Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health: Building Georgia's System of Care

A strong social and emotional foundation promotes a child's ability to reach their full potential and lead a happy, healthy life. Georgia is home to over 900,000 young children,[2] and it is part of the Department of Early Care and Learning's (DECAL) mission to ensure every child feels safe, loved, and supported through strong early caregiving relationships and environments. Providing opportunities for children and their families to grow and thrive involves an interconnected network of services, state programs, and supports called a *system of care*.
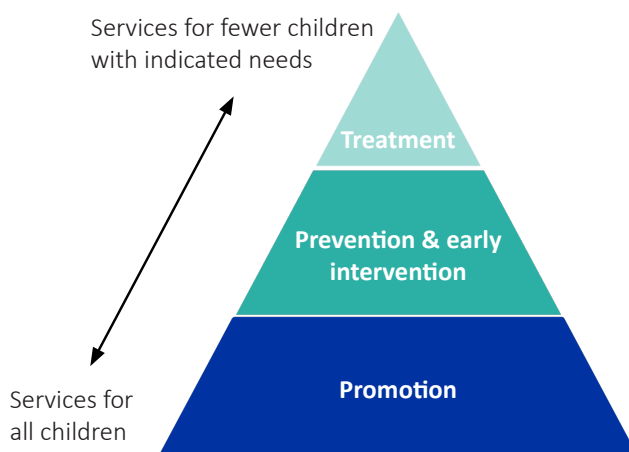
Defining Georgia's IECMH System of Care

A well-defined and implemented system of care for infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) promotes child and family well-being and prevents long-term behavioral health issues.[3] The system includes developmentally appropriate services that meet varying levels of need. For Georgia's children under 6, the system of care includes access to early care and learning in safe, nurturing environments, social resources and parenting support, pediatric care for physical and mental health, and early intervention and treatment for children with indicated need.[4] Services seek to align with three core values of the system-of-care philosophy: "family and youth driven, community-based, and culturally and linguistically competent."

Promotion, Prevention, and Treatment Services are Essential

The array of services within a system of care is called the **continuum of services**. The continuum includes **promotion**, **prevention**, and **treatment** services (Figure 1), which may be provided in a variety of settings. For example, promotion services can be provided in early care and learning centers as well as primary health care offices. Prevention and treatment services may be provided in behavioral health clinics or families' homes. A strong system of care ensures that its continuum of services is comprehensive and accessible to all families, regardless of their circumstances.

What is IECMH?

IECMH develops the capacity of young children to:[1]

- Experience, manage, and express emotions
- Form close relationships
- Explore the environment and learn

All in the context of family, community, and culture.

Georgia has made great strides over the past year to develop its IECMH[1] system of care.

The Georgia Association for Infant Mental Health: Birth to Five was established as a resource and training hub for early childhood professionals who address the social, emotional, and developmental needs of young children and their families.

Georgia's Department of Community Health published an Infant and Early Childhood Behavioral Health Services Toolkit to provide diagnostic and billing assistance for IECMH clinicians.

Georgia's Department of Early Care and Learning and Department of Public Health blended funds to finance statewide child-parent psychotherapy trainings.

The table on page 2 highlights examples of Georgia's accomplishments toward building its IECMH system of care across the continuum of services.

Figure 1: A Continuum of IECMH Services that Support Children, Families, and the Workforce

Services for fewer children with indicated needs

Treatment

Prevention & early intervention

Promotion

Services for all children

Adapted from: Miles, J., Espiritu, R.C., Horen, N., Sebian, J., Waetzig, E. (2010). *A Public Health Approach to Children's Mental Health: A Conceptual Framework*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development. https://gucchd.georgetown.edu/products/PublicHealthApproach.pdf

Georgia's IECMH System of Care

Promotion	**DECAL's Children's Mental Health Promotional Video** This informational video highlights the importance of healthy child-caregiver relationships in early childhood development. **Children's Mental Health Week** Each May, Georgia celebrates Children's Mental Health Week to promote early relational health and IECMH. **Georgia's System of Care Website** The new System of Care website provides updates on relevant news, events, and trainings for professionals, parents, and youth.
Prevention and Early Intervention	**IECMH Consultation Pilot** Consultation provides behavioral health support to childcare and early learning centers that serve children from birth to age 5. **Early Childhood Workforce Training** DECAL partnered with Resilient Georgia to provide trainings to Georgia's IECMH workforce in mindful self-compassion and the Community Resilience Model. **Home Visiting Study** DECAL and the Georgia Department of Public Health partnered with researchers at Emory University to evaluate the impact of home visiting on social and emotional health. **Infant-Toddler Court Program** The Infant-Toddler Court Program, a collaborative project of Georgia's Interagency Directors Team, identifies children and families at risk of child welfare involvement and provides comprehensive support services to prevent future concerns.
Treatment	**Child-Parent Psychotherapy Trainings** Child-parent psychotherapy is an evidence-based, dyadic, trauma-informed treatment that trained clinicians give to caregivers and children who have experienced trauma. **Department of Community Health IECMH Services Webpage** Georgia has been a champion in providing clinicians with technical assistance for Medicaid billing pathways. This webpage houses billing tips and tools for IECMH practitioners.

