

Developing a UK Infant Mental Health Competency Framework

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This article outlines the background to and the need for an Infant Mental Health Competency Framework in the UK. It details the collaborative work between the Association for Infant Mental Health (AIMH UK) and the International Training School for Infancy and Early Years (ITSIEY); describes how practitioners self-assess against the competency framework, and finally, looks at AIMH UK's plans to establish an Infant Mental Health Recognition Register (IMHRR).

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Infant mental health (IMH) is a complex concept that includes social and emotional development of the infant; affect regulation and dysregulation, and neurophysiological development of the infant brain. As practitioners concerned with IMH come from a variety of disciplines, each one will interpret infant mental health through her or his particular professional lens.

The UK workforce is distinctive in that it provides universal, targeted, and specialized services in the public, private and voluntary sectors. This unique configuration of services means that IMH competency frameworks developed elsewhere in the world, such as the US, do not fulfill the need for an IMH competency framework to improve the quality of practice in the UK.

Practitioner competencies are now recognized as an important means of improving the quality of workforce practice. They enable practitioners to self-assess to ensure they have the right competencies for their current role, to identify areas of strength and weakness, and to identify what further professional training they require and which continuous professional development activities they need to engage in.

BACKGROUND TO DEVELOPMENT OF IMH COMPETENCIES FRAMEWORK

Over the past decade in the UK, developments to promote IMH practice include the launch of the '1001 Critical Days Manifesto' in 2013 at each of the major political parties' annual conferences; the formation of an All Party Parliamentary Group for Conception to Age 2, and the publication of the '1001 Critical Days Manifesto to help prevent child abuse' in December 2015 (www.1001criticaldays.co.uk). All of these initiatives aim to offer children the best start in life, to promote early intervention and to support universal public health service

provision to every child via the Healthy Child Programme (Department of Health, 2009).

In 2010 The Anna Freud Centre, Tavistock Clinic and Yale Child Study Center established the International Training School in Early Years Mental Health (ITSIEY), with a focus on evidenced, multidisciplinary knowledge and skills to support practitioners in effective early intervention with infants and their families. At the same time, ITSIEY started working on a competency framework for IMH practitioners.

The ITSIEY 2011 competency framework was based on:

- An ecological approach
- A developmental perspective
- A relationship understanding of change
- An attachment-based understanding of trauma

In 2015, AIMH UK organized an expert reference group (ERG) to establish what the fundamental principles of IMH were, and what practitioners really needed to know.

This resulted in the development of an online course (Infant Mental Health Online, IMHOL) which was piloted in 2015. It has now been followed by over 650 participants and is available to all practitioners wanting to extend and update their infant mental health knowledge (<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/med/about/centres/wifwu/training/>).

In October 2017, the NHS England Perinatal Mental Health National Transformation Programme was launched, described as 'a chance for real change'. To assist in the desired 'transformation', Health Education England, in partnership with the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, developed a multi-professional competency framework to support professionals to identify their professional development needs in relation to supporting women with perinatal mental health issues.

ITSIEY AND AIMH UK WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

Following on from all of the above initiatives, ITSIEY and AIMH UK began working in partnership in January 2017 to further develop ITSIEY's original draft IMH Competency Framework. A scoping exercise was carried out comparing different competency frameworks and the 'Thrive' model (Roth & Pilling, 2008) used in the draft was replaced due to its overarching therapeutic stance, which was considered incompatible with developing a framework to focus on the prevention of mental health problems. The competencies were reviewed to ensure there was parity between the areas of skills and knowledge, and thus the Infant Mental Health Competency Framework (IMHCF) came into being.

About the Infant Mental Health Competencies Framework: (Pregnancy to 2 years)

(The following content is taken direct from the IMHCF)

- Competencies are the skills, knowledge and behaviours that enable practitioners to deliver high quality care and the continuous improvement of services.
- This competency framework has been developed for all staff working with infants and their parent/s/ caregivers from pregnancy to the second year of life, to support parent/s/caregivers to promote healthy infant development.
- It is informed by research, theory and evidence-based practice, and designed to raise standards of care for families by supporting all staff to optimize their learning and skills.
- It has been developed to standardize competencies for infant mental health practice.

THE CORE INFANT MENTAL HEALTH COMPETENCY

The core infant mental health competency is an ability to hold an 'infant mental health frame of mind'. This means the capacity of staff working with parents and babies to be able to maintain the perspective, not only of the parent, but also of the baby; to be able to use observations in order to imagine the experience of the non-verbal infant, and to maintain reflectivity in practice.

Practitioners need a capacity to maintain a focus on the parent-infant relationship as a dynamic system, and to be able to apply interventions flexibly in line with the strengths, vulnerabilities and wider social context of each infant, parent and family. The seven domains in the IMHCF define the key aspects of working that are part of this mind-set.

- Domain 1: Relationship-based practice
- Domain 2: Normal and atypical development
- Domain 3: Factors that influence caregiving capacity
- Domain 4: Assessment of caregiving
- Domain 5: Supporting caregiving

- Domain 6: Reflective practice and supervision
- Domain 7: Working within the relevant legal and professional framework.

