



# Tipperary Infant Mental Health Project Newsletter

Issue 1

January 2019

## Why Infant Mental Health Matters

**A baby's brain is 25 to 30% developed at birth and almost full grown by the age of 3 years. No other period of brain development is as critical to setting the stage for human growth, development and mental health as these first three years of a child's life.**

Babies come into the world expecting to establish a relationship and prepared for social interaction. They are very social beings from birth. Their early social interactions, as well as stimulation such as holding and touching are key to the establishment of the essential brain pathways. Therefore it is crucial that there is a significant adult ready to respond and attune to this relationship with them.

When babies consistently experience warm, sensitive interactions with their caregivers, their brain and neural pathways will develop patterns of understanding that assure them that their environment is predictable, safe and responsive.

When infants are provided with predictable and nurturing caregiving environments, they are afforded the best possible opportunity for optimal development.

The psychological process of preparation for the birth of a baby and a future family does not begin at the moment of birth .

**There is compelling evidence of a link between maternal psychological functioning and pregnancy that primes the maternal brain for the challenges of motherhood (Mayes, Rutherford, Suchman & Close, 2012).**

The ante-natal period and the first weeks, months and years of a baby's life are a critical transitional stage in the development of the parent-infant relationship and the development of the family itself (Nugent & Brazelton, 1989,2000).

Infant Mental Health (IMH) refers to how well a child develops socially and emotionally from birth to three years. Positive development during this time impacts upon cognitive development and enhances the child's capacity to makes healthy transitions into education and to sustain their positive health and wellbeing across later developmental stages of childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

There is now a growing body of longitudinal research in mental health and neuroscience that shows the origin of mental health problems diagnosed in later childhood, adolescence and adulthood can be found during pregnancy and the first three years of life (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Tremblay 2010).

**"Thus, the transformative developmental challenges for infant and parent of this time present the practitioner with a unique opportunity for preventive intervention at this early stage" (brazeltontouchpoints.org).**

It is essential that infant mental health is recognized and understood with the same importance as the physical development of the infant.



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## Infant Mental Health in Tipperary

The Tipperary Infant Mental Health Project began in 2013, initiated by HSE Psychologists working in the Clonmel area (CHO5). Audrey Lonergan, Fionnuala O'Shea and Rosarii O'Donnell-Connorton are Infant Mental Health Specialists accredited by the Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health.

They approached a number of Community service providers to discuss how the benefits of IMH practice could be used on a multi-disciplinary basis and reach communities at all levels.

The Tipperary IMH Steering Group was then formed comprised of the three HSE Psychologists and representatives from Clonmel Community Mothers, Barnardos, Cuan Saor Women's Refuge, Tusla and Clonmel Community Resource Centre (CCRC).

Audrey, Fionnuala and Rosarii are also involved in the development of e-learning IMH training modules and training materials being produced by the Nurture Programme—a partnership between HSE, Atlantic Philanthropies, Katharine Howard Foundation, Community Foundation for Ireland and the Centre for Effective Services.



Launched in 2016, the Nurture Programme builds on the existing child health programme, strengthening a cohesive, integrated child health and wellbeing service for children aged 0-2 years and their families. It aims to support parents and healthcare professionals in their caring and service provisions to give each baby the best start in life. ([www.hse.ie/nurtureprogramme](http://www.hse.ie/nurtureprogramme) and [www.hse.ie/Caringforyourbaby](http://www.hse.ie/Caringforyourbaby))

# Tipperary Infant Mental Health Project Strategic Plan

The Tipperary IMH Project Steering Group initially focused on raising awareness about Infant Mental Health with its emphasis on the infant's social and emotional development in the context of their early relationships with caregivers, and on providing training to front-line staff to embed the IMH approach in work practice.

In 2013, and again in 2017, Infant Mental Health Masterclass training was delivered to two groups of front-line professionals working with infants and their families. A Reflective Practice Network Group was also established in 2014 which still meets on a monthly basis to share learning.

Since 2014, the Steering Group has considered how it can take on a strategic role in promoting integration of IMH principles and practice into statutory and community-based service provision to children and families. It has undergone a facilitated process to develop its objectives, goals, and related actions, and has developed its Tipperary Infant Mental Health Strategic Plan.

