

CREDENTIALS
& DEGREES

Elevating the Field of Early Childhood Education through Endorsement®: An International Standard of Excellence in Infant Mental Health

By Jes Fyall Cardenas and
Isabel Tanco



"Endorsement is allowing expert social workers and early childcare professionals to label what they already do as imperative work. This assists with professionalizing the field and helping amazing caregivers feel valued and respected for their incredible role in a child's life."

– Natalie R., IMH-E® (IV)

There is a unique spirit and heart required to work effectively with our youngest children in the child care setting. Beyond compassionate character traits, there is a greater need for professionals to be informed on the importance of early child development from infancy into toddlerhood. Awareness of not only the markers and tangible milestones of development, but of the whole child's journey through social growth and emotional change, concurrently recognizing the family's role in a continuum of care, providing the optimum environment, and fostering caregiving that honors a child's family culture and innate individuality.

The Infant Mental Health Endorsement® is the internationally recognized credential for professionals working with and on behalf of infants, toddlers, and their families that honors this distinctive skill set. Teachers and caregivers who work with infants and toddlers have crafted their expertise over time through experience and education, but, more importantly, continue to seek out new information to inform their practice. These providers are promoting positive infant mental health practices in their classrooms, through their interactions with families, and

should be recognized as for their education, experience, and continued development as a leader working with infants and toddlers.

The Infant Mental Health Endorsement®, developed by the Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health, is housed by First-3Years for the state of Texas. Endorsement supports and commends the development and proficiency of professionals in the specialized birth to three field, as it is based upon a comprehensive set of competencies that helps define best practice and guides an organized system of culturally sensitive, relationship-based professional growth. A strong Endorsement candidate will have a broad and deep collection of trainings, including one or more conferences consisting of multiple workshops or keynotes, intensive in-person trainings that delve into a single topic, online trainings or webinars that allow access to remote speakers and research, and training series designed to cover the community's most salient needs. Applicants should have at least 30 hours of infant mental health focused training experiences, with the birth to three population at their core. Documented trainings require the presenter be a subject matter expert

and applicants should retain a copy of the approved continuing education certificate, as well as a summary of the training topic. Once they input this information on their applications, they are asked to match each entry with the best-fitting competencies to ensure they are holistically met.

The Endorsement Competencies are organized into the following categories, with various specific knowledge/skill areas falling under each: theoretical foundations, law, regulation & agency policy, systems expertise, direct service skills, working with others, communicating, thinking, and reflection. As the state's endorsement organization, every First3Years training is matched up with two to five of the critical knowledge/skill areas, which are provided on attendees' continuing education certificates. We strive for each training to provide the competencies all infant-family professionals need to achieve best practice.

A First3Years training will equip attendees with the knowledge they need to optimally care for young children; our highly qualified speakers cover a wide range of topics, such as early brain development, pregnancy and early parenthood, attachment, self-care, cultural sensitivity, and trauma-informed practice. Our goal is for trainees to walk away not only with enhanced knowledge, but also increased competence and honed skills to implement in their work every day, as they are the ones on which infants and toddlers rely to grow up mentally healthy.

Endorsement applicants finish the process with the Infant Mental Health Endorsed designation, IMH-E®, indicating they have met the distinctive work, education, reflective supervision, and training experiences that affirm expertise in infant mental health. The Endorsement System is honored in about 26 states in the U.S., has recently been implemented in Australia, and is recognized by Zero to Three and the World Association for Infant Mental Health. Texas was the second state, after Michigan, to provide this new special recognition for birth to three professionals. Since 2004, First3Years, the infant mental health association of Texas, has endorsed 168 professionals in a variety

of infant-family occupations, from child care workers and administrators to university professors and researchers. One case manager at a child care center commented:

"I and my staff went through the Endorsement process with First3Years. For me, it was a great learning experience where I was able to review pertinent information pertaining to Infant Mental Health and child development... As the child case manager at my center, I work with the staff to continue their child development education, classroom integration, and to empower the teachers to utilize the knowledge they gained through the Endorsement process. As an endorsee, I have been able to be connected with other professionals in the field and receive ongoing information pertaining to the field and important educational training opportunities."

Another child care worker has used his Endorsement credential to advance his professional development as he finishes his Master's degree program:

"As I enter into my last two semesters as a Health Promotion graduate student, I do so with much more confidence in my mission to impact the lives of children and families. Thanks to you and the help of your organization, individuals will be able to see that I have been approved by a highly recognized professional organization for the discipline of infant mental health, that I am committed to professional development, and that I will provide high quality integrity and care."

The imperative work of nurturing zero to three-year-old children is sometimes under-recognized and under-rewarded. Endorsement combats this unfortunate reality by conveying that, as in the fields of

law, medicine, business, etc., infant-family workers are professionals and should be applauded like any others for meeting best practice standards. IMH-E® is a mark of excellence in the field of infant mental health. As more professionals earn the Endorsement and proudly write the designation after their names, recognition of the validity and criticality of the roles of infant-family professionals will grow.

To learn more about becoming endorsed in Texas, please visit the First3Years website: <http://first3yearstx.org/endorsement> and start your application today!

At First3Years we educate, advocate, and collaborate to support the healthy development of infants and toddlers. First3Years, formerly Texas Association for Infant Mental Health (TAIMH), began in 1980 as a group of volunteers in the infant mental health field who were concerned about the quality of care for infants and toddlers both inside and outside the home. Over the past 35 years we have trained and mentored thousands of professionals across the state on brain development, attachment, separation, trauma, self-regulation, cross-cultural awareness, and other infant mental health related issues. We believe that supporting the social emotional development of infants and toddlers is critical for helping the next generation be healthy, productive members of society. jfyall@first3yearstx.org

REFERENCES

- First3Years (2015). *Endorsement*. Retrieved from <http://first3yearstx.org/endorsement>
- Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health (2014). *Endorsement*. Retrieved from <http://mi-aimh.org/endorsement/>

JES FYALL CARDENAS is a doctoral student in the department of Human Development and Family Studies at Texas Tech University. [jes.fyall@ttu.edu](mailto:j.es.fyall@ttu.edu)

ISABEL TANCO works for the First3Years. itanco@first3yearstx.org
