



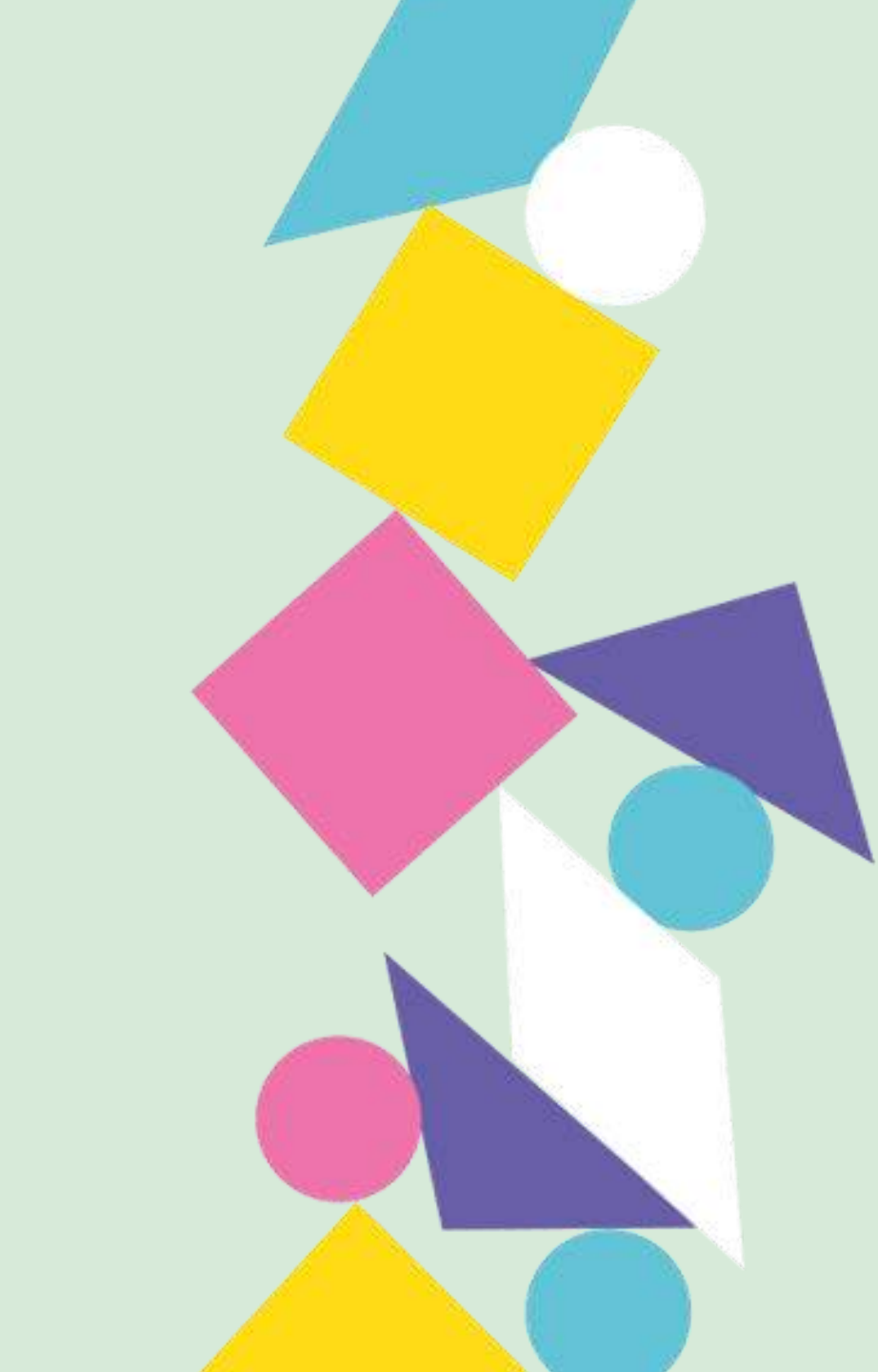
# Mental health in early childhood

Belonging from the Beginning: Supporting  
inclusive early years practice in libraries

Dr Alice Haynes



**Anna Freud**  
building the mental  
wellbeing of the  
next generation



What is mental health in the early years and why is it so important?



