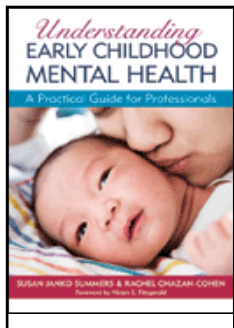


Understanding Early Childhood Mental Health – A Practical Guide for Professionals

Susan Janko Summers and Rachel Chazan-Cohen. Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.: Baltimore, Maryland, 2012. 275 pages. \$39.95 (US), softcover.



This book is primarily geared towards early childhood education professionals, not health professionals. It starts with an introduction describing the lack of training in mental health for early childhood educators, and provides 11 practical steps about how to “support infant mental health in [...] programs” (page 7), such as:

“Educate teachers [...] about social and emotional development and caregiver-child relationships” (page 7);

“Allocate sufficient time and resources to qualified mental health staff or consultants” (page 8);

“Provide support to teachers [...] for compassion fatigue and secondary stress” (page 8).

It then goes on to describe each of these steps in the 14 chapters of the book. It is divided in two sections: the first section consists of the first seven chapters, and relates to infant mental health (development and relationships), while the second section deals with strategies to implement interventions in organizations to support infant mental health.

The first part of the book is useful to anyone working with young children and their families. It starts by giving general basic information about infant mental health, and then goes on to address the challenges brought up by young children who are aggressive or have emotional dysregulation. We find the chapter following this, on maternal depression, very important, given that educators might not realize their role and ability to intervene with the children themselves, and with the primary caregivers. An introduction to risk and resilience models, and a description of the effects of direct and indirect trauma follow. This section ends with tools to assess socio-emotional development and caregiver relationships, with descriptions of various questionnaires and curricula. We like that the first section of the book brings up the complexity of having to address mental health or abuse concerns with parents, and helps guide educators through

the emotional and cognitive process of communicating these concerns.

The second section of the book is more useful to those in a position of starting, managing, or assessing an early childhood program. It elaborates, among other things, on how to act on a systemic level to involve infant mental health specialists in the classrooms, how to take care of the emotional needs of staff members and engage in reflective supervision, and finally how to do program evaluation. The chapter on how to help parents seems quite relevant to me, given that educators are likely more trained to interact with children than with their parents, and having knowledge of the possible ways that they can help these families would likely empower them more to intervene in a positive way.

One of the strengths of this book includes the attention to including information that is evidence-based, as shown by the long list of references at the end of each chapter. The list includes books and journals from the fields of education, psychology, and medicine (child psychiatry, paediatrics). Statistics appear to be derived from reliable sources, such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The two editors hold PhDs, as do the majority of the contributors, and there is a high level of scholarly content.

The book is easy to read, despite relying heavily on research articles. Chapters are brief and focused, with more detailed charts, tables and lists of resources for those who wish to know more about each topic or have a more visual summary of the information. The quotes from various early childhood professionals and parents make it even more enjoyable to read and help put the didactic material into context.

We did not always find useful the addition of some information in boxes instead of in the main body of the text, as it sometimes seems to disrupt the flow of thought. It may have made more sense to have some of the boxes at the end of the chapter or integrated in the body of the text.

Overall, this book does offer useful basic information about mental health of young children, which could be useful for health professionals who are not familiar with this particular subject. More importantly, I believe that this book is of great value to early childhood educators and programs trying to incorporate more mental health promotion and intervention in their work.

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