

Baby Talk

USF St. Petersburg researcher steps into community to address infant mental health.

WITH AN APPRECIATION FOR the critical importance of infant mental health gained from years of research on family dynamics and child adjustment, James McHale, professor of psychology at USF St. Petersburg, has taken this knowledge on the road – though close to his front door.

He's focused on Pinellas County – Florida's most densely populated county and home to approximately 9,000 newborns each year. As co-chair of the Pinellas/Pasco Early Childhood Mental Health Committee, McHale and his committee colleagues – front-line professionals and administrators from county agencies serving families with young children – are elevating consciousness throughout the county. Emphasizing the life-long impact of early experiences on later mental health, the committee has stimulated plans to better understand and support infant mental health county-wide, focusing especially on babies in the child welfare system.

McHale's newest research reveals that just 100 days after their birth, babies are already capable of engaging in coordinated interactions with two adults simultaneously – much earlier than previously thought – and their capacity to do so is related to early coparenting patterns between their parents.

"Affect-sharing underlies the development of empathy," McHale says. "Babies' brains develop more rapidly during the first year than ever again, and pathways and connections made in the brain's architecture during that first year help guide functioning in all the years after. Once established, brain connections are much harder to alter later in life."

McHale and his colleagues emphasize that brain health begins before birth and that coordination between all adults caring for babies is necessary for healthy socio-emotional development. They recently completed a series of presentations to childcare professionals, Healthy Start professionals, dependency court judges, child welfare professionals and other human service providers, prelude to a major upcoming conference on Pinellas infant mental health on July 31. The conference is slated to bring together all agencies and



front-line professionals working with infants and toddlers, including physicians, child welfare workers, mental health and childcare professionals and foster parents.

"The event draws together all those who touch the lives of infants and toddlers in Pinellas. We will look to the science of infant mental health to guide new initiatives" McHale says.

The committee's efforts have already initiated significant changes.

Following McHale's presentation to the Department of Children and Families, Lorita Shirley, director of operations for Eckerd Youth Alternatives, the lead agency responsible for child welfare in Pinellas, discussed integrating the new science into foster parent training.

"A better understanding of infant mental health will help our caregivers provide an enhanced level of care and have a better understanding of the needs of infants they care for," Shirley says.

McHale chairs the Psychology Department and directs the Family Study Center at USF St. Petersburg. His most recent book, "Charting the Bumpy Road of Coparenthood: Understanding the Challenges of Family Life," details the longitudinal "Families through Time" study of families with young infants. His research, supported since 1995 by the National Institutes of Health, is concerned with family risk and resilience, co-parenting dynamics in families, and adaptation of diverse family systems.

– Melanie Marquez