

Jill Gilgenbach
Children's Resource Center

Ohio House Children and Human Services Committee

Chairperson White and Members of the House Children and Human Services Committee,

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My name is Jill Gilgenbach and I am an Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant at the Children's Resource Center in Bowling Green, Ohio. I urge you to prioritize investments in Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health in Ohio's FY26-27 budget, HB 96.

It is very difficult to sum up the work that I do in our community in a few minutes but I will do my best to be concise. All of our life experiences affect how we show up in the world, no matter how old we are. For your youngest constituents, 90% of their brain development occurs from ages 0-5. My role as an IECMHC is to support caregivers of children ages 0-6. By providing them with the education and support around development whether that be brain, social, emotional, effects of trauma, or more. I see many of your adult constituents struggle daily to manage difficult feelings. Have you ever seen someone yelling at a cashier at a gas station?

My Google search shows that there are @ 70,000 people incarcerated in Ohio. How many of these people were never taught how to manage big, hard feelings? How many of them have experienced countless traumas in their lives. That's my job. To provide the education to caregivers about the lasting impact of trauma on children. The ability to self-regulate when emotions are high is a skill that can be taught to a 3-year-old. It's hard for grown-ups to teach skill if they don't have it. How many of you were taught what you were feeling and how to cope with it in a healthy manner when you were a child? Not so many of us. When we know better, we do better. That's my job. To help parents and teachers know better so they can do better.

In short, my job is to prevent expulsion of young children from childcare settings and schools. My job is to educate the community as a whole as to the lifelong effects of trauma on development. It is hard to find the right statistics to send you because my success stories have a different trajectory.

My personal story – Using my skills and the tools available to me, caregivers' tenacity and love for their child, we now see a happy, well adjusted, lovable toddler in the classroom. Several months ago, this child was biting peers and teachers, leaving marks over 10 times a day. He was on the verge of being expelled from his childcare center. His affect was flat and he rarely engaged with others. I helped them to better understand him and his needs from a social and emotional perspective.

What could have happened? If our program didn't exist, he could've have been kicked out of the childcare center. His parents could have struggled to find another option for childcare. One of them could have had to quit their job. They could have gone on public assistance because they couldn't find childcare to go to work. Let's average a cost to the state of \$20,000/year for 3 people for Medicaid purposes. The child could have been enrolled in multiple other childcare centers, continued biting, and continued getting expelled. The child could have then gone through the

formative years of his brain development not being supported in his emotional or social wellness. This could lead to him having a hate for school, which he would be required to attend K-12. The public school system could have had a challenging time meeting his needs. They could have spent \$15,000/year educating him and supporting his needs due to these concerns. He could have struggled to make friends because he never learned how when it was important. Hypothetically, this child is now a teenager. He struggles to make friends and still reacts physically when upset. He could still be on public assistance and now be getting multiple mental health services in his community. On the low end, let's say that's say that costs \$4,000/year. He is now 18. He could lose his temper and shoot someone in an argument. Now, he is in prison, costing the state just over \$30,000/year. This might sound extreme but there is a preschool to prison pipeline. We know that kids are expelled from early learning, have incarceration rates. We prevented this by working together. That's my job. Let's add it up - \$39,000/year to support this child and \$30,000/year for the rest of his life as an adult.

I have countless other stories. This is one family and one child. Do I know all of these things would have happened? No but I do know the likelihood is much higher if we don't intervene.

There is a ripple effect to what we do. The teacher that was supported has countless other children in her care and as they age, she will have countless more through her classroom. She has new skills from our experience together. This family plans to have more children. Mom is teacher in her own classroom. Those skills will be used to benefit so many more children. Mom might share with her friends and family what she has learned. There is a ripple effect to our work. That's what I do.

My favorite quote of all time by Frederick Douglass – “It's easier to build strong children than to repair broken adults.” If I add my own twist to it, it also costs less. Please invest in infant mental services for your constituents. Our babies, toddlers, and preschoolers are the future. The effects of our program are lifelong and lasting. Together we build a better future for everyone. Thank you so much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jill Gilgenbach, MSW, LSW, IECMHC, OIMHP-III