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# We all have mental health

Just like adults and older children, babies and young children experience a range of emotions in response to what happens in their lives.

However, early mental health is often poorly understood and overlooked.



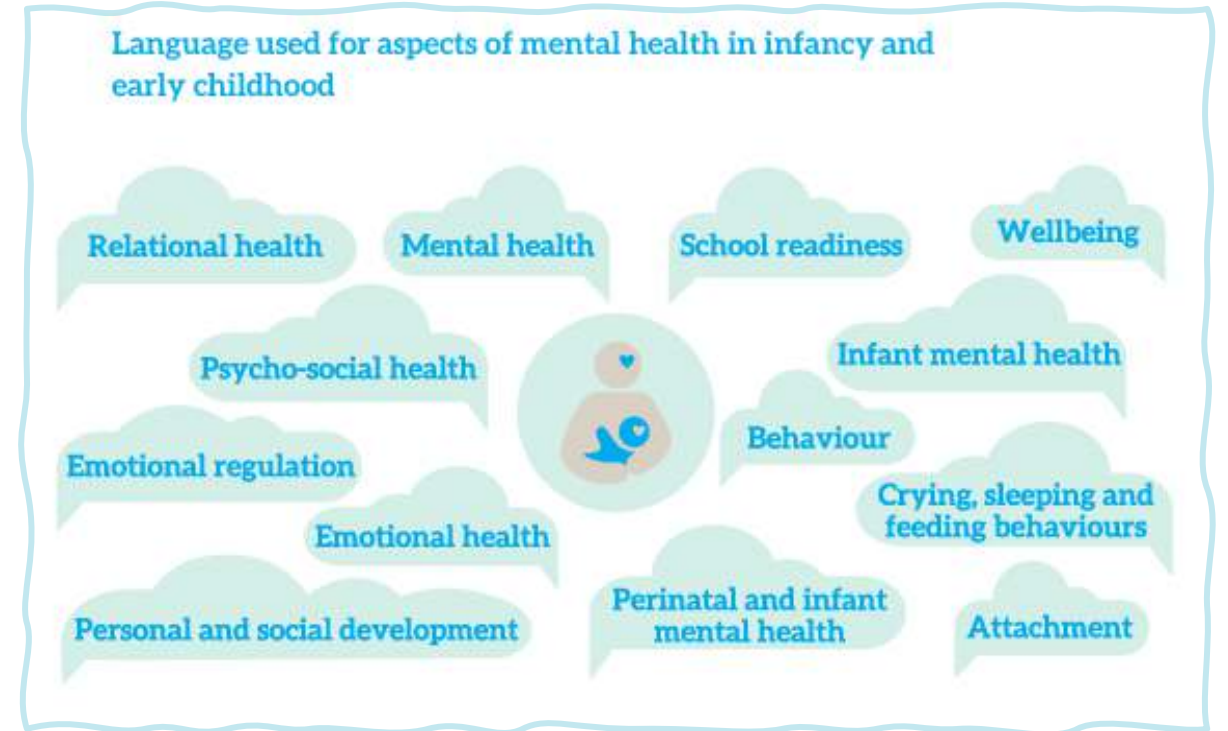
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# Being and becoming

BEING → What does it mean to be mentally healthy in early childhood?



BECOMING → What capacities do babies and young children develop to enable them to be mentally healthy in the future? How are these capacities developed?



