washington is part of a national movement to ensure that a strong network of IECMH services is available to young children and their families. Even as significant progress has been made across the state, however, there is a continued need to address long-standing systemic inequities and the inadequacy of the resources that have been invested in systems of care that support social-emotional well-being. The urgency to address the mental health and wellness of families with young children has been especially visible recently. As Washington currently responds to the impact of COVID-19, it is increasingly necessary to address these persistent inequities and invest additional resources focused on enhancing social-emotional health. Ensuring that babies are healthy and safe, and have joyful, connected experiences with their caregivers, is the first line of defense against negative outcomes and more costly impacts later in life. For that reason, leaders and champions across Washington have an important role to play in promoting positive social-emotional well-being and strong child-caregiver relationships—creating the best conditions for young children, families, and communities to thrive.





## UNDERSTANDING WHAT EXISTS IN WASHINGTON STATE

To fully understand what it would take to provide Washington's young children and families with the IECMH resources and services they need, an extensive effort was launched to examine the landscape of programs, partnerships, and services available across Washington State. This effort, with support from Perigee Fund, took place concurrently and in alignment with an IECMH landscape analysis and strategic planning process in King County supported by Best Starts for Kids. School Readiness Consulting (SRC) was engaged to lead both projects so that lessons learned and promising practices from the county could inform the state work, and insights from the state landscape could inform strategic planning for the county. The findings collectively offer a compelling set of recommendations from families, providers, and community and system leaders for what it will take to create and sustain an equitable and coordinated network of IECMH services and supports in King County and across Washington State.



**COMMUNITY COUNCIL PHOTOVOICE BY:**

*Erica Armstrong*

CERTIFIED MIDWIFE ASSISTANT,  
BIRTH DOULA, AND MOTHER OF TWO  
CHILDREN, NA'MIER AND SKYLAR

## What Steps Did We Take?

The Washington State and King County projects were guided by a shared Advisory Table and Community Council made up of families, IECMH providers, local and state policymakers, agency leaders, and advocates to provide various perspectives, insights, and reflections on the landscaping process and findings. The Washington Association for Infant Mental Health and Soar also provided invaluable capacity by facilitating focus groups, interviews, and site visits in order to connect with community members and practitioners across the state, as well as offering strategic input throughout the process. With the support and guidance of all these organizations, SRC took the following steps:



### Analyzing Local Data

**(January 2019-February 2020)**

SRC requested existing administrative data from state and local agencies, including information about demographics of infants, young children, and families, as well as services available to support child and family mental health and well-being.



### Asking the Right Questions

**(January 2019-February 2020)**

SRC conducted focus groups, interviews, and site visits and gathered a series of photos and stories offered by families and IECMH providers. Honoring the commitment to equitable representation with this work, SRC ensured that these efforts reached communities that represent a range of geographies and urbanicity, as well as diverse racial, linguistic, and cultural identities.



### Examining the Field

**(January 2019-February 2020)**

SRC conducted a literature review and a scan of innovative practices in other jurisdictions and states to better understand opportunities to strengthen IECMH services.



### Synthesizing the Information

**(February 2020-December 2020)**

SRC synthesized findings from across all sources of information to identify key themes and to inform potential directions for the state.

