



# FIRST 3 YEARS

OUR IMPACT LASTS A LIFETIME

*A Guide to*  
**ENDORSEMENT®**

The Internationally Recognized Credential for  
Culturally Sensitive, Relationship-Focused  
Practice Promoting Infant Mental Health



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*“Participating in the Endorsement training helped me realize the value of the knowledge, resources, and connections available to me and other professionals in the community.”*

*-Jerica Owukori, LMSW, IMH-E® (IFA)*

*"My Infant Mental Health Endorsement has elevated my credentials and provides a quality backing for my expertise...I am proud to have this professional designation because it is not otherwise acknowledged and it provides a community of support for this specific populace."*

*-Katie Compton, IMH-E® (IFS)*

## Introduction

### History

First3Years<sup>1</sup> began in 1980 as a group of volunteers in the infant mental health field who were concerned about the quality of care for infants and toddlers both inside and outside of the home. The founders wanted to create high quality training and education opportunities for professionals whose work impacts the emotional development of infants, toddlers, and their families.

In 1986, First3Years was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) organization, and over the past 35 years, we have trained and mentored thousands of professionals across the state on brain development, attachment, separation, trauma, self regulation, cross-cultural awareness, and other infant mental health related issues. We believe that supporting the social emotional development of infants and toddlers is critical for helping the next generation be healthy, productive members of society.

During the 1990s, 20 passionate First3Years members began to develop a set of standards for working with infants and toddlers across disciplines. The Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health was also working to establish such standards; their work became known as the Endorsement® program. In 2003, after three years of training, Texas became the first state to license Michigan's Endorsement program, which is now accepted across the nation and internationally.

Since 2003, over 2,600 professionals have earned Endorsement, with about 10% (171) in Texas.<sup>2</sup>

Today, the Endorsement program preserves the cornerstones on which the credential was built: kindness, compassion, acceptance, and recognition of individual differences.

### Overview

The Endorsement credential—IMH-E®—supports and recognizes the development and proficiency of professionals who work with or on behalf of pregnant women, infants, toddlers, and their families. This process is based upon an internationally recognized set of competencies that helps define best practice and guides an organized system of culturally sensitive, relationship-based professional growth. Endorsement applicants must meet the requirements matching one of four categories to earn the Infant Mental Health Endorsement. The Endorsement System has been approved by Zero to Three and the World Association for Infant Mental Health, is honored across U.S. states, and has been recently implemented on an international level.

<sup>1</sup> Formerly Texas Association for Infant Mental Health (TAIMH). TAIMH became First3Years in 2015.

<sup>2</sup> As of December 31, 2014

## Who Can Apply?

All professionals who have experience working with or on behalf of pregnant women, infants, toddlers, their parents, and/or other caregivers *and* meet the educational, work, training, and reflective supervision requirements at each category (see a chart of these requirements on page 5).

## Why Apply?

- To enhance your professional profile as a specialist in the infant and family field.
- To distinguish yourself among your colleagues by meeting competency standards that reflect best practice and by earning the IMH-E credential.
- To affirm the specialized knowledge and skills you have acquired through formal education, work experiences, and in- service trainings, under the guidance and supervision of experienced mentors in the infant-family field.
- To gain the opportunity to network and collaborate with many other professionals in a variety of disciplines to improve the quality of infant and toddler care.
- To better support the pregnant women, infants, toddlers, families, students, agencies, and institutions that are served by the promotion of infant mental health.

## Process

### Designation Categories

There are four categories of Endorsement. They are designed to target different professional areas within the infant-family field. Individuals are guided to a specific category based on their line of work rather than educational background. The four Endorsement categories are:

- **Infant Family Associate:** This category of Endorsement can be most appropriate for those whose work has a primary focus on promotion. Promotion services encourage and support social-emotional wellness in a multitude of ways. Here are just a few examples: Early Care and Education, Administration, Case Management, Wraparound Services, Child Welfare.
- **Infant Family Specialist:** This category of Endorsement can be most appropriate for those whose work has a primary focus on prevention. Prevention programs reach families that are experiencing levels of stress that may increase their infant or young children's risk of developing social-emotional, relational, or mental health problems. For the purposes of Endorsement, these services focus on the promotion of the relationships surrounding the infant or young child. Additionally, a primary focus of the services provided are the social-emotional needs of the infant or young child. Here are just a few examples: Part C, Early Head Start, 0 -3 home visiting programs like HFA, PAT, NFP, and Mental Health Consultation.
- **Infant Mental Health Specialist:** This category of Endorsement is typically a good fit for those engaged in IMH practice or intervention. This type of work experience include therapies and practices that are intended to explore issues related to attachment, separation, trauma, and unresolved losses as they affect the development, behavior and care of the infant/very young child. That is, practitioners who provide relationship-based therapies to address "ghosts in the nursery." Those therapies or interventions may include: IMH HV, IPP/PPP, Minding the Baby, or Interaction Guidance.
- **Infant Mental Health Mentor:** This category of Endorsement is for leaders in policy, research & teaching or RSC and is divided into 3 subcategories: Clinical for those who provide reflective supervision/consultation, Policy for leaders in policy, advocacy, program design, and program administration, and Research/Faculty for those in academic settings (conducting research that promotes IMH, teaching about IMH principles and/or practices