The objectives of the Strategic Plan are:

- (1) To begin to develop universal access to information, support, advice and screening to meet the emotional & social needs of infants & toddlers, aged 0 - 3 years in Tipperary.
- (2) To build capacity of service providers through provision of IMH information, training and peer group reflection, to optimally support the social and emotional development of babies and toddlers in partnership with parents.
- (3) To contribute to the promotion of IMH as an evidence-based model of best practice, through research and through participation in relevant policy-making structures at national and international levels.
- (4) To establish coordination to promote and implement the Tipperary IMH Strategic Plan.
- (5) To set up governance structures that will ensure stability and sustainability of the project.

## Reflective Practice Networks: Their Role in Supporting Best Practice with Infants and their Families

Niamh McGrath, Primary Care Social Worker, Carrick-on-Suir

The IMH Reflective Practice Network is an inter-disciplinary group of professionals from Community Services, HSE and TUSLA. Group participants attended an Infant Mental Health introductory two-day training before joining the group.

The goals of the Reflective Practice Group are to:

- (1) Consolidate learning from the original IMH training;
- (2) Strengthen professional skill development and core knowledge and practice in IMH;
- (3) Keep the baby and his relationship with his parents/caregivers central to the work;
- (4) Facilitate the provision of IMH informed services to children from pregnancy to age 3.
- (5) Build up a network of and relationships with workers, who serve families with small children in the area.



The IMH Network Group follows a schedule of topics related to the social and emotional wellbeing and development of young children in the context of their relationships with their primary caregivers. The topics covered include: attachment, loss, maternal prenatal anxiety, postnatal depression and anxiety, infant development, IMH practice, reflective functioning of parents and trauma.

The group meets on a monthly basis and is facilitated by 2 leaders. Each month a different group member gets an opportunity to share a case pertaining to a certain topic. A discussion follows and feedback is then given by other participants and reflective questions used to aid discussion. There is an educational aspect to the Network meetings also by including the discussion of an article related to the topic being discussed.

## Tipperary IMH Project Receives Funding For Project Coordinator

The Tipperary IMH Project Steering Group is very grateful to have received funding from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs under the Quality Capacity Building Initiative (QCBI) scheme for the recruitment of a Project Coordinator and for the delivery of further IMH training across the whole county.

The Steering Group also thanks the Tony Ryan Fund for Tipperary and the Community Foundation for Ireland for the generous contribution to, and support of, the Project.

The new Project Coordinator, Katherine O'Daly, commenced in the post on 19th November last.

Tots2Teens is a full day care service in the CCRC in the heart of Clonmel. We cater for children aged 4 months to 12 years. We have a team of 20 Early Years Educators who care for 168 children on a weekly basis. My role is to oversee the day to day running of the service and to work with families offering support and guidance. I attended a two-day Infant Mental Health masterclass training workshop. The workshop gave me an understanding of the importance of supporting children and their relationship with their primary caregivers.

Taking part in this training has given me the opportunity to relay the knowledge of the importance of this field of practice to the staff team, and also to draw on it with the families I work with. A week after I attended this workshop a parent came to speak to me regarding enrolling her 8-month old baby into the crèche. On speaking with this parent I was concerned about the interaction between herself and her son and wondered if there were some difficulties in their bonding and attachment. What I observed was her holding her baby outwards, making no eye contact and not responding to her baby's cues. The mother also seemed to be upset and preoccupied with personal issues. We had no availability within the crèche at that time. I was concerned about this Mum and her baby and all the 'red flags' I had observed. I was able to refer her to the Community Mothers programme. They are experienced in IMH intervention and can give ongoing support to families like this one. If I had not attended the Infant Mental Health training, I may have not have been attuned to what I had seen with this Mother and her baby. I may have missed those red flags and this relationship between this Mum and her baby may have become more vulnerable without the intervention of Community Mothers.



## Clonmel Community Mothers Programme

Jill Sandvoss, Coordinator

The Community Mothers Programme uses IMH principles to inform its practice through Home Visiting, Mother & Baby groups and Parent & Toddler groups.

