CONVERGE
Reimagining Canada's Mental Health Systems, Together

Research Power Hour with Dr. Chaya Kulkarni

Changing the Future Starts Earlier: Infant and Early Mental Health as a Response to Canada's Mental Health Crisis

Where does mental health begin, and what could change if we recognized vulnerability and responded before challenges become entrenched? **Dr. Chaya Kulkarni** and her team at Infant and Early Mental Health Promotion (IEMHP) are leveraging three national initiatives to strengthen the environments young children grow up in and change how they develop.

The facts:

- 26% of Canadian youth rated their mental health as "fair" or "poor" in 2023, up from 12% in 2019
- 28,000 children and youth are on waitlists for mental health care
- The average wait time for care was 105 days in 2023-2024, up from 94 days in 2022-2023
- An estimated 200,000 more children and youth need care but never reach a centre

The opportunity: Prevention, promotion, and early intervention, even before children start school

Why the Earliest Years Matter

- Lifelong mental health is built early through relationships, environments, experiences, and development
- The brain builds its foundations fastest in the first years of life, with 80% of adult brain size reached by age 3
- Young children's brains can change easily in response to experience – both positive and negative experiences shape their development
- If we recognize challenges early (adversity, inequity, family and community stress, health challenges, other difficult circumstances), we can change the trajectory of a child's brain development
- Waiting for adolescence to treat mental health concerns misses a critical window of opportunity

Moving Evidence into Action Now

- Research typically takes 17 years to influence the care children and families receive
- IEMPH moves evidence into action in 17 months by working in partnership with communities
- How? They prioritize knowledge mobilization and implementation science, and use lessons from community to inform future research
- Collaboration and buy-in across all community partners are necessary for this work to happen

Three National Initiatives Moving the Needle

System of Care Pathways

Creating a clear referral pathway when help is needed.

- Strengthens how communities identify and respond to young children's developmental and mental health needs
- Puts the science to work in communities now
- Shortens the path from knowledge to practice

Nurturing the Seed

Creating an infant and early mental health model through an Indigenous lens.

- Developed and implemented in partnership with Indigenous communities
- Advances promotion, prevention and early intervention
- Community leadership and relationships at the centre

Canadian Database of Development, Infancy to Six

Establishing a national database on young children's development.

- Builds a national picture of how children from birth to six are doing developmentally
- Allows data to inform practice, systems and policy
- Shows where earlier support is needed