*\*Please note that these are only examples of the types of jobs a provider may have at this designation; this is not an exhaustive list. Moreover, the categories are not meant to act as a hierarchy, but rather as categories to organize the wide range of occupations that exist in this field. Providers are encouraged to contact First3Years with questions ([endorsement@first3yearstx.org](mailto:endorsement@first3yearstx.org), 734.785.7705 ext. 7196).*

*“Endorsement is allowing expert social workers and early childcare professionals to label what they already do as imperative work. This assists with professionalizing the field and helping amazing caregivers feel valued and respected for their incredible role in a child’s life.”*  
-Natalie R., IMH-E® (Infant Mental Health Mentor)

## Requirements by Category

	Infant Family Associate (I)	Infant Family Specialist (II)	Infant Mental Health Specialist (III)	Infant Mental Health Mentor (IV)
Work Experience	CDA or Associate's degree or 2 years early childhood experience and/or 2 years in the infant, early childhood, and family field	Minimum 2 years paid, providing services that promote infant mental health for infants, toddlers, and their families	Minimum 2 years post Master's, paid, providing infant mental health intervention to infants, toddlers, and their families	Minimum 3 years post Master's, paid, as a practice leader in the infant, toddler, and family field in one of the 3 designation areas
Educational Experience		Bachelor's or Master's degree	Master's or post-graduate degree	Master's, post-graduate, doctorate, post-doctorate degree
Training	Minimum 30 hours			
Reflective Supervision	Recommended, but not required	Minimum 24 clock hours within a 1 to 2 year time period while working with infants, toddlers, and their families and/or while providing supervision to staff who are providing services to infants, young children, and families	Minimum 50 clock hours within a 1 to 2 year time period while working with infants, toddlers, and their families	Required only for Clinical: Minimum 50 clock hours within a 1 to 2 year time period while working with infants, toddlers, and their families
Reference Ratings	3			
Code of Ethics	Signed			
Endorsement Agreement				
First3Years Membership	Required			
Written Exam	No	No	Yes	Yes
Application Fee	\$15	\$15	\$25	\$25
Processing Fee	\$25	\$50	\$200	\$300
Professional Application	Candidate will submit a professional application on EASy (Endorsement Application System) that demonstrates he/she has met both the requirements and the competencies specified at each category.			

## Reflective Supervision

Reflective Supervision is recommended for all applicants, however only Category II, Category III, and Category IV-Clinical Endorsement applicants are required to receive it. Reflective Supervision involves regular meetings between individuals or groups and a reflective supervisor, who facilitates thoughtful discussion focused on the emotional content of work in the infant-family field. This specialized supervision goes beyond clinical or administrative supervision to shared exploration of the parallel process, i.e., attention to all of the relationships, including that between practitioner and parent, between parent and infant/toddler, and between practitioner and supervisor. It is critical to understand how each of these relationships affects the others. Of additional importance, by attending to the emotional content of the work and how reactions to the content affect the work, Reflective Supervision enhances professional and personal development within one's discipline. Finally, there is often greater emphasis on the supervisor's ability to listen and wait, allowing the supervisee to discover solutions, concepts and perceptions on his/her own without interruption from the supervisor.

## EASy (Endorsement Application System)

EASy, or the Endorsement Application System, is the online site that houses Endorsement candidates' applications. Applicants will first create a preliminary application at <https://easy.mi-aimh.org/first3years>. Here, they will fill out basic personal, work, education, and reflective supervision information and choose the designation category that best fits their professional position and experiences. The Endorsement coordinator will verify three things—that the chosen category fits, that the applicant is a member of First3Years, and that they have paid the registration fee—before sending them their username and password. With these log-in credentials, applicants can access their EASy online application at any time to add information and make changes.

Every piece of information required for an applicant's final application submission is stored on this system: the information from the preliminary application, the signed agreements, education information with any CDAs or transcripts, work experience, training documentation, reference ratings, and reflective supervision. There are detailed instructions on each page regarding how to input information in that particular section. Once the application is complete, the candidate will click 'submit' on his or her dashboard and pay the corresponding processing fee.

