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The importance of promoting infant mental health in hospitalised infants with neonatal abstinence syndrom

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Infant mental health is based on the understanding that the infant period of development lays the foundation for psychological, emotional and social development. The concept of attachment is fundamental to infant mental health. Loosely defined, attachment refers to an affective relationship between the infant and a particular, preferred individual (usually the infant's biological mother). It is within this primary attachment relationship that infants develop their ability to emotionally self-regulate and socially interact. There is consistent evidence that compromised or absent attachment in infancy leads to significant social, emotional and psychological sequelae in adulthood. Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome is a term used to describe infants who are born physically dependant on drugs of addiction. These infants require specialised treatment and are often hospitalised for extended periods of time. Current research and policy regarding hospitalised infants with NAS focus on symptom relief and physiologic health. There is a scarcity of literature or reference to the importance of promoting the mental health of these infants. Social and health policy acknowledge the significance of the infant primary attachment relationship. However, in current clinical practice little is done to support or facilitate attachment for hospitalised infants with NAS. This is particularly problematic as infants with NAS often have limited to no interaction with their mothers due to poor maternal health, maternal issues of addiction and/or the involvement of child protection services. This paper highlights the gaps in current policy, practice and research in relation to the mental health of hospitalised infants with NAS. Specifically, it highlights implications for nurses at the infant bedside and makes recommendation for future practice and research.

Biography

Stacy Blythe is a Registered Nurse and full time Academic at Western Sydney University (Australia). Her research interests include vulnerable children and families, child protection and foster care.

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