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**Testimony Re: S-344 – Early Childhood  
Mental Health Professional Hub**

**Senate Health & Human Services  
Committee March 27, 2025  
Michaela Carroll, Health Policy Associate**



**Right from the  
Start**

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT coordinates the Right from the Start Campaign, a state policy coalition led by eight organizations to advance state policies and budget priorities that help babies and young children get off to the right start.

**Both Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and the Right from the Start Campaign strongly support Senator DiMario’s bill, S-344, which would require the state to create a budget and seek funding to pilot an Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health Professional Hub.**

In the early years, babies and young children develop the capacity to form close and secure relationships, experience, manage, and express a full range of emotions, and explore the environment and learn.

**As you can see on the attached fact sheet, the number of young children enrolled in Medicaid presenting with Serious Emotional Disturbance has grown from 10% in 2017 to 22% in 2024.** Many young children, with both Medicaid and Commercial insurance, are experiencing significant mental health challenges that interfere with their development, relationships, and learning. The state now has a [new online data dashboard tracking Medicaid claims for mental health service by age of child](#) (see page 4, right column)

In 2023, after passage of legislation establishing a Rhode Island Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health Task Force, the state released [a plan to address and improve the mental health needs of Rhode Island’s youngest children](#). The plan recommends that the state build therapeutic capacity by developing a Rhode Island Early Childhood Mental Health Professional Hub to train and support professionals to use appropriate and culturally-responsive tools and therapies to better screen, evaluate, and treat children under age six with mental health challenges.

Through Medicaid coverage, there are 21 states that recommend or require the use of evidence-based therapies for children under the age of six. **Rhode Island has a very limited number of therapists trained in these evidence-based models.** Trained therapists implementing evidence-based therapies can help babies and young children, in the context of their families, develop close and secure relationships and learn how to express and manage their emotions.

**Rhode Island is already paying for mental health services for young children, we are just asking that the state take concrete steps to help ensure therapists that serve young children have opportunities to be trained in evidence-based treatment models.** A pilot Early Childhood Mental Health Hub would help to build the capacity of Rhode Island's clinical workforce to adopt evidence-based practices for young children. Then down the road, when the state has enough trained clinicians, we could consider recommending evidence-based treatment models through Medicaid.

Growing the capacity of the workforce for early childhood mental health will build the foundation needed to improve the mental health of Rhode Island's children and adults. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.

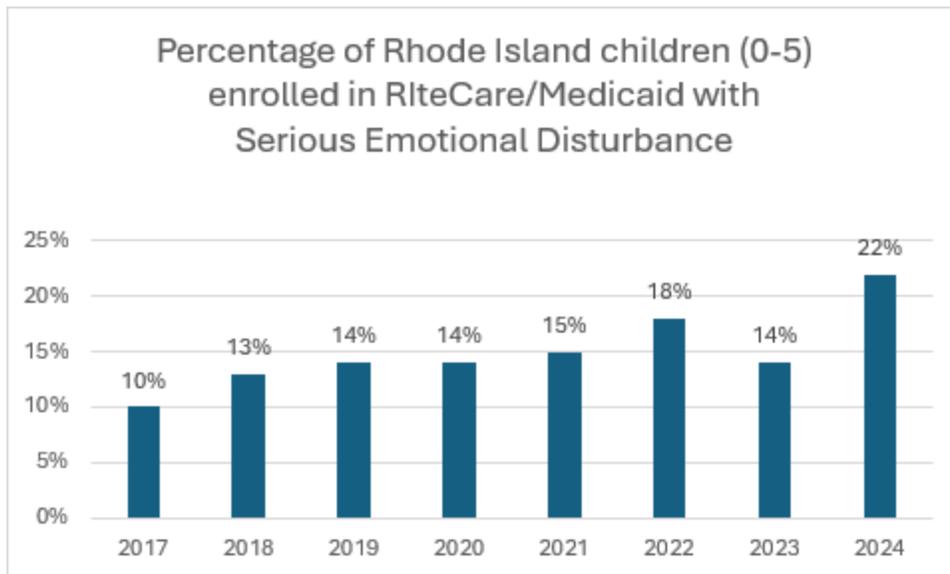
## Meet Young Children's Mental Health Needs

[H-5497](#) (Fogarty) & [S-0344](#) (DiMario)



Right from the Start

In 2023, the Rhode Island Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Taskforce issued [a plan with 10 recommendations to address and improve the mental health needs of Rhode Island's youngest children](#). The number of young children enrolled in Medicaid presenting with Serious Emotional Disturbance **has grown from 10% in 2017 to 22% in 2024**. Many young children, both with Medicaid and Commercial insurance, are experiencing significant mental health challenges that interfere with their development, relationships, and learning.



[A national report tracks state policies that help young children access key Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health services](#). Rhode Island's Medicaid and commercial insurance providers already pay for mental health services for young children, but Rhode Island does not have several recommended policies and systems in place to develop and support therapists to work with very young children and their families.

In particular, Rhode Island does not recommend or require that mental health therapists use evidence-based dyadic therapies with children under age six and has a very limited supply of therapists who are trained to use recommended evidence-based dyadic therapies for children under age six. For example, there are currently only three licensed clinicians trained to use the [ChildParent Psychotherapy](#) (CPP) model and three trained to implement [Parent-Child Interaction Therapy](#) in Rhode Island. There are 21 states that require or recommend the use of these and other therapy models for children under age six.

The Rhode Island Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Task Force Plan recommends that the state builds therapeutic capacity by developing a **Rhode Island Early Childhood Mental Health Professional Hub** to train and support professionals to use appropriate and culturally-responsive tools and therapies to better screen, evaluate, and treat mental health challenges of children under age six.

## **The 2025 Early Childhood Mental Health Professional Hub bill will:**

Require the state to develop a budget and seek funding for a 3-year pilot program to:

- 1) Train and support infant and early childhood mental health professionals to adopt and implement evidence-based practices.
- 2) Maintain a registry of infant and early childhood mental health professionals and their qualifications and help connect families to services.
- 3) Monitor the availability of services, new national recommendations, and advancements in interventions/therapies.
- 4) Make recommendations annually to Medicaid and behavioral health systems to address gaps.

### **Mental Health is the Foundation of Early Childhood Development**

Babies come into this world ready and wired to form relationships. From the moment of birth, children are forming connections, developing social responses, and learning about themselves and the world around them.

In the early years, babies and young children develop the capacity to:

- Form close and secure relationships,
- Experience, manage, and express a full range of emotions, and
- Explore the environment and learn.

But despite trending national conversations about mental health, early childhood mental health is largely ignored or misunderstood. As a baby grows through infancy, toddlerhood and the preschool years, each experience—positive or negative—becomes a building block for their future wellness. We can do more to help very young children and their families build a strong foundation and support them when they face mental health challenges.

[From Zero to Three](#)