

# Understanding Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation and the Pyramid Model: How Do These Approaches Fit Together, and How Are They Different?

This goal of this document and the graphic summary *Understanding Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC)* is to help state administrators, tribal leaders, and policymakers understand the differences, similarities, and synergies between IECMHC and the Pyramid Model for supporting social and emotional competence in infants and young children. Both are effective approaches for promoting young children's social and emotional development and work especially well when implemented together.

## Background

Children's early experiences have a profound impact on their later development. When adults form positive nurturing relationships with young children, children are better able to manage their emotions, and rates of expulsion from early care and education (ECE) settings go down. When adults support children's social and emotional development, children exhibit fewer behavior problems, have an increased ability to focus, and develop more positive relationships with peers and adults. States, tribes, and communities have increasingly invested in approaches to better equip adults to support children's early emotional development.

IECMHC and the Pyramid Model are two common prevention-focused approaches that states and communities have adopted to promote young children's social and emotional development. While the approaches have many commonalities, they are not the same. Understanding their similarities and differences and how they enhance each other is critical to gain the most from each approach.

## What are IECMHC and the Pyramid Model?

IECMH consultants are highly trained licensed or license-eligible mental health clinicians with specialized knowledge in child development, the effects of stress and trauma on families, and the impact of adult mental health on the developing child. Using their advanced training and expertise in mental health, consultants focus on building the capacity of early childhood professionals to promote both strong relationships and supportive environments for young children.



An IECMH consultant can help ECE programs support children who are exhibiting challenging behaviors, have experienced trauma, have mental health concerns, and/or may be at risk of expulsion from a program. In home visiting settings, an IECMH consultant may help home visitors support parents who are experiencing a variety of challenges, including depression, substance misuse, a history of trauma, and other significant stressors like family or community violence. IECMH consultants can also help early childhood professionals understand their reactions and responses to the behaviors of children and families.

Like IECMHC, the Pyramid Model helps ECE providers create positive learning environments, promote targeted social and emotional skills, and support children who exhibit challenging behaviors. The Pyramid Model is a positive behavioral intervention and support framework to help ECE providers build skills through implementation of a set of practices—the Inventory of Practices for Promoting Children’s Social Emotional Competence. These practices include strategies such as greeting children by name, defining boundaries in learning centers, teaching children social skills, and developing a hypothesis about a child’s challenging behavior.

Some programs have Pyramid Model coaches to assist with implementation of the practices. The coach focuses exclusively on implementing the Pyramid Model and supports programs in implementing the Pyramid practices with fidelity.

## **How is IECMHC different from the Pyramid Model?**

One distinction between IECMHC and the Pyramid Model is that the IECMH consultant does not bring a prescribed training package or manualized set of practices to the program. IECMH consultants use their clinical skills and mental health training to assess an individual child, caregiver, and/or program’s needs and issues. The IECMH consultant works with ECE program leadership and staff to determine the best approach for addressing children’s social and emotional needs and challenges. The consultant uses a combination of techniques and strategies informed by evidence-based behavioral health principles. For example, an IECMH

### **IECMH CONSULTANTS CAN HELP ECE AND HOME VISITING PROFESSIONALS:**

- understand how trauma and other stressors affect behavior
- implement strategies to prevent and minimize the impact of mental health disorders
- implement trauma-informed care strategies
- understand the importance of attachment and responsive caregiving in young children’s lives
- help staff and coaches engage family members
- review policies and procedures related to how a program supports children’s social and emotional development
- engage in discussion on sensitive topics, such as implicit bias and suspension or expulsion
- implement social and emotional screening and assessment tools
- increase access to mental health services for young children and their families
- assist families in accessing needed services, such as substance abuse treatment, shelter for survivors of domestic violence, parenting classes, and health care
- make necessary reports related to child abuse and neglect
- help staff and families talk to children after natural or man-made disasters



consultant can identify signs or symptoms of a developmental disorder, or mental health issues such as anxiety, attachment issues, attention issues, or traumatic stress reactions. IECMH consultants can help connect families with specialized mental health care for further assessment, therapy or medication if needed. IECMH consultants can work with caregivers to develop plans and strategies, and offer tools, to help children overcome social and emotional challenges and experience success in the classroom. If an ECE program has adopted or received training on a specific approach, such as the Pyramid Model, the consultant can help the program implement those strategies.

