



The INFANT program: supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and families

- Investing in the prevention and early intervention in the first 2,000 days are critical for establishing healthy behaviours that lay the foundation for lifelong health and wellbeing.
- **INFANT** is an evidence-based program that supports families from the start of life, by promoting healthy eating and active play in the early years. These healthy behaviours have complementary mental health benefits for young children and families.
- The group-based format of the program helps to build social and community connections – important in promoting the mental health and wellbeing of new parents.

Supporting new parents and young children

INFANT supports new parents to make healthy lifestyle choices, providing parents with:

- supportive information and skills for feeding, healthy eating and active play – this can improve parental self-efficacy¹ and may also reduce parental stress.
- opportunities to share experiences with other parents in supportive environment to overcome some of the common barriers experienced by new parents.
- connections with existing health services to gain support from health professionals.

Healthy behaviours are linked to mental health and wellbeing

- Adopting healthy behaviours early in life reduces the risk of overweight and obesity - being a healthy weight has a positive effect on mental health and supports children to thrive².
- Eating a diet rich in vegetables and fruit, and low in non-core food and drinks is associated with better mental health among both children and adults³.
- Outdoor family time such as pram walking and active play creates opportunities for physical activity and offers additional mental health benefits through social and community connections.
- Healthy eating and being active (at least 60 minutes per week) can reduce the risk of depression among adults⁴. This is important during the perinatal period, as one in five mothers and one in ten fathers in Australia may experience depression and anxiety.⁵

Building social and community connection

- Being a new parent is a time of new challenges and life changes. Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of parents can have a significant and lasting benefit to the mental health and wellbeing of their children.⁶
- INFANT helps to connect parents with other new parents, providing social and community connection. The group-based format of INFANT provides a “*relaxed, friendly environment that encourage(s) peer discussion, social connections and trust.*”⁷
- Engaging new parents in early parenting programs such as INFANT also connects families with health services, helping them to access other services at the right time, if they need support.

There's so many isolated young mums out there. So I really try and hone in on the playgroup aspect and all the different services... like there's been one lady, she sort of needed a little bit of extra support, and I sort of said to her that I thought it would be really good if she was to speak to her maternal health nurse and see if she could get some extra support.” - INFANT Program facilitator.

¹ Spence, A.C., Campbell, K.J., Crawford, D.A. et al (2014). Mediators of improved child diet quality following a health promotion intervention: the Melbourne INFANT Program. *International Journal of Behaviour Nutrition & Physical Activity* 11, 137. doi.org/10.1186/s12966-014-0137-5

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2020). Australia's children. Cat. no. CWS 69. Canberra: AIHW

³ Rioseco, P., Warren, D. & Daraganova, G. (2020) Children's social-emotional wellbeing: the role of parenting, parents' mental health and health behaviours. Australian Institute of Family Studies: Canberra. aifs.gov.au/publications/childrens-social-emotional-wellbeing

⁴ Department of Health (2020). Co-benefits of a healthy lifestyle for mental wellbeing. Victorian Government: Melbourne. health.vic.gov.au/population-health-systems/co-benefits-of-a-healthy-lifestyle-for-mental-wellbeing

⁵ PricewaterhouseCoopers Consulting Australia (PwC Australia) (2019). The cost of perinatal depression and anxiety in Australia. perinatalwellbeingcentre.org.au/news/cost-of-perinatal-depression-and-anxiety-in-australia

⁶ Rioseco, P., Warren, D. & Daraganova, G. (2020) Children's social-emotional wellbeing: the role of parenting, parents' mental health and health behaviours. Australian Institute of Family Studies: Canberra. aifs.gov.au/publications/childrens-social-emotional-wellbeing

⁷ Love, P., Laws, R., Litterbach, E., & Campbell, K. (2018). Factors Influencing Parental Engagement in an Early Childhood Obesity Prevention Program Implemented at Scale: The Infant Program. *Nutrients*, 10(4), 509. MDPI AG. [dx.doi.org/10.3390/nu10040509](https://doi.org/10.3390/nu10040509)