Hogg & Moody 2023



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# ‘Being’ mentally healthy in the early years

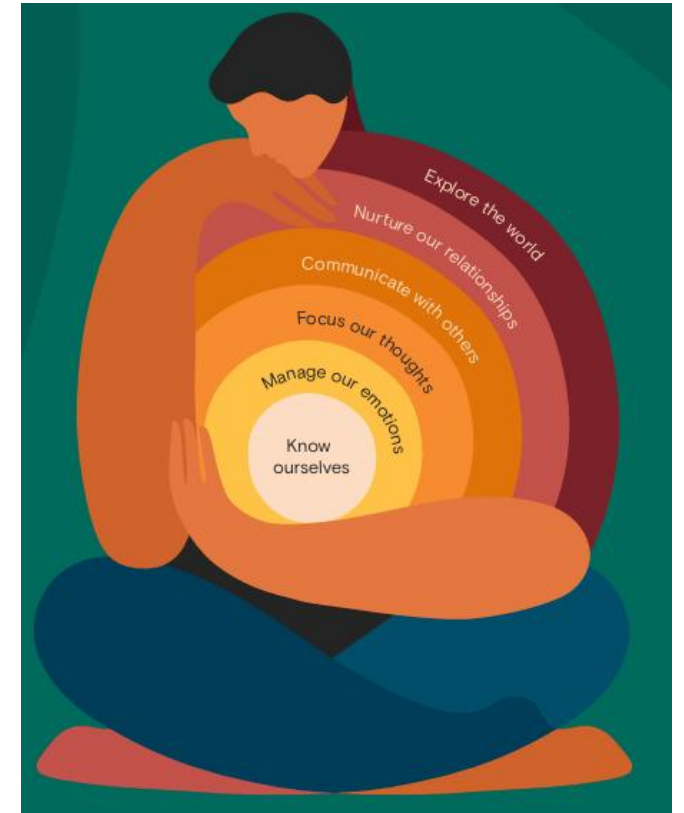


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# ‘Becoming’

- The foundations for healthy relationships and future mental and physical health are laid in pregnancy and the early years
- Broad (typical) developmental milestones, i.e.
  - demonstrates preference for familiar people
  - separation anxiety
  - waves goodbye
  - plays with, not just alongside, others
- Social and emotional development is not linear
- Interconnectivity with other aspects of development

Royal Foundation Centre for Early  
Childhood, 2024



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# Early relationships are key

*“There is no such thing as a baby.  
There is a baby and someone.”*  
(Winnicott, 1960)



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# Early relationships are key



- Babies express themselves through their behaviours, long before they can talk.
- Attuned, sensitive and consistent parent/caregiver-infant/child relationships help children feel safe and loved.
- Key mechanisms: attunement, serve and return, co-regulation, rupture and repair.



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# The role of culture

- Culture shapes social and emotional development through variations in cultural norms, values, beliefs and expectations, e.g.
  - norms around emotional regulation and expression of emotions
  - parenting norms and expectations
- Tendency to draw on normative models of emotional competence rooted in dominant Western cultural assumptions
- Professionals' role - to be curious and reflective, and to embed diversity in learning and everyday routines



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# Neurodivergence

- Some children may interact and communicate in ways that are different to their neurotypical peers, e.g.
  - Preference for quiet parallel play
  - Special or intense interests
  - Diverse play - lining up, collecting items, repetitive rhythms
  - Diverse communication identity - non-verbal, repeating of sounds/phrases, vocal stimming
  - Sensory differences - a love or strong dislike of, for example spinning around, slime and goopy textures, firm pressure
- Emphasis on a child's holistic profile of interests, strengths, traits, differences and needs
- Care and support is child-led and focused on affirming neurodivergent traits and ways of being.

The neurodivergent umbrella is expansive. The list below is not exhaustive, rather it provides some examples of 'neurotypes'.<sup>6</sup>



# A guide to neurodiversity in the early years



This booklet is for early years professionals working with young children aged five and under in an educational or community setting.