## How do the two approaches complement each other?

IECMHC and the Pyramid Model are two of many approaches for supporting children's social and emotional development. When ECE programs introduce the Pyramid Model, they may look to IECMH consultants to support their implementation of the framework. An IECMH consultant is trained in a variety of mental health and social and emotional wellness approaches and interventions. The consultant can help a program director determine which interventions and approaches, including the Pyramid Model, may be the best fit for the staff. IECMH consultants can and often do use strategies and tools from the Pyramid Model, as well as from other models that promote social and emotional development.

If a program uses both the Pyramid Model and IECMH, it is critical that the IECMH consultant and Pyramid Model trainers and coaches work together to ensure that they provide a cohesive, complementary, and seamless continuum of services.

In our community, the IECMH consultant meets regularly with the Pyramid Model coaches. Together they brainstorm challenges and share their perspectives with each other. Sometimes the Pyramid Model coaches and the IECMH consultant have different lenses to understand the challenges in the program. For example, in one instance a child was exhibiting extreme challenging behavior. The Pyramid Model coach helped the teachers assess the function of the behavior and develop a behavior plan. The IECMH consultant noticed that many of the behaviors the child was exhibiting were consistent with symptoms of trauma exposure. The consultant helped the program learn more about the child's exposure to trauma. Upon meeting with the family, the staff learned that the child's father had recently died as a result of a drug overdose, and his mother was experiencing extreme grief. The consultant helped the teachers understand the impact of trauma on this child's behavior. The consultant worked with the coach and teachers to build in additional activities to help the child feel safe and practice relaxation activities.

—Sara, ECE Program Director

## How have states used these approaches?

Many states, tribes, and communities use both IECMHC and the Pyramid Model. Here are two examples:

- In Michigan, IECMH consultants provide individual and programmatic consultation, and the ECE workforce receives training in the Pyramid Model. A [2017 study](#) found that the ECE centers that received both Pyramid Model training and IECMHC demonstrated more improvements in teacher practices than Pyramid Model training alone, likely because the staff were supported in their efforts to understand children's behaviors by a mental health professional.
- In Pennsylvania, IECMH consultants provide consultation to ECE directors and teachers to increase their understanding of children's social and emotional development and to connect services for children and families. The array of IECMHC services all contribute to the goal of reducing the number of children who are expelled from child care settings. Additionally, the IECMH consultants offer some Pyramid Model training as part of their menu of services.

## What do ECE directors say about the unique contribution of IECMHC?

One ECE program director highlighted how the mental health consultant helped her program understand how mental health concerns among staff and families affect children in the program:

*A high percentage of parents and staff in our program experience depression. Yet, there is a significant stigma surrounding mental health in our community. We also have many children with challenging behavior. Our mental health consultant has worked with our staff to better understand depression and understand the connection between children's behavior and caregivers' mental health, based on her mental health background. Our consultant helped us talk more openly about mental health and depression. She also helped make connections in the community to refer children, families, and staff who want to receive counseling.*

Another ECE program director identified how her program benefited from using both the Pyramid Model and an IECMH consultant to support the children in her program:

*The Pyramid Model training has helped our staff develop positive and nurturing relationships, set up high-quality environments, and support children to better resolve conflicts. The Pyramid Model has also helped our staff develop individualized behavior plans when a child needs more intensive intervention. However, sometimes our staff still feel stuck. Sometimes we need more help. Many of our children have witnessed or experienced extreme violence in the community. We have also had many children who are living in foster care. Our mental health consultant has helped us understand the impact of trauma on children as well as build connections with community mental health services. With the closer collaboration with community mental health, children and families can now obtain counseling more quickly. Many of our staff have also had similar experiences in their own childhood and/or*

*neighborhoods. Our consultant helps staff understand their own feelings and helps them implement the Pyramid Model practices.*

## **Summary**

Communities that seek to improve the quality of their ECE programs should consider a variety of approaches that promote better social and emotional outcomes for children. IECMHC is one such approach to build the capacity of adults to support children’s social and emotional development, and IECMHC can work well in tandem with other models, such as the Pyramid Model. To learn more about these approaches, please visit the [Center of Excellence for IECMHC’s website](#) and the [Pyramid Model website](#).

