Mental Health Consultation in Early Care and Education: A Capacity Building Approach to Supporting Young Children’s Social-Emotional Development

Janice O. Okeke, MPH1; Fatima Kadik, MA1; Shirley Berger, DrPH, MPH, MA1
1New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Division of Mental Hygiene, Bureau of Children, Youth, & Families

ISSUE

Social and emotional capacities developed during early childhood are the foundation for future academic success and lifelong health and mental health. Prevention and early intervention produce better outcomes and higher return on investment than interventions later in life. This includes helping adults build their skills so they can support the healthy development of the young children in their care.

Mental health consultation is a “problem solving and capacity building intervention implemented within a collaborative relationship between a professional consultant with mental health expertise and an early care and education provider and/or family member.”

Research shows positive outcomes at all levels:

Child/Family Level: Improved social-emotional competence, reduced challenging behaviors, improved parent-child relationships, fewer missed work days, decreased stress, decreased teacher turnover, improved interactions, and fewer suspensions/expulsions.

Classroom Level: 65% of children identified for counseling; teachers reported changing “a lot” or “some” aspects of their practice:

- 91% for children’s Emotional Development
- 90% for Early childhood Development
- 94% for Preventing challenging behaviors
- 91% for Managing children’s challenging behaviors
- 90% for Considering my own feelings and reactions to interpersonal interactions during the school day

60% of children identified for counseling received therapy.

Setting services were provided to over 2,200 early care and education staff and childcare providers.

Project

As part of ThriveNYC NYC’s comprehensive mental health plan, the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) funded seven mental health clinics to provide mental health consultation to center-based early care and education (ECE) sites.

The model pairs one consultant with five ECE sites/15 classrooms for a school year; consultants visit each classroom once a week during that time period.

A consultant provides three types of consultation

1. Site-Level: Collaborate with program leadership to assess and address issues as they relate to supporting the mental health of young children and their families.

2. Classroom-Level: Work with teachers to improve their overall approach to supporting young children’s social emotional development and effectively addressing children’s challenging behaviors.

3. Child/Family-Level: Work with teachers and parents/caregivers to address the factors that contribute to an individual child’s difficulties functioning well in the early childhood setting.

RESULTS

Children identified as needing mental health consultation services were referred to a clinic or to a specialized early childhood mental health clinic for trauma-informed mental health treatment. Data presented are from September 2017 to June 2018, but the initiative is ongoing.

76 early care and education sites

80% of children referred for therapy identified for counseling received mental health consultation services during the school year.

Graph 1. Children Perceived Difficulties: Beginning of Consultation

Graph 2. Teacher feedback survey results, September 2017 – June 2018

REFERENCES:


ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: New York City Administration for Children’s Services

CONTACT INFORMATION: Janice Okeke, MPH Evaluation and Quality Improvement Specialist; New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Bureau of Children, Youth, and Families; Email: jokeke@health.nyc.gov

Figure 1. Map of the 76 ECE sites that received mental health consultation from September 2017 – June 2018, and proportions of the 3 types of consultation activities.

Figure 2. Consultation services were provided to over 2,200 early care and education staff and caregivers at 76 early care and education sites and 318 classrooms, reaching over 4,400 children. September 2017 – June 2018

SETTING

76 early care and education (ECE) centers in New York City, NY received mental health consultation services from September 2017 to June 2018 through 34 masters level mental health professionals.

The majority of the children in the ECE sites were of preschool age (36 - 71 months). Of the 4,408 children referred to the classrooms served, 40% were referred by the teacher to be Latino, 35% black, 12% Asian, 3% white and 10% “other” race/ethnicity.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Mental health consultation was a well received adult capacity building service that allowed for preventative behavior management and social-emotional skill building in children.

Children identified as needing higher level mental health supports were given a “warm handoff” to a specialized early childhood mental health clinic.

Teachers reported that strategies provided by mental health consultants were useful in increasing knowledge and enhancing practice.

The proportion of children that teachers perceived as having definite or severe difficulties reduced from 23% to 18%.

BARRIERS

ECE staff turnover in sites

Recruitment and retention of trained consultants

Establishing the mental health consultant’s role across the ECE site

Challenging data collection process

Lack of reliable funding after grant ends

LESSONS LEARNED

Mental health consultation allows for population-level impact of the social-emotional development of children by increasing ECE staff’s capacity to support young children and identify and address their emotional and behavioral concerns preventatively.

INFORMATION FOR REPLICTION

Close collaboration between mental health and ECE systems

A dedicated source of funds to provide mental health consultation services

Readiness of ECE programs to receive mental health consultation services

Trained workforce of mental health consultants

Data systems to track progress and inform program planning and policy