### For Washington State...

#### Developing the Issue Briefs

**(December 2020–April 2021)**

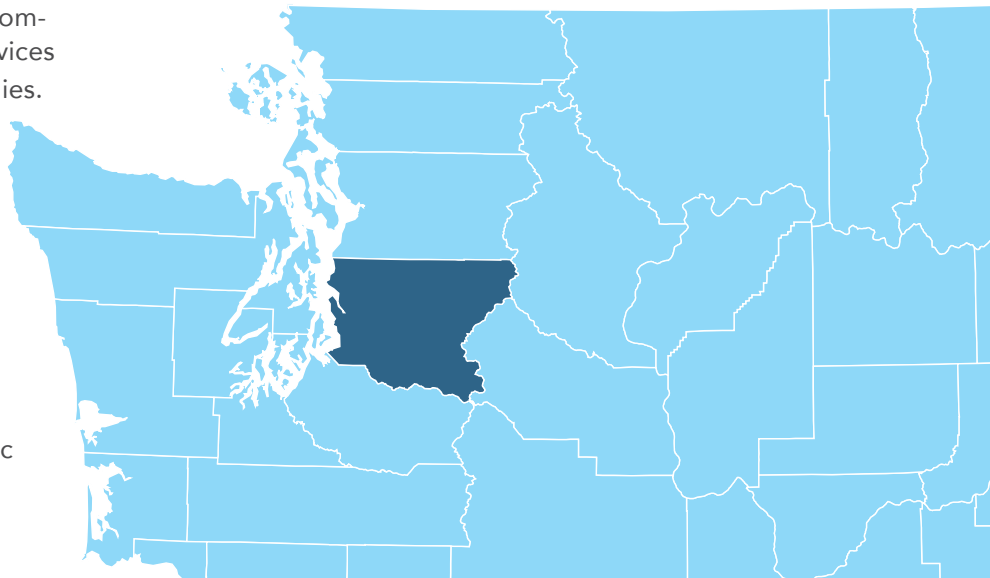
The final phase of the work included developing a series of issue briefs to share findings from the landscape effort and provide recommended actions to strengthen IECMH services for Washington's young children and families.

### For King County...

#### Developing the Strategic Plan

**(December 2020–April 2021)**

The final phase involved developing a full strategic plan to streamline landscape analysis findings and provide a road map for the IECMH in King County. The resulting plan is intended as a living document and will include considerations for periodic reflection and revisions.



## HOW DID WASHINGTON RESIDENTS GET INVOLVED?

The involvement of families, providers, and other stakeholders across many diverse communities was a central part of the process. Building on the lived experiences and perspectives of those who have the highest stake in IECMH, this work aims to elevate the full range of needs and insights to support the social and emotional well-being of all Washington's children and families.



# 47

### INTERVIEWS WITH STATE AND LOCAL LEADERS

To learn more about organizational practices, challenges, and aspirations



# 14

### FAMILY FOCUS GROUPS ACROSS THE STATE

To hear more about how families experience infant and early childhood mental health services, how they are investing in their young children, and what their children need most

- With families in King County (7), Yakima (2), Tri-Cities (2), Pierce, Spokane, and Clallam
- Conducted in Spanish and English, and prioritizing Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Congolese, and Vietnamese families



# 4

### PROVIDER FOCUS GROUPS IN KING COUNTY

To better understand the perspectives and challenges of those who work directly with children and families in infant and early childhood mental health settings

- Including clinicians, prevention service providers, a group specifically for prevention providers of color, and Early Support for Infants and Toddlers (ESIT) providers



# 5

### SITE-SPECIFIC FOCUS GROUPS IN KING COUNTY

To learn about promising and innovative local strategies and the dedicated professionals who lead the way

- Including Childhaven, Encompass, Navos, Odessa Brown, Center for Human Services



# 12

### COMMUNITY COUNCIL PARTICIPANTS IN THE PHOTOVOICE PROJECT

To share photos and stories from parents and providers that highlight their lived experiences and perspectives on what it takes to support young children and families



## OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE BRIEFS

For the Washington State effort, the resulting issue briefs provide an overview of current efforts, successes to build on, and gaps that should be addressed. The issue briefs also offer recommendations informed by families, providers, and other key stakeholders to guide statewide efforts to advance equitable, culturally responsive, and effective IECMH services and supports.

### BRIEF #1

#### **MAKING THE CASE: Why Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Matters**

An introductory look at the importance of social-emotional wellbeing and the significance of IECMH as a catalyst for change in Washington state.

