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.¹

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)³

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.⁵

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

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)⁷

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.⁷

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

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

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

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

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.

Increase in share of mental health–related doctor visits⁴

24% US 2019 to 2020

Children 5–11

US 2022

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

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

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