# Some possible signs of difficulty

- Freezing or becoming unresponsive
- Withdrawal
- Preference for a stranger over their primary caregiver
- Not seeking comfort from, or checking in with, a primary caregiver when in an unfamiliar situation, avoiding eye contact with them
- Prolonged feeding/sleeping difficulties
- Extreme clinginess to primary caregiver
- Body rigidity/back arching in babies
- Inconsolable crying for prolonged periods
- Behavioural difficulties in young children

[Anna Freud - Attachment Booklet - Final.pdf](#)



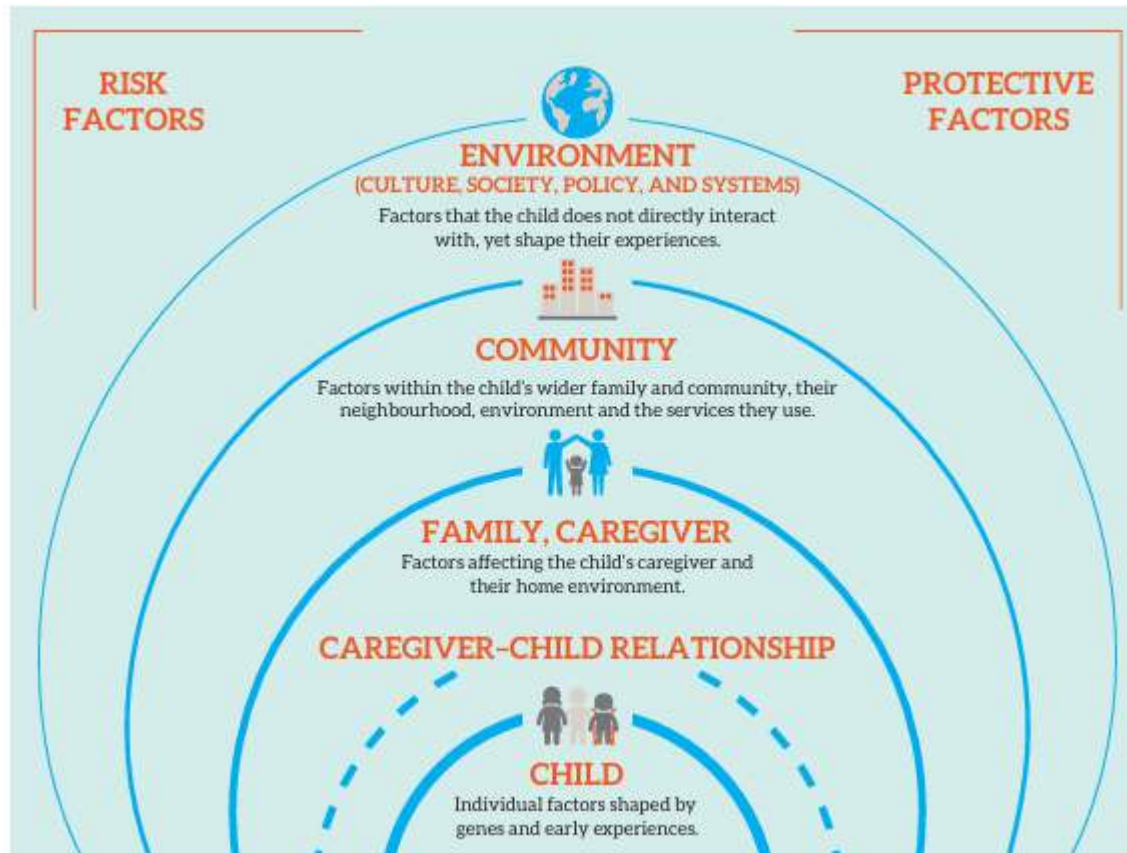
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# Protective and risk factors for early mental health



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# Risk and protective factors



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## RELATIONSHIPS, and...

**Infant/child:** Genetics, pregnancy, birth and neonatal experiences, temperament, disabilities...

**Caregiver:** Parents' /caregivers' own experiences of being parented, unresolved losses and traumatic life events, parental mental health, substance misuse, parental conflict...

