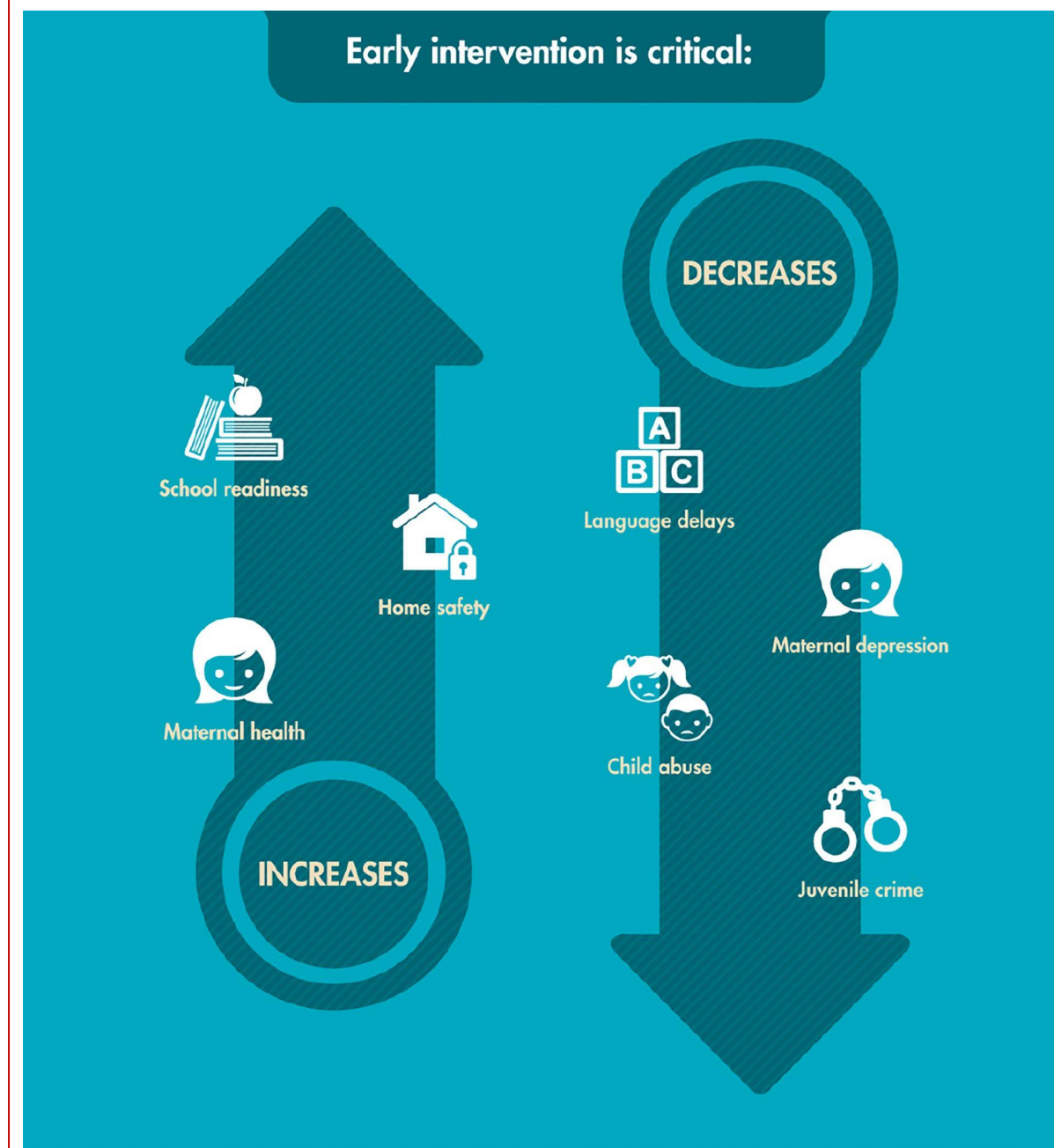


Social Work in Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health — An MSW Internship

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INFANT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH

Infant Mental Health refers to the social and relational wellbeing of children birth to three. Early Childhood Mental Health refers to the same, but in children ages 3-6. Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health practitioners focus on providing support, resources, and guidance to parents and caregivers in order to promote secure attachment relationships, which lead to better outcomes mental health and other for children and families.