THE IMHCF PILOT

In October 2017, 100 practitioners from professions working in the field of infant mental health were supplied with a copy of the competency framework and asked to agree/disagree with the following questions using a 5 point Likert scale:

- 1) The domains of the IMHCF are applicable to my profession
- 2) There is consistency across the different levels
- 3) The IMHCF would be useful as a self-assessment tool regarding my infant mental health knowledge and skills
- 4) The IMHCF would be useful to identify areas of strength in my infant mental health knowledge and skills
- 5) The IMHCF would be useful to identify gaps in my infant mental health knowledge and skills
- 6) The IMHCF would be useful to identify my future infant mental health learning needs
- 7) The IMHCF would be useful as a record of my continuous professional development

The practitioners were also supplied with a blank competency grid and asked to identify any competencies they considered problematic and to make further comments on the domains.

The pilot had a response rate of 25% and all respondents 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with all the questions. Feedback was given on presentation of the domains and the wording of individual competencies. It was suggested that a 'Key Terms' glossary should be included, e.g.:

- Attachment
- Attunement
- Contingent responsiveness
- Emotional regulation and dysregulation
- Marked mirroring
- Reflective Function
- Unresolved trauma

SELF-ASSESSMENT AGAINST THE IMHCF PILOT

The next stage of the pilot involved asking practitioners to see how easy or hard it was to rate themselves against the competencies. The competencies consist of three levels and are progressive and cumulative in that the second and third levels integrate and expand upon competencies from the preceding level. An assessment grid was produced that could be completed by each practitioner undertaking self-assessment, and in April 2018, fifty professionals were invited to use the assessment grid to measure their competence and capacity against the IMHCF. They were asked:

- 1) Are there any individual competencies for which you are finding it hard to

gauge what level you are at?

2) What do you think would be useful to present as evidence to show that you have achieved a competency?

Preliminary feedback indicated that practitioners did not find it difficult to self-assess against the competency framework. Evidence suggested by practitioners to confirm achievement of competencies included:

- Mapping IMH training/seminars/workshops/courses against individual competencies
- Clinical work experience
- Supervision reports
- Reflective submissions

WORLD ASSOCIATION FOR INFANT MENTAL HEALTH (WAIMH) CONGRESS, 2018, 26TH-30TH MAY, ROME

The information included in this article was presented at WAIMH as part of the 'Bridging Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Training, Competency and Professional Development' strand, and a separate workshop entitled, 'Development of the UK Infant Mental Health Competency Framework' was delivered. The response was favourable with delegates to the conference acknowledging the need to define the core knowledge, skills and behaviours required by professionals working in IMH.

WHAT NEXT?

The aim of the IMHCF is to improve the overall quality of the IMH workforce and promote early intervention. The evidence- and consensus-based competencies will be made freely available at the official launch of the IMHCF (date to be confirmed). Individual practitioners will be able to use them to self-assess their IMH practice, and IMH training providers will be able to assess the effectiveness of their teaching and assessment.

THE UK INFANT MENTAL HEALTH RECOGNITION REGISTER

AIMH UK is an independent charity and an affiliate organization of WAIMH. Having developed the competency framework in partnership with ITSIEY, AIMH UK now plans to establish the UK Infant Mental Health Recognition Register (IMHRR). The aim of the Register will be to recognize practitioners' specialist skills in IMH. As previously discussed, practitioners have already suggested different types of evidence they consider would demonstrate achievement of specific competencies, and these will be used in future as part of the self assessment process as a method of establishing that specific competencies have been achieved.

The competency framework provides a mechanism by which individual practitioners can rate their IMH practice. Establishing a Recognition Register will acknowledge their achievements in IMH, support them to advance professionally, and encourage a sense of community among professionals working in the field.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information about the launch of and the Competency Framework, or the Register please contact: D.Cannon@warwick.ac.uk

REFERENCES AND LINKS

AIMH UK

<https://www.aimh.org.uk>

Anna Freud Centre

www.annafreud.org.uk

Cross-Party Children's Manifesto Coalition

<http://www.1001criticaldays.co.uk/about-coalition>

Department of Health Healthy

Child Programme (2009)

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/167998/Health_Child_Programme.pdf

Five Year Forward View for Mental Health

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Mental-Health-Taskforce-FYFV-final.pdf>

IMHOL

<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/med/about/centres/wifwu/training/>

ITSIEY

Info re ITSIEY: Anna Freud Centre and Tavistock websites, and registration for ITSIEY courses at the Anna Freud Centre website

1001 Critical Days

<https://www.1001criticaldays.co.uk>

Perinatal Competency Framework

<https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/training/medical-education/competency-framework-perinatal-mental-health/>

Roth, A.D., Pilling, S. (2008) A competency framework for the supervision of psychological therapies. London, University College.

Available at: www.ucl.ac.uk/CORE/ <accessed 17 June, 2018>

WAIMH

<https://www.waimh.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=1>