**Community and wider society:** Support networks, socio-economic status, housing, racism, technoference, 'affluent neglect', quality of early education...

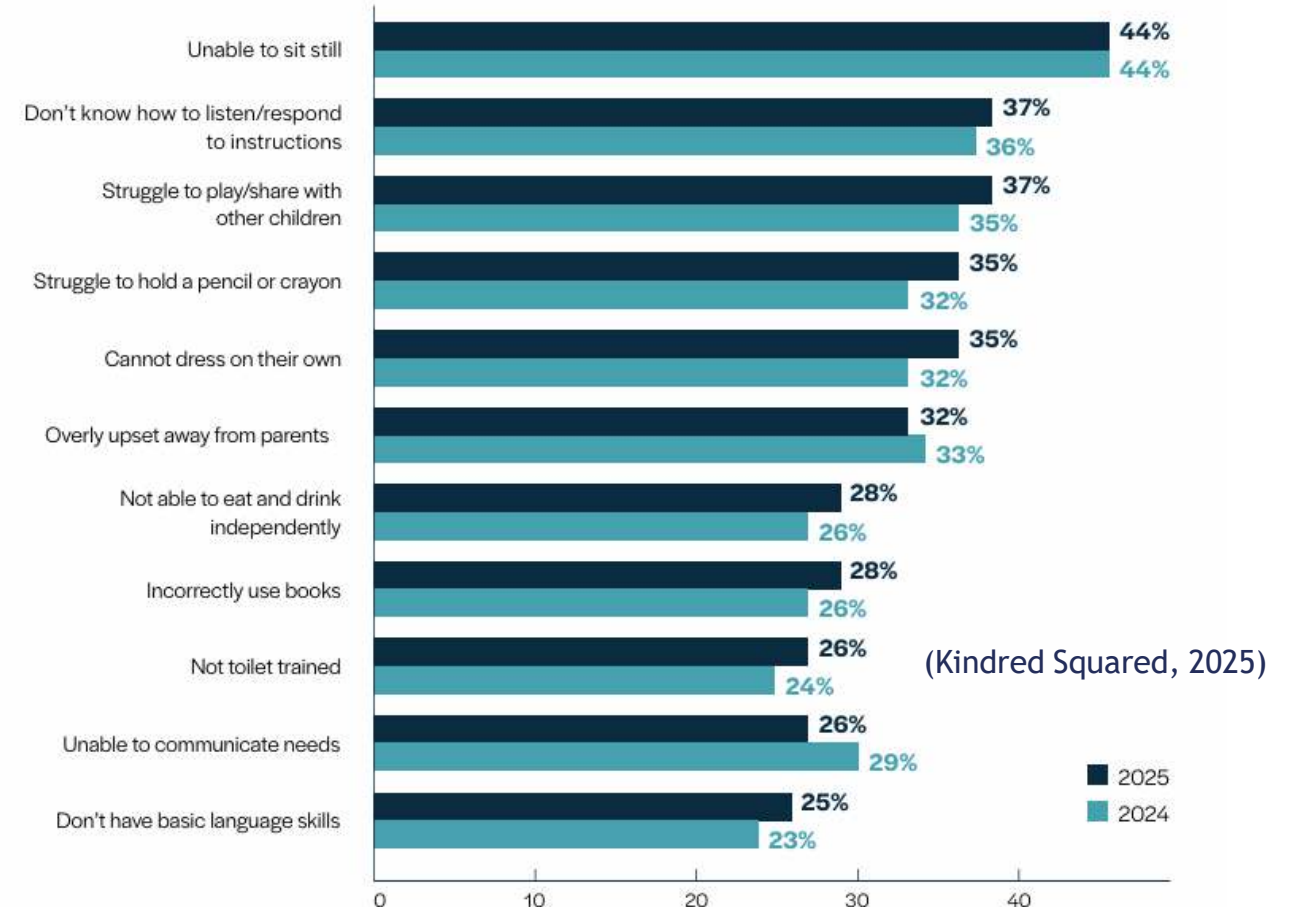


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# Prevalence of difficulties