### BRIEF #2

#### **CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES: Improving Access to Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Services**

A discussion of the barriers that families face to access the full spectrum of IECMH supports—from screening and referral to receipt and coordination of comprehensive mental health

### BRIEF #3

#### **REDEFINING QUALITY: Providing Infant and Early Childhood Health Support to Fully Meet the Diverse Needs of Families**

An overview of opportunities to improve the quality of IECMH services delivery, including considerations for relationship-based, trauma-informed, and culturally and linguistically responsive prac-

### BRIEF #4

#### **WHAT PROVIDERS NEED: Strengthening the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Workforce**

An overarching picture of the systemic factors that undermine the supply, diversity, preparedness, and wellbeing of professionals delivering IECMH services.

### BRIEF #5

#### **ACCELERATING STATEWIDE CHANGE: Advancing Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health in State and Local Systems**

An examination of policy and advocacy, funding, and data and research as areas in which increased action and alignment could help move the needle to advance the multiple state-level systems that support IECMH services.

## ADVANCING INFANT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH

Washington has made important progress, and there is more work to be done. Strong children and families are the building blocks of a vibrant and prosperous Washington, so when it comes to ensuring that the state's youngest residents are healthy, happy, and thriving, there is no time to waste. The following findings, key takeaways, and recommendations lay the groundwork for enhancing and accelerating the state's efforts to support the social-emotional well-being of young children and their families—leading to a brighter future for all.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The IECMH landscape analysis was a collaborative effort guided by stakeholders from across the state. Perigee Fund and its partners at School Readiness Consulting (SRC) acknowledge the considerable time, talent, and perspectives of the IECMH community, who generously participated in a variety of ways.



**To the families** whose willingness to share the triumphs and challenges of life with young children brings attention to the system’s most urgent needs: Your voices make all the difference.



**To the providers, community leaders, and administrators** who voiced deep truths and wisdom about what the infant and early childhood mental health system is and what it can be: Your dedication to the work and the families in your care is an inspiration.



**To our partners at Washington Association for Infant Mental Health and Soar,** who facilitated focus groups, interviews, and site visits and enabled connections with families, providers, and communities: This effort would not have been possible without your support.



**To the parents and providers who participated as Community Council members** and shared images and stories through the PhotoVoice project: The opportunity to see the successes and shortcomings of the system through your eyes is immeasurably valuable.



**To the Advisory Table,** who offered their time and expertise throughout the process: Your commitment and continued effort to lead the way are essential.

COMMUNITY COUNCIL		ADVISORY TABLE	
Erica Armstrong	Eric Ruthford	Susan Barbeau	Dila Perera
Mara Calhoun	Arlene Smith	Dr. Betsy Browder	Ron Rabin
Sherry Dione	Sierra Sonza	Barbara Cobb	Rep. Tana Senn
Carol Gicheru	Kathy Svinth	Katie Hess	Elizabeth Tinker
Rocio Gonzalez	Christine Wood	Lea Johnson	Maria Vasquez
Rokea Jones		Judy King	Liz Venuto
Selam Kebebew		Sally Mednansky	

All the guidance provided from key stakeholders served to highlight the triumphs and challenges around social and emotional well-being, and to lift up important opportunities to improve IECMH across the state as a significant driver for change for all young children and their families.



The project was supported by School Readiness Consulting. As a consulting firm focused exclusively on early childhood, SRC partners with cities, districts, states, foundations, and nonprofits to develop and implement systemwide strategies that improve outcomes for children in school and life. SRC believes that improving early childhood and affirming the right for all children to thrive represents the greatest opportunity to create a just society.

1. Zero to Three. (2017). "The Basics of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health: A Briefing Paper." <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1951-the-basics-of-infant-and-early-childhood-mental-health-a-briefing-paper>.
2. Phu, T., Erhart, A., Kim, P., and Watamura, S. (2020). "Two Open Windows: Part II—New Research on Infant and Caregiver Neurobiologic Change." [https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Two\\_Open\\_Windows\\_II.pdf](https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Two_Open_Windows_II.pdf).
3. Zero to Three. (2017). "The Basics of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health: A Briefing Paper." <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1951-the-basics-of-infant-and-early-childhood-mental-health-a-briefing-paper>.