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Promoting infant mental health in infants who experience prenatal substance exposure

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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. Infants who experience prenatal substance exposure often require specialized treatment and extended periods of hospitalization. Current research and policy regarding infants with prenatal substance exposure focuses on symptom relief and physiologic health. There is a scarcity of literature or reference for 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 infants who are prenatally substance exposed. This is particularly problematic as often these infants have limited or 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 infants who are prenatally substance exposed. Specifically, it highlights implications for nurses at the infant bedside and makes recommendation for future practice and research.

Biography

Stacy is a Registered Nurse and full time student at Western Sydney University (Australia). Her research interests include Vulnerable Children and Families, Child Protection and Foster Care.

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