

## Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation

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Young children's healthy social and emotional development is critical to school readiness and positive long-term outcomes.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Although most children progress in their development without any significant challenges, research exposing high rates of preschool expulsion<sup>4</sup> coupled with estimates suggesting that one in ten young children exhibit problem behaviors<sup>5</sup> underscore that this is not the case for all children. One approach to addressing challenging behaviors that is gaining in popularity is early childhood mental health consultation (ECMHC).

ECMHC is characterized by a professional consultant with mental health expertise working collaboratively with early care and education staff/programs (e.g., child care centers, Head Start programs, family day care homes) and families to improve *their* ability to prevent, identify, treat and reduce the impact of mental health problems among children from birth to age 6.<sup>6</sup> Essentially, ECMHC is an indirect, capacity-building approach. Another hallmark of ECMHC is its comprehensive focus, which addresses *promotion* of social emotional health and *prevention* of behavioral problems in addition to intervention for children already exhibiting challenging behavior. Mental health consultants typically provide two types of consultation: 1) child- or family-centered consultation, which aims to address the needs of an individual child who is exhibiting challenging behaviors or whose social emotional well-being may be at risk due to a family crisis (e.g., death in the family, divorce); and 2) programmatic consultation, which focuses on improving the overall quality of the early care and education (ECE) program and/or assisting the program to solve a specific issue that affects more than one child, staff member and/or family.<sup>7</sup>

Preliminary research findings suggest that ECMHC does yield positive outcomes for children, ECE staff and programs;<sup>8,9</sup> however, more research is needed to develop a solid evidence base and provide guidance on which aspects of consultation are critical for achieving desired outcomes. To assist states and communities in their efforts to conduct high-quality evaluations of ECMHC programs and contribute knowledge to the field, researchers from Georgetown University, Johns Hopkins University, and Portland State University developed an evaluation toolkit (available at <http://gucchd.georgetown.edu/>). This toolkit is also a useful resource for those considering how to structure consultation programs.

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<sup>1</sup> National Research Council & Institute of Medicine. (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. J. P. Shonkoff & D. A. Phillips (Eds.). Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

<sup>2</sup> Raver, C. C. & Knitzer, J. (2002). *Ready to Enter: What Research Tells Policymakers About Strategies to Promote Social and Emotional School Readiness Among Three- and Four-Year-Old Children*. New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health.

<sup>3</sup> Thompson, R.A. & Raikes, H.A. (2007). The Social and Emotional Foundations of School Readiness. In D. Perry, R. Kaufmann, & J. Knitzer (Eds.), *Social & Emotional Health in Early Childhood*. (pp.13-35). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

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<sup>4</sup> Gilliam, W. S. (2005). Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergartener systems. New Haven, CT: Yale University Child Study Center.

<sup>5</sup> Raver & Knitzer.

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, E., & Kaufmann, R. K. (2005, Rev. ed). *Early childhood mental health consultation*. DHHS Pub. No. CMHS-SVP0151. Rockville, MD: Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen & Kaufmann, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Perry, D., Brennan, E., Bradley, J., & Allen, M.D. (2006, July). *The Evidence Base on Mental Health Consultation in Early Childhood Settings: Child and Family Outcomes*. Paper presented at Developing Local Systems of Care for Children and Adolescents with Emotional Disturbances and their Families: Orlando, FL.

<sup>9</sup> Brennan, E. M., Bradley, J. R., Allen, M. D., & Perry, D. F. (in press). The evidence base for mental health consultation in early childhood settings: Research synthesis addressing staff and program outcomes. *Early Education and Development*.