

# WHY A MENTAL HEALTH CURRICULUM?

Early childhood educators have long focused on the physical, emotional, social and cognitive development of young children. Some teachers in preschool programs tend to look at children's developmental levels, consider what skills are needed for kindergarten, and plan activities—often without a clear philosophical base. These programs address certain needs, but do not necessarily prepare children for the variety of life experiences they may face.

Life in America has changed rapidly in recent years. Changes, such as shifts in the economy, have placed a great deal of stress on families and resulted in home and social environments with less stability than children experienced previously. Physical and sexual abuse, divorce, single parenthood, and “working parent” families increase stress on children. Children need responsive environments and meaningful relationships in which to strengthen their inner relationships in which to strengthen their inner resources. Children in very stable situations also need support as they build life skills. The joys and stresses of growing and changing can cause children to feel insecure. All children benefit from an environment which accepts them as individuals, appreciate their capabilities, and fosters their growth in many areas. Thus the Head Start Mental Health program is designed to nurture each child's security and allow growth to become a positive life experience.

Mental Health is a positive state, not just the absence of mental illness. Head Start fosters mental health by promoting the healthy social and emotional development of every child, family, and staff person.

Some common characteristics of mentally healthy people include: curiosity, optimism, self-confidence, ability to exercise developmentally appropriate self-control, ability to cope with frustration and solve problems, and the ability to form meaningful relationships with others. Some common characteristics of mentally healthy families include: adults are in charge, children feel they belong, it is safe to express feelings and needs, change is expected and sources of help and support are used when necessary.

Each child comes into the world wanting to connect with others, to grow, and to explore. Social development ( our feelings about and expectations of relationships with others) and emotional development ( our feelings about and expectations of ourselves) take place in the context of relationships from the very start. Newborn infants enter the world ready to be responsive and active partners with the most important people in their lives: family and other primary care givers. As infants grow and come to know and trust the small day-to-day interactions that make up those relationships, they learn that they can affect the world and are worthy of love. The child's feelings of security, confidence, and trust blossom.

Children's relationship with their primary family caregivers can be the single most powerful protective factor to buffer the stress of life events. Every person has a unique, inborn temperament or style of responding to the world. Understanding temperament ( child and adult) can help a caregiver think about how to structure the environment to better fit individual children's unique styles. In order to help children benefit from the relationships and experiences that Head Start offers, we ask families to be our guides in understanding the child's emotional and social history thus allowing each child to develop socially and emotionally at his/her own pace. The Head Start Mental Health program encourages children's self being and emotional growth so they are better prepared to learn and experience life.