From *What is Infant-Family Mental Health?* by <https://www.chla.org/ChildMentalHealth>.
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MSW INTERNSHIP SETTING

Leap-ei is an inclusive preschool program for ages 2 to 5 years. It is a preschool that serves all children, and is skilled at meeting the needs of children expelled by other preschools for behavioral or emotional issues. They offer small class sizes and a nurturing, positive environment for children of all abilities to grow and learn.

Did you know that in the United States, more than 250 children per day are expelled from preschool (PBS NewsHour, 2014)?

SOCIAL WORK ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN INFANT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH

- Parent counseling and support
- Individual sessions using play therapy techniques
- Group sessions using play therapy techniques
- Psychoeducation to parents, caregivers, and staff
- Case management for families of children with special needs
- Advocacy
- Program development including event planning, community outreach, and policy writing

PLAY THERAPY

Play therapy uses a theoretical model based on the client's needs. This process creates a trusting relationship with the client using the therapeutic powers of play. This therapeutic relationship helps clients to resolve difficulties and achieve growth and development. In addition, play therapists help clients to prevent and face psychosocial difficulties.

CHILD CENTERED PLAY THERAPY

“Child Centered play therapy (CCPT) utilizes play, the natural language of children, and therapeutic relationship to provide a safe, consistent therapeutic environment in which a child can experience full acceptance, empathy, and understanding from the counselor and process inner experiences and feelings through play and symbols” (UNT, 2023).

**Toys are children's words and
play is their language.**

—Garry Landreth

CHILD CENTERED PLAY THERAPY: a case example

Four-year-old Jack (a pseudonym) did not speak to teachers, peers, or anyone besides his parents. He was an only child who lived with his mother and father. His parents reported that he spoke freely with them, but if anyone came to their home, he would not talk. At school, he did not interact with the toys or play with the other children. Jack frequently said, “I want to go home.”

CCPT is not directed by the therapist, rather it is led by the child. The social work intern would track his actions, reflect emotions, and empower Jack to lead the play. CCPT creates a safe space that empowers a child to explore feelings and beliefs which drive behaviors. After several sessions, there were themes played in the playroom which addressed his frustrations such as a victorious car that drove other cars off the road. After several sessions, Jack's posture seemed to become more relaxed in social interactions. He appeared to be more willing to interact with teachers and other students. After several therapy sessions, Jack's statement, “I want to go home” was replaced with “I want to stay.”

THERAPLAY®

Theraplay is an attachment-based play therapy. Attachment theory stems from John Bowlby's premise that the early emotional bonds a child has with its caregiver are profoundly important throughout the child's life. Theraplay focuses on strengthening that bond between the parent and child through playful adult led activities.

THERAPLAY: a case example

Three-year-old Henry (a pseudonym) lacked eye contact and seemed mostly nonverbal. His parents were hardworking and highly educated immigrants. According to the parents, they rarely played with Henry, and he did not engage in independent or peer play at home. Cultural and societal values had encouraged the parents to prioritize academic skills and activities. The social work intern worked on joyful and playful connection between Henry and his mom with Theraplay activities that were structured, nurturing, engaging and challenging. One activity was Henry jumping into his mom's arms from a step. After a few sessions, Henry began having more direct eye contact with his mom. Henry started saying, “Mom, look!” frequently. After jumping into his mom's arms, their hugs and kisses increased. Mom reported that she began creating more playtime with Henry at home. Teachers reported that Henry has become more verbal and interactive with peers and teachers.

SUNSHINE CIRCLES®

Sunshine Circles are a group play therapy based on Theraplay. They are adult-led and used in classroom settings. Weekly Sunshine Circles at Leap-ei resulted in more cooperation, better social skills, more playful and nurturing behaviors from the staff and more fun.



From Leap-ei, A Sunshine Circles session. Copyright 2023, Leap-ei, LLC.

WAYS TO LEARN MORE:

- **NJ Association for Infant Mental Health** <https://nj-aimh.org>
- **Leap-ei** <https://www.leap-ei.com>
- **Association for Play Therapy** <https://www.a4pt.org>
- **The Theraplay Institute** <https://theraplay.org>