

Alaska Association for Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health



AK-AIMH

April 1, 2016

This letter is to support House Current Resolution 21 introduced by Representative Geran Tarr that urges Governor Walker to establish policy and programs to address the public and behavioral health epidemic of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). The Alaska Infant and Early Childhood Association is a non-profit organization whose mission is to support the social and emotional well-being of children between the ages of 0-5 and their families. Our main focus is centered on educating the general public about infant mental health as well as building capacity in the workforce to be able to provide appropriate services to this specific group of children.

The infant mental health professionals who work in this field witness the effects of ACE's on infants and very young children. To catch up and to keep pace with the science of child development, we must ensure that Alaska creates a continuum of strategies and programs to prevent mental health problems, to promote social and emotional well-being, and to treat mental health disorders beginning in pregnancy and continuing on throughout the early years of life and beyond. Contrary to common belief, mental health problems can occur in children under the age of 5 years. Mental health problems for infants and young children might be reflected in physical symptoms, delayed development, inconsolable crying, sleep problems, aggressive or impulsive behavior, and paralyzing fears. Over time, untreated symptoms of mental health problems can "take root" in young children and accumulate to seriously affect their ability to learn and functions. Because infants and young children develop in the context of close, consistent relationships, their own emotional well-being is directly tied to the emotional functioning of their caregivers and families. Untreated parental depression, substance abuse, domestic violence, and trauma disrupt parenting and can affect the mental health of children.

Research demonstrates that early prevention and treatment strategies are more beneficial and cost-effective than attempting to treat emotional difficulties and their effects on learning and health after they become more serious. Therefore it is imperative that Alaska's state policy decisions acknowledge and take into account the importance of the early years offer a unique window of opportunity to prevent the intergenerational transmission of the effects of ACE's and heal the effect of ACE's on the caregivers of infants and toddlers.

Sincerely,
Alaska Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health
Board of Directors