- Est. that 10-25% of babies experience disorganised attachment
- 91.8% of children at expected level of development for personal social skills at 2-2.5 years (*Ages and Stages Questionnaire-3, 2024-2025*)
- 83.1% of children at expected level of development at reception (*Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, 2024/2025*)
- Children of the 2020s - 25% of 2 yr olds with emotional/behavioural difficulties

Figure 1: Proportion of Reception children that struggle with each of the reported skills according to primary school staff



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# Inequalities in development

On average, 83.1% of children meet expected levels of development at reception.  
However -

- Children eligible for free school meals = 72.4%
- Black children = 76.7% (compared to approx. 84% of white children and 83% of mixed/multiple ethnic groups and Asian/Asian British)
- Traveller of Irish heritage children = 67.9%
- Gypsy/Roma children = 72.0%

The attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged early years pupils is 4.7 months (EPI, 2024).



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# Support and services available to babies and families



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# Services/support for early mental health

Level of support	Description	Example services
Community	Thriving - early mental health promotion	Statutory support from midwifery, health visiting, GP, early education and childcare
Universal	Getting advice - advice and support from the universal workforce	Advice and support from midwifery and health visiting, universal stay and play, early education, <b>libraries</b>
Targeted	Getting help - brief, low intensity interventions	Family Hubs interventions, Talking Therapies, short term input from parent-infant team
Specialist	Getting more intensive or multiple interventions	Perinatal mental health services, 0-5 CAMHS, parent-infant relationship services
Risk	Getting risk support - families may not be in a position to take up support	Professionals working with families may benefit from specialist consultation

**Unequal access**

# What do families want from services in the early years?



## The Nurtures Charter

What do families need from services in the early years?

### Nurture trusting relationships

We want to see the same professional and build relationships where we feel safe to open up without judgement.

N

### Uphold the rights of babies and young children

We want practitioners to notice and engage with our children when they are in the room, and listen to us when we interpret how they are feeling, or explain what is normal behaviour for them at home.

U

### Respect and be interested in different cultures

We all need to feel listened to and respected. Services should be designed for all of us and appreciate our cultures and faiths.

R

### Tell us what services are available

Practitioners should let us know what services and support are available, including community and voluntary groups.

T

### Understand the importance of peer support

Informal drop-ins and parent groups are important to us. They feel like low-pressure, safe spaces for us to ask questions and meet other parents and carers.

U

### Reduce stigma and the fear of asking for help

Practitioners should talk about mental health and reassure us that there is support available.

R

### Engage dads and coparents

Dads and coparents are every bit as important as mums. We need to be invited in, included, recognised for the important role we play, and offered support.

E

### See us as individuals

We need support that is personalised and flexible, with extra help for additional needs and neurodivergence.

S



# How libraries nurture mental health in the early years



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# Your role in early mental health

1. The environment
2. Books, reading and song
3. Relationships and modelling
4. Connecting to others



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# The environment sets the tone



A space that is....

- friendly and warm
- tolerant and non-judgemental
- baby and child friendly
- inclusive and non-stigmatising

...supports families to be...

- their authentic selves
- open and curious
- at ease
- trusting



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# Early mental health, books and songs

Reading aloud, singing songs and nursery rhymes → cognitive and language development, **social-emotional development and opportunities to bond**

- Relationship-building activities
- Physical closeness and focused attention
- Helps children relate to the experiences and emotions of others



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# Relationships and modelling

- Show warmth, interest, curiosity
- Model positive relationships and social interactions
- Support routine, development of attention and listening skills
- Support ‘epistemic trust’



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# Connecting to others



- Encourage peer relationships
- Support multiagency working
- Signpost to support - i.e. stay and play groups, voluntary organisations, local perinatal mental health and parent-infant