How Georgia Finances its IECMH System of Care

A mixture of federal, state, and private dollars contributes to Georgia's IECMH system of care. For example, federal funds from the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) program helped DECAL create its children's mental health promotional video, host early childhood workforce trainings, and conduct a study on Georgia's home visiting program. Georgia has also championed blending and braiding state funds to finance its IECMH system of care. A combination of DECAL, the Georgia Department of Public Health, PDG B-5, and foundation grant funds finance its statewide child-parent psychotherapy (CPP) trainings, which have led to the rapid expansion of the CPP workforce (Figure 2).

For more information about financing an IECMH system of care, see this DECAL issue brief.

Georgia is leveraging federal grants and dollars to finance two new programs that provide comprehensive behavioral health services for young children and their families. Grant funding from the Health Resources and Services Administration supports the Infant-Toddler Court Program, and American Rescue Plan Act funds will support the upcoming IECMH consultation pilot.

Financing IECMH Treatment Services

Health insurance, including Medicaid, reimburses clinicians for behavioral health treatment services. Nearly 40% of Georgia's children are covered through Medicaid.[6] The Infant and Early Childhood Behavioral Health Services page on Georgia's Department of Community Health website includes a billing guide for dyadic models, a Medicaid-funded services chart, and a Georgia-specific DC:0-5 crosswalk with case study examples to assist clinicians with diagnostic and billing efforts.

Strengthening Georgia's IECMH System of Care: Next Steps

Several national programs have recently recognized Georgia for its collaborative IECMH systems-building efforts and achievements,[7,8,9] and the work has only just begun. State leaders, practitioners, and champions are leveraging this support and momentum to expand, strengthen, and promote the sustainability of Georgia's IECMH system of care through the following efforts.

IECMH Workforce Expansion

Several efforts are underway to continue growing the IECMH workforce in Georgia. For example, approximately 100 clinicians are trained or are being trained in CPP across Georgia (Figure 2). Additional agency support and financing mechanisms can expand the CPP-trained workforce.

IECMH Services Referral Network Development

Families' awareness of and access to the IECMH workforce is critical to ensure that treatment services reach those in need. Coordination and communication across caregivers, early childhood educators, pediatricians, and behavioral health care providers can streamline access to the IECMH system of care. Efforts are underway to create and distribute a database of IECMH treatment providers. In the meantime, families and child-serving professionals can visit FindHelpGA.org to find referrals for local IECMH services.

Figure 2: Map of counties with access to CPP as a result of 2021 and 2022 trainings

Cross-System Integration

Developing a sustainable IECMH system of care infrastructure in Georgia requires robust cross-agency collaborations to fund, coordinate, and deliver services. Representatives from various child-serving programs and entities serve on both the Georgia Interagency Directors Team and the IECMH Task Force. This collaboration promotes connections and partnerships across agencies. The collaboration between DECAL/Georgia Department of Public Health to finance statewide CPP trainings is a key example of blending and braiding funds to support Georgia's children and families.

Opportunities to Support and Promote Georgia's IECMH System of Care

Join Georgia's coalition of infant, early childhood, and family-serving professionals by becoming a member of the Georgia Association for Infant Mental Health today.
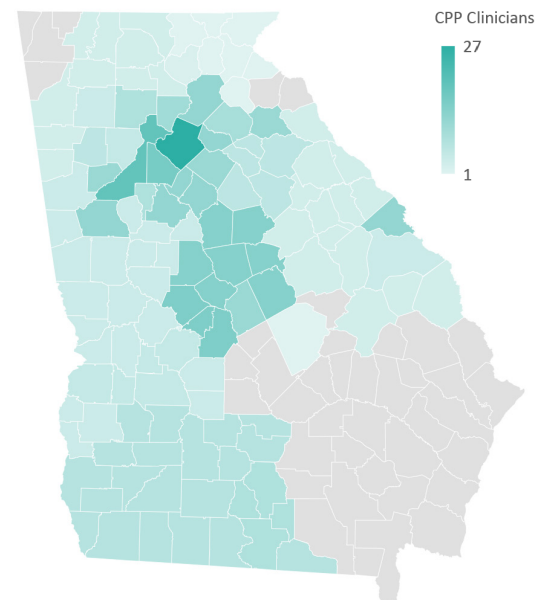
Learn about early social-emotional health and IECMH resources by visiting DECAL's Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health webpage.

Share the DECAL children's mental health promotional video widely with your networks to help promote awareness of IECMH.

References

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