

# 5 NUMBERS

YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN OTTAWA

## Frontline Reflections

**Featured member: Cathryn Fortier, St. Mary's Home**

We used to think that a child's early experiences didn't really count; that it was what happened when they started school that really mattered. But recent research has shown that early experiences lay the foundation for outcomes later in life. We can observe clear behaviors in young babies that indicate poor mental health. For example: not seeking comfort, pushing away their parent when upset, over or under-reacting when upset, being very difficult to comfort, etc.

The most important protective factor related to infant mental health is a secure infant-parent relationship, also called secure attachment. For a secure attachment to form in the child, the parent has to respond to their child's needs in a consistent and sensitive manner. Simple, right?



It may sound simple to someone who has had a great relationship with their own parent and never had to overcome trauma, abuse, or neglect. We know attachment styles are passed down from generation to generation, so when a parent has had negative experiences in their own childhood they might need to learn the basics of how to respond sensitively to their baby.

What can parents do to help their children build trust? What can parents do to teach their children to rely on them in times of need? There are many things that can be done but the very first building block is to know how to read the baby's cues. One thing we teach parents is to observe their baby in a way that will help them read their cues appropriately. We call this technique "Watch, Wait and Wonder".

We ask the parent to:

- Watch their baby's face and eyes
- Wait and give their baby the chance to initiate an interaction, to show them what they need by reaching out, looking at them, or any other way they can use to communicate depending on their age
- Wonder about their baby's thoughts and feelings

This simple technique helps parents focus on their child's inner world and be able to respond appropriately to their baby's specific needs. In turn the baby will feel cared for, protected, and loved. This is the foundation of positive mental health outcomes.

For more information on Infant Mental Health and Attachment, call St Mary's Home at (613)749-2491 ext 715

*Submitted by :*



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