

# Mental health challenges for Hawai'i's youngest keiki and their families have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

The relationship between infant and caregiver is crucial to healthy brain development. A secure, warm, responsive and predictable relationship with at least one caregiver influences the formation of neural structures in the brain that lead to infant well-being. Even in situations of stress, secure attachment relationships can help buffer the developing brain from significant harm.<sup>1</sup>

Recent trends in mental health indicators for keiki in Hawai'i are alarming.

Birth to Age 3

**SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL**

HI 2021

Since the pandemic, Early Intervention has seen a dramatic decline in infant and toddler social and emotional development.<sup>2</sup>

*"It would be a tragedy if we beat back one public health crisis only to allow another to grow in its place."*

– Surgeon General Murthy

The U.S. Surgeon General issued a public health advisory. On December 7, 2021, U.S. Surgeon General Murthy issued a rare warning and call to action to address the mental health challenges confronting youth. National data shows alarming increases in symptoms of depression and anxiety, negative behaviors and conditions associated with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)<sup>3</sup>

A new study reveals that children born during the pandemic are having issues with motor skills and social development due to the stress the pandemic has on the mother during pregnancy.<sup>5</sup>

Increase in share of mental health-related doctor visits\*

US 2019 to 2020

**24%**

**MENTAL HEALTH DOC VISITS**

Children 5-11

US 2022



Children as young as 0-5 experience mental health disorders.

Children under 6 years of age have a similar rate of mental illness as older children and youth.<sup>6</sup>



A young child's brain is extremely malleable to stress.

No other stage depends more on the child's environment for growth and development.

Early experiences shape the brain, affecting lifelong health, behaviour and learning.

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH)<sup>7</sup>

IECMH issues include

- ADHD
- Anxiety and depression
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Obsessive compulsive disorder

Early warning signs are

- Developmental delays
- Inconsolable crying
- Failure to seek comfort from caregivers
- Lack of curiosity

Lifelong impacts include increased risks for

- Poor physical and mental health
- Alcoholism and drug use
- Low school readiness rates
- Absenteeism and high school dropout
- Criminal justice involvement



Lifelong impacts lead to increased state spending across multiple programs, linked to lifetime costs of approximately \$200,000 per child.<sup>7</sup>

While later interventions are effective and essential, the return on investment is greatest in the earliest years.

Pandemic-related safety measures reduced in-person interactions. This isolation made it harder to recognize signs of child abuse, mental health concerns, and other challenges.

**Early adversity has a critical impact on a child's social and emotional development.**

Socioeconomically disadvantaged children and adolescents are two to three times more likely to develop mental health conditions than peers with higher socioeconomic status.<sup>3</sup>

**Vulnerable keiki are at higher risk of mental health challenges.**

Risk factors include

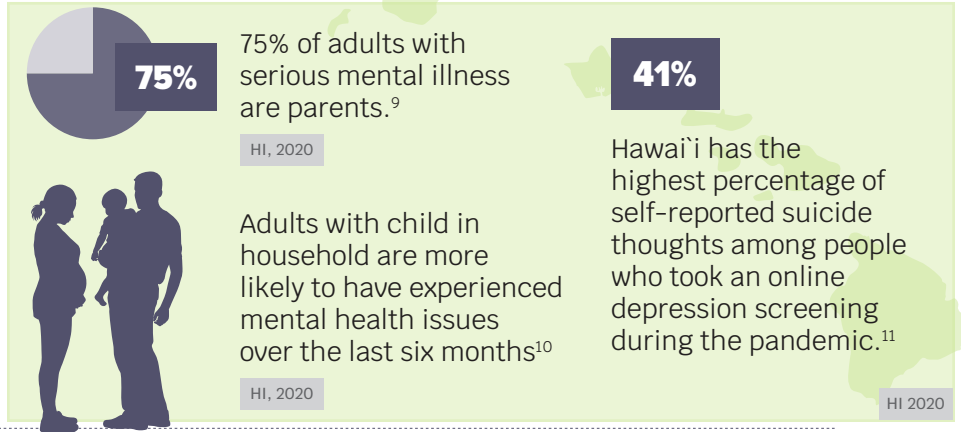
- Growing up in poverty
- Exposure to family violence
- Intellectual disabilities
- Living in immigrant households or racial and ethnic minority families
- Involvement with the Child Welfare System

**Pandemic conditions had a negative impact on the mental health of pregnant women and parents.**

Pregnant and postpartum women show increased levels of

- Anxiety and depression
- Post-traumatic stress symptoms
- Feelings of loneliness<sup>8</sup>

US, 2020



**Parents' untreated mental illness can have grave impacts on their child's development.**

Struggling adults might seem withdrawn or have limited ability to nurture.

As a result, the child may struggle with

- Behavioral and learning difficulties
- Socialization deficits
- Trauma and post-traumatic stress disorders
- Life-long mental health problems of their own

A sound social and emotional base is the launching pad for all other development – the physical, motor and cognitive development that prepares children for both school and success in life.



**It's imperative that children and their families have the mental health supports they need to manage stressors in productive ways.**

We know that mental health is shaped by many factors, from our genes and brain chemistry to our relationships with family, friends and teachers, neighborhood conditions, and larger social forces and policies.

Investing in our youngest keiki and 'ohana mental health needs will prevent more costly mental health treatments, learning challenges, drug use, school shootings, family violence and suicides, all impacting the health and economic well-being of our families, workplaces and communities.



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*"Mental health challenges in children, adolescents, and young adults are real, and they are widespread. But most importantly, they are treatable, and often preventable."*

– Surgeon General Murthy

1 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4933050>  
 2 Department of Health Early Intervention Services  
 3 Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, December 2021  
 4 <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6945a3.htm>  
 5 Columbia University, published Jan 4th, 2022.  
<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2787479?resultClick=1>  
 6 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4933050/>  
 7 <https://www.zerotothree.org/espanol/infant-and-early-childhood-mental-health>  
 8 <https://womensmentalhealth.org/posts/pandemic-distress>  
 9 Mental Health America of Hawaii  
 10 Survey commissioned by the Hawai'i Department of Health, conducted by Anthology Research January 2021  
 11 <https://mhanational.org/sites/default/files/Suicide%20and%20COVID-19%20Report.pdf>