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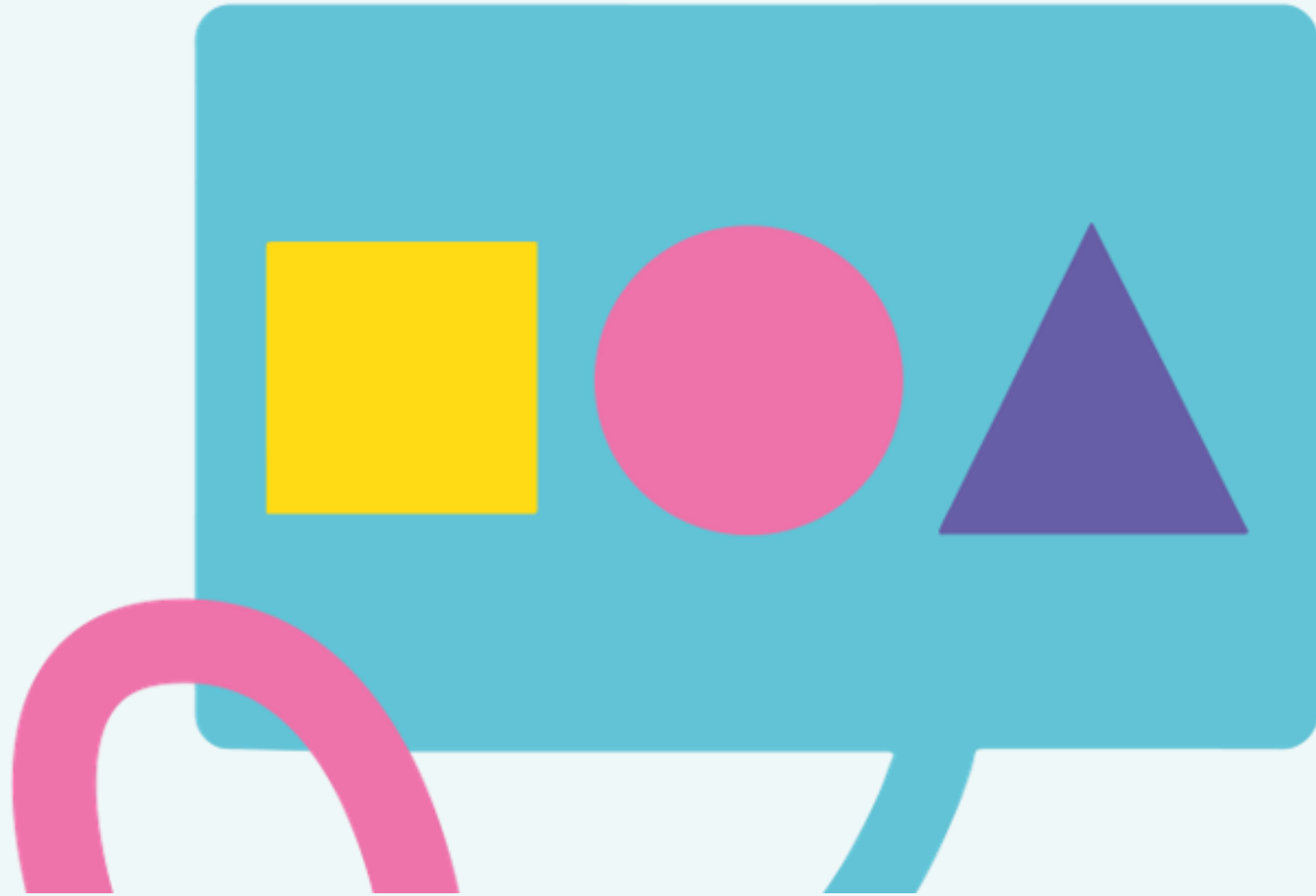
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Thank you!

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