

Zfive: A Community of Support for the Social and Emotional Health of Young Children

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There is increasing awareness in both the professional and lay community about the important role early development plays in health and wellness, not just during the period of childhood, but also throughout a person's lifespan. New scientific evidence from multiple fields, including neuroscience, biology, genetics and the behavioral and social sciences, confirms brain development occurs at an explosive rate during the first three years of life.

What do we mean by mental health in young children, and what does it look like? Mental health in young children is about healthy social-emotional development — the ability to experience, regulate and express emotions, form close interpersonal relationships, and explore the environment and learn. While this development occurs as a matter of course in most instances with little attention given to the nuances of how it happens, the evidence also is clear that disruptions during the prenatal period and the formative years can have a life-long effect on health, adaptive functioning and the very architecture of the developing brain.

So, who is looking out for the infants, toddlers and preschoolers who are experiencing significant adversity, including trauma, abuse, living with a parent with a substance abuse or mental health disorder or being raised in persistent poverty? In 2010, the N.C. General Assembly asked this very question, and in turn, directed the N.C. Institute of Medicine to convene a task force of statewide experts to study the adequacy of the current system of services. The Task Force of 43 members met 15 times between March 2011 and June 2012. Last July, the report, "Growing Up Well: Supporting Young Children's Social-Emotional Development and Mental Health in North Carolina" was issued. The report details a set of

recommendations with both short- and long-term strategies for systemic change that fall into four broad categories:

- Creating a more coordinated, integrated system to meet the social-emotional and mental health needs of young children and their families;
- Promoting awareness and understanding of young children's social-emotional and mental health;
- Improving treatment to meet the social-emotional and mental health needs of young children and their families; and,
- Ensuring a well-prepared workforce.

The full copy and briefs of this report can be found on the N.C. Institute of Medicine website (www.nciom.org).

Zfive: A community of support

So what is happening in Mecklenburg County to keep pace with these recommendations? For the past five years, Zfive has existed as a local community collaborative, serving as a resource to physicians and their patients. Zfive is a team of clinicians, researchers, program managers and parents in Mecklenburg County who are dedicated to improving the lives of children, ages birth-5, with mental health issues, and their families. Since 2007, Zfive has been working to raise awareness, build resources and enhance the quality of developmental services provided to young children. Represented by more than 25 organizations, Zfive meets monthly to share information, build and implement new initiatives, evaluate progress and support each other on issues of shared concern. Subgroups work between meetings to move initiatives forward. Recent activities include the identification and development of trauma screening and attachment-focused assessment protocols and instruments.

Increasing public awareness

Zfive has produced three reports to frame the issues and identify community needs in the field of infant and young child mental health. These reports are available at www.Zfive.org:

- An Assessment of Infant Mental Health Needs in Mecklenburg County: A Report to Smart Start of Mecklenburg County on Behalf of The Infant Mental Health Working Group, April 15, 2008
- Risk, Responsibility and Opportunity: Facing the Facts About the Social-Emotional Health Needs of Mecklenburg County's Most Vulnerable Young Children, prepared by Natalie Conner, PhD, for the Infant Mental Health Working Group, July 21, 2009

- Zfive Recommendations: Addressing the Social-Emotional Needs of Children 0-5 With a Substantiated Finding of Abuse or Neglect or in Need of Services in Mecklenburg County, 2010

Zfive's website connects families and professionals with information including:

- 1) A locally produced video (in English and Spanish) for parents with concerns about their young child's development;
- 2) Local news and events particularly regarding professional development opportunities;
- 3) Recommended reading and helpful websites on topics related to healthy social and emotional development of young children;
- 4) Overview of Zfive programs and reports; and
- 5) An "I Need Help" button that connects parents to definitions of the different types of providers in the community, questions to ask providers while shopping for the right match for their child, links to resources on how to choose a provider, family support resources in the state and a list of state-licensed providers in Mecklenburg County — agencies and

individuals — caring for the social and emotional development needs of young children ages 0-5. This list includes a description of the services provided, insurance accepted, locations where services are provided, languages spoken and much more.

