

# Qualifications of an Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant

## Overview

When assembling or expanding an IECMHC staff, it is important to first assess the kind of context or environment the consultant(s) will be providing the services within. The qualifications of an Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health consultant may vary depending on the context. They should be of the highest level in all cases, but it is especially important with respect to independent consultants. Consultants working within community, tribal, or statewide Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) programs that include workforce development and quality assurance features can be employed with lesser qualifications. Community, tribal, and statewide IECMHC programs that include robust workforce development (training, supervision, mentoring, etc.) and quality assurance systems can support consultants in gaining the needed knowledge and skills and ensure that their work meets high-quality standards. In general, the degree to which a program can effectively employ less-qualified consultants is dependent on its size (including both reach and scope), its evidence base, and the comprehensiveness of its consultant workforce development and oversight structure.

## Independent IECMH Consultants

### Context and Considerations

Independent IECMH consultants address the needs of a limited number of clients (early childhood education programs, home visiting programs, or child service agencies). Practitioners in this category may include (1) private consultant practitioners delivering services in an ad hoc manner or through individual service agreements, (2) consultants contracted through and employed by a mental health agency, or (3) consultants who are employed to work with a target population by agencies whose prime mission is not mental health (e.g., Head Start/Early Head Start programs). Characteristics of independent IECMH consultants typically include the following:

- ◆ Service eligibility is limited, based on the skill set of a particular consultant or the nature of the hiring entity.
- ◆ Geographical reach is limited, based on the capacity of a particular consultant.
- ◆ Supports and oversight may vary significantly, depending on consultant access and agency structure or functioning.

## Qualifications

Independent consultants require the highest qualifications, due to the often isolated nature of the consultation they provide outside of a formal IECMHC program and/or the absence of a formal IECMHC system of support and accountability in which their work takes place. Such qualifications include the following:

- ◆ A master's degree or above in a mental health field
- ◆ Licensure in the consultant's specific field of study
- ◆ Three or more years of post-master's experience involving work with young children, infant-child mental health, and the delivery of IECMHC
- ◆ The capacity to work within the culture and system of the service community in which consultation is delivered

## IECMH Consultants Working Within a Community or Statewide IECMHC Program or Model

### Context and Considerations

Community, tribal, or statewide IECMHC programs are intended to address the mental health of a population, most typically children from birth to age 5. Depending on the program or model employed, a targeted group within that population may be identified as eligible to receive IECMHC services. In such situations, anywhere from a few to a large number of IECMH consultants are employed and, depending on the employing program or model, receive varying degrees of oversight and workforce development supports. Two categories of community or statewide IECMHC programs or models, along with key considerations, are identified below.

### Targeted IECMHC program:

- ◆ Service eligibility is limited to specific target population(s)—for example, to programs only serving preschoolers or to Early Head Start/Head Start programs.
- ◆ Geographical reach is limited, for example, to a city, community, county, or tribe, or to key areas of a state.
- ◆ Fewer consultants are employed (i.e., typically fewer than a statewide IECMHC program).
- ◆ Comprehensive supports and oversight exist but are variable, depending on a particular program's structure.
- ◆ Supports may be embedded or not.

## Statewide IECMHC program:

- ◆ Statewide program with targeted access:
  - Geographic reach is limited to specific location (or locations) throughout a particular state.
  - General client population is eligible based on location.
  - Higher numbers of consultants are employed (i.e., typically more than a targeted IECMHC program).
  - Comprehensive supports and oversight are embedded in the program.
  
- ◆ Statewide program with universal access:
  - Geographic access is unlimited within a state.
  - All children are eligible, regardless of location.
  - Higher numbers of consultants are employed (i.e., typically more than a targeted IECMHC program).
  - Comprehensive workforce development, support, and oversight structures are required and are fully embedded in the program or model.
  - Model fidelity is maintained—work is done in alignment with a model’s evidence base.

## Qualifications

Required qualifications for consultants working within a universal IECMHC program or model are slightly more flexible than qualifications for consultants who work independently or who work in a program serving a targeted population (e.g., note the requirement of a mental health *or* a non-mental health master’s degree and that a license is preferred rather than required). This less than ideal set of qualifications is suggested only when necessary due to the limitations of an available workforce, or when the expertise of a particular consultant will be of benefit to the program, team, and/or client population.

Three considerations should guide the practice of modifying qualifications for hiring:

- ◆ If the number of consultants employed through a particular model, and their higher-level IECMHC qualifications, can buffer and/or augment the skills of less-qualified consultants
- ◆ If the program's workforce development and oversight is sufficient to maintain and further develop consultants' skills
- ◆ If the program's structure or model of delivery is clear and includes strong fidelity measures

Qualifications for this type of hiring include the following:

- ◆ A master's degree in a mental health field or in a related human services field
- ◆ Licensure in the consultant's specific mental health field (preferred; not required) or eligibility to obtain such license (preferred; not required)
- ◆ At least two years of post-master's experience in an area related to mental health, social-emotional development, early childhood, and/or early childhood education
- ◆ The capacity to work within the culture and system of the service community in which consultation is delivered

