



CENTRE COUNTY PREVENTION COALITION

A SAMHSA Funded Drug-Free Community Coalition

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May 13, 2009 – Promoting Early Childhood Mental Health

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Making friends. Displaying anger in a healthy way. Figuring out conflicts peacefully. Showing concern and taking care of someone who has been hurt. Waiting patiently. Following rules. All of these qualities describe *healthy* social-emotional development.

Healthy social and emotional development refers to a child's capacity to experience, manage, and express a full range of positive and negative emotions; develop close, satisfying relationships with others; and enable readiness for learning.

It is a common myth that ensuring good cognitive ability is enough to foster academic success in the later years.

The truth is, even before young children can tackle their numbers and letters, they're forming their foundation for learning, through gains in the capacity for behavioral self-control and effective regulation of their emotions.

Importantly, children learn these fundamental skills in the context of their family environment. The mental health of adults goes hand in hand with a child's early social and emotional development: both in the parents' behavior and the family dynamic.

Professionals in this field, who are focused on the social and emotional aspects of child development, refer to their area of practice as "infant mental health" or "early childhood mental health."

Every year, May is National Mental Health Month: a time to promote awareness and recognize the realities of living with mental illness. Mental health problems, like depression or anxiety, are too often considered only as adult concerns.

Did you know that 1 in 5 children ages 9 to 17 have a diagnosable mental health disorder, and that precursors of mental health problems are often evident early in life through un-healthy social-emotional development?

As such, early childhood represents a critical window for identifying problem behavior, and if necessary, seeking services and professional support before there are detrimental effects on children's later functioning.

Fortunately, services and supports are available to young children with mental health needs—and their families—in Centre County—not just in the month of May, but year round.

Smart Start-Centre County is a large network of child care professionals, businesses, parents, academics, and citizens dedicated to the needs, concerns, and issues of young children in Centre County. This network acts as a clearinghouse for information, providing a directory of local resources for families.

How can you help promote early mental health awareness in Centre County? Get involved, and become an advocate for kids! Smart Start-Centre County welcomes new members to its Early Childhood Mental Health (ECMH) Committee and events, such as the annual Speaker Series. The ECMH committee hopes to soon make available “Tuning In To Kids: Emotionally Intelligent Parenting” classes, giving Centre County parents skills training in emotional awareness, of themselves and their children, as well as, strategies for guiding children’s behavior with appropriate limits.

To find out more contact Smart Start-Centre County at www.smartstartcc.org

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