

**Ohio Department of Mental Health
Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative**

Attributes for Effective Consultants*

Research and practice in consultation services for early childhood mental health suggest that the following competencies represent the core knowledge and skills needed by direct service providers whose focus is the healthy emotional and social development of young children. This is not an exhaustive list; it is designed to provide guidance to Boards and their providers as they develop an infrastructure to facilitate good mental health for young children.

In addition to being a state-licensed mental health professional, the consultant should possess the following skills and areas of expertise:

- ✚ Knowledge of child development milestones (e.g., the expected characteristics and course of normal growth and development of young children and a basis for identifying atypical behavior in infants, toddlers, and preschoolers)
- ✚ Knowledge and understanding of the concepts underlying young children=s socio-emotional development, such as attachment, separation, and how relationships influence development
- ✚ Knowledge of early childhood mental health disorders
- ✚ Knowledge of early childhood programs, such as Early Help Me Grow, Early Head Start and Head Start, child care, center and home-based and public pre-schools, and other programs that support families
- ✚ Ability to integrate mental health activities and philosophies in group settings
- ✚ Strong skills in observation, listening, interviewing, and assessment
- ✚ Knowledge and skills to address cultural differences, i.e., cultural competency, and ability to discern the difference between culturally appropriate behavior and resistance to services
- ✚ Sensitivity to the community's attitudes and strengths, including community resistance to mental health services
- ✚ Knowledge of best practices@ in treatment for young children, including behavioral interventions
- ✚ Understanding of the concept of family-centered, strength-based practice
- ✚ Ability to recognize indicators of child abuse and neglect
- ✚ Knowledge of family systems
- ✚ Ability to create partnerships among and between professionals from different disciplines and with parents/caregivers
- ✚ Ability to recognize the diverse perspectives of staff and to facilitate communication of these perspectives
- ✚ Ability to work with adults (both parents and professionals) and knowledge of adult learning principles
- ✚ Understanding of Ohio's public mental health system

Interpersonal Skills. The consultation process will be effective in bringing about change only when early childhood program staff believe that the consultant understands the problem, perceives the need for action, and provides support to staff in carrying out the desired change. Effective consultants not only have expertise in the particular content area in which he or she offers assistance, but also has the interpersonal skills to facilitate action on the part of staff. Key interpersonal skills that are critical for entry and building partnerships with families and early childhood staff include the following:

- ❖ Warmth—the skill of listening, communicating care and commitment to early childhood staff and/or family members
- ❖ Empathy—the ability to convey the consultant’s understanding of staff’s subjective experience
- ❖ Respect—the ability to suspend judgment and to communicate that staff are valued

Special Issues. In addition to the above, the consultant should also have specialized knowledge of, and experience (or at a minimum the ability to immediately access information and resources) related to the topic(s) of concern to the early childhood staff and issues of relevance to the communities and families the consultant serves. Examples of such specialized content include, but are not limited to:

- Separation and loss
- Substance abuse
- Maternal depression
- Adolescent parents
- Issues related to child abuse and neglect
- Trauma/ witnessing violence
- Childhood mental health disorders
- Infants with failure-to-thrive
- Children with aggressive behavior
- Infants with low birth-weight
- Infants with drug exposure
- Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder
- Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with developmental disabilities
- Working with fathers
- Dynamics of kinship care, foster care and adoption
- Relationship-based mentoring and coaching
- Parenting skills and strategies
- Behavioral health assessment in early childhood

*Adapted from *Early Childhood Mental health Consultation*, Georgetown University.