Community Mother Sharon received a referral to visit a pregnant 17 year-old in her family home. On her initial visit Sharon was introduced to other family members: grandmother-to-be and her partner, and siblings aged 10, 6 and 10 months. Housing conditions were very cramped.

Over time Sharon built up a positive relationship with the mum-to-be and also with others in the family, in particular the grandmother-to-be. This was welcomed by her daughter. Both had experienced trauma from domestic violence in the past. The supportive presence of the Community Mother, using IMH principles of an open stance, willingness to listening and guidance, helped to reduce the risk of relationship failure and offered hope for a positive nurturing response from Mum & grandmother-to-be in anticipating the birth of baby.



In ongoing reflective supervision, Sharon was supported to share details of the work, describing the interactions as she observed them and exploring her feelings, thoughts, worries and concerns. Sharon used a strengths-based perspective in her work with this family, emphasising the positive attributes and supports within the family. Sharon supported Mum to recognise her own feelings and those of her baby, having a significant positive impact on their attachment and security going forward.

## Upcoming Infant Mental Health Training in Tipperary

The Tipperary IMH Project runs two-day **Infant Mental Health Masterclass Training** which has the following learning objectives:

- 1) Orientation to the concept of infant mental health - how pregnancy and the first 3 years of life lay the foundation for mental health throughout the lifespan, with an emphasis on the perinatal period.
- 2) Understand the early building blocks of attachment.
- 3) Identify the signs and symptoms of disturbance in emerging caregiving relationships.
- 4) Apply infant mental health skills and strategies in your work.
- 5) Recognise the importance of reflective practice while working with infants and families.

If you or your colleagues are interested in participating in IMH Masterclass training, please contact Katherine for further information on: [infantMH@outlook.com](mailto:infantMH@outlook.com)

**Marte Meo training**  
Starting 1st February  
Places still available  
See overleaf for  
more details

## Tipperary Infant Mental Health Project

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# IMH Training Needs Survey

Tipperary Infant Mental Health Project is currently carrying out a survey of:

- (1) the services and resources in the area of Infant Mental Health available in Co. Tipperary; and
- (2) the training needs of front-line workers in this regard.

This information will help us to appropriately plan and target the delivery of Infant Mental Health training in the county and assist us in working collaboratively with the service providers across agencies, disciplines and sectors.

We would very much appreciate your assistance with this. We will feedback our findings in a future edition of the Newsletter and keep you informed of upcoming training events.

You can download the Training Needs Survey questionnaire on the Infant Mental Health page of the CCRC website:  
[www.clonmelcrc.ie/Family-Support-/-Tipperary-Infant-Mental-Health](http://www.clonmelcrc.ie/Family-Support-/-Tipperary-Infant-Mental-Health)

and return it to Katherine at [infantMH@outlook.com](mailto:infantMH@outlook.com).

With many thanks.

Tipperary IMH Project Steering Group

**"What Happens in the Early Years Affects the Course of Development Across the Lifespan"**  
(Weatherston, 2000)



## Other IMH Training Opportunities

Tipperary IMH is currently running **Marte Meo training** in conjunction with Marte Meo Ireland at the CCRC with participants from a range of services including Tots2Teens Childcare, St. Bernard Group Homes and Barnardos. Thanks to the Tony Ryan Fund for Tipperary for funding this.

A second Marte Meo Practitioner training course will take place in Nenagh commencing on 1st February, with sessions running one day per month for six months until June.

The course covers use of video technique with young children and parents while exploring issues such as child development, supportive interaction, the attachment cycle, specific needs such as autism, challenging behavior, crying babies, isolation, global developmental delay and hyperactivity.

Places are still available for this course.

For further information please contact: **Naomi Burke**, Manager, Clonmel Community Resource Centre, Kickham Street, Clonmel.

Tel: 052 6129143 or email: [manager@clonmelcrc.ie](mailto:manager@clonmelcrc.ie)



The Tipperary Infant Mental Health Library is located in the CCRC and is a resource for those working with infants, parents and families. For further information contact Katherine on [infantMH@outlook.com](mailto:infantMH@outlook.com)