Building resources and enhancing quality

• **Mentoring Program.** Zfive offers licensed clinicians the opportunity to participate in a six-month mentoring experience led by a highly-trained and experienced young child mental health therapist. Established in 2008, the program increases the number of licensed clinicians who are competent in evaluating and treating the mental health needs of children ages birth-5 via evidenced-based assessments and practices. Clinicians gain knowledge about the skills needed to work with these children and their families, as well as become acquainted with evidence-based evaluations and therapeutic interventions for this population. Additionally, the person being mentored practices his/her new skills with children and families, with guidance from the mentor via weekly mentoring sessions and monthly group mentoring meetings.

• **Peer Consultation.** Last February, Zfive launched a peer consultation initiative to expand understanding, appreciation, knowledge and awareness of the clinical issues involved in infant mental health and to support the community in enriching the quality of treatment services for infants, toddlers, young children and their families. Monthly meetings, geared for a broad base of professionals, are led by core clinicians.

• **YFS Collaboration.** In 2010, Zfive completed a pilot program, in which a single infant mental health specialist was embedded in the Department of Social Services' Geo-District One to serve as a consultant, coach and trainer for YFS social workers and supervisors. In 2012, YFS and Mecklenburg Children's Developmental Services partnered to co-locate a licensed mental health clinician and a case coordinator in each Geo-District. With the support of a supervisor, they collaborate with the YFS social workers to meet the needs

of young children. Targeting all children under age 5 with a YFS case designated as (1) substantiated abuse or neglect or, (2) in need of services, the goal is improvement in child and family access to developmentally appropriate services that support children's educational, social and emotional well-being.

• **Young Child Mental Health Training Series.** Zfive, in conjunction with the Charlotte Area Health Education Center (AHEC), has developed an ongoing training series covering a broad array of issues regarding social and emotional development in children ages birth-5. The training series offers topical presentations by nationally recognized experts in the field of early childhood mental health. Many of these workshops are paired with community impact events to bring further attention to the information, and to deepen awareness and capacity in our community.

Extending our reach

Zfive marked its fifth anniversary in 2012 and would like to pause long enough to take stock of where it has been and where it is going. Zfive continuously looks for opportunities to grow awareness about the field of infant and young child mental health outside of Mecklenburg County — as well as to learn from others across the state. Zfive members:

1) Connect each other to opportunities for participation in best-practice learning collaboratives;

2) Have presented Zfive highlights at the national Smart Start Conference, as well as local conferences and gatherings;

3) Have participated in an advisory capacity in the development of the Institute of Medicine's Infant Mental Health Study; and

4) Have supported the development of the new N.C. Infant and Young Child Mental Health Association (www.ncimha.org).

What do you think?

We would like to hear from you.

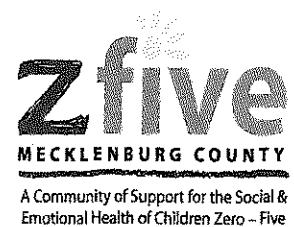
- Where should Zfive pay particular attention over the next couple of years?
- What talent or resources could you contribute to strengthen Zfive?
- How could Zfive and its members help you or your organization?

• What additional information do you wish you had about Zfive, or about infant mental health?

• Who else should Zfive speak with as part of "taking stock?"

• What will you do to ensure a bright future for all of our children?

Zfive meets on the third Thursday of each month at the Dr. Carlton G. Watkins Center, 3500 Ellington St., 9-10:30 a.m. Attendance is open. For more information, e-mail John Ellis at john.ellis@mecklenburgcountync.gov or go to www.Zfive.org.



MMAE Community Health Awards Applications Available Jan. 1, 2013

The Mecklenburg Medical Alliance and Endowment began the process of receiving applications on January 1, for the Community Health Awards to nonprofits in Mecklenburg County. Since 1982, when MMAE established its 501(c)(3), it has granted more than \$1 million to projects that improve the health and quality of the life of the people in the community.

Only applications that promote health-related charitable, scientific and educational needs in Mecklenburg County will be considered. Check the website at www.mmaeonline.com for further information about the application procedures, guidelines and deadline for applying. You also may contact Debbie Taylor, MMAE vice president of Grants and Disbursements, at debbietaylor130@gmail.com or 704-896-3581.