## Process Overview

- 1) Inquire by contacting First3Years ([endorsement@first3yearstx.org](mailto:endorsement@first3yearstx.org), 734.785.7705 ext. 7196) or by completing a preliminary application on EASy ([easy.mi-aimh.org/first3years](https://easy.mi-aimh.org/first3years)).
- 2) While completing a preliminary application, pay the application fee and turn in First3Years membership fee and form (if not a current member).
- 3) Prepare and submit the completed main application along with the Endorsement processing fee.
- 4) Competency review, including a two-level review of the professional application by the Endorsement Committee and, for Infant Mental Health Specialists (Category III) & Infant Mental Health Mentors (Category IV) only, successful completion of written exam.
- 5) Official Endorsement letter and certificate upon approval.

## Endorsement Renewal Requirements

In order to keep their place on the Endorsement Registry and maintain use of the IMH-E credential, First3Years requires ongoing membership in First3Years and participation in 15 clock hours of training experiences that promote infant mental health per year. Applicants can renew both membership and Endorsement at [www.first3yearstx.org](http://www.first3yearstx.org).



## Competencies

More extensive copies of the competencies by category can be found on the First3Years website at <http://first3yearstx.org/endorsement/endorsement-requirements-and-competencies>

A note on the color coding: each category corresponds to the competencies in its color categorization as well as those of the category before it (e.g., Category III applicants must meet all the competencies in green as well as those in red and black)

Competencies for Category I through IV

Additional competencies for Categories II through IV

Additional competencies for Categories III and IV

Additional competencies for Category IV

### Theoretical Foundations

#### Knowledge Areas

- pregnancy & early parenthood
- infant & young child development and behavior
- Infant/young child & family-centered practice
- relationship-based practice
- family relationships & dynamics
- attachment, separation & loss
- cultural competence
- relationship-based, therapeutic practice
- disorders of infancy/early childhood
- psychotherapeutic & behavioral theories of change
- mental and behavioral disorders in adults
- adult learning theory & practice statistics
- research & evaluation

### Law, Regulation & Agency Policy

#### Knowledge Areas

- ethical practice
- government, law & regulation
- agency policy

### Systems Expertise

#### Knowledge Areas

- service delivery systems
- community resources

### Direct Service Skills

#### Knowledge Areas

- observation & listening
- screening & assessment
- responding with empathy
- advocacy
- life skills
- safety
- treatment planning
- developmental guidance
- supportive counseling
- parent-infant/toddler psychotherapy
- reflective clinical supervision

### Working with Others

#### Skill Areas

- building & maintaining relationships
- supporting others
- collaborating
- resolving conflict
- empathy & compassion
- mentoring
- coaching
- crisis management
- consulting



## Competencies (Continued)

Competencies for Category I through IV

Additional competencies for Categories II through IV

Additional competencies for Categories III and IV

Additional competencies for Category IV

### Leading People

#### Skill Areas

- motivating
- advocacy
- developing talent

### Communicating

#### Skill Areas

- listening
- speaking
- writing
- group process

### Thinking

#### Skill Areas

- analyzing information
- solving problems
- exercising sound judgment
- maintaining perspective
- planning & organizing

### Reflection

#### Skill Areas

- contemplation
- self-awareness
- curiosity
- professional/personal development
- emotional response

### Administration

#### Skill Areas

- program management
- program development
- program evaluation
- program funding

### Research and Evaluation

#### Skill Areas

- study of infant relationships & attachment
- study of infant development and behavior
- study of families

*"The culminating study that I did to earn TAIMH Endorsement pulled together 30+ years of professional involvement in the early childhood field and fundamentally enhanced (even changed) my philosophy of the critical importance of supporting parents, caregivers, lawmakers (everyone!) in understanding the importance of the early years and advocating for practices that support the nurturing of babies and families."*

*-Suzy Armstrong, M.Ed., IMH-E® (Infant Mental Health Mentor)*



## FAQs

What are the benefits of Endorsement?

There are both professional and personal benefits to Endorsement:

- It enhances your professional profile and resume as a specialist who meets best practice standards in the infant and family field.
- It gives you an internationally-recognized credential that will set you apart from other professionals in the field.
- Earning the IMH-E credential affirms the specialized knowledge and skills you have acquired through formal education, work experiences, and in-service trainings.
- It allows you to better support the vast scope of infants, toddlers, families, students, agencies, and institutions that are served by the promotion of infant mental health.

How long does it take to go through the Endorsement process?

It varies. Some applicants begin and complete the process in four weeks and some may take two years or more. The length of time depends on multiple factors, such as - how many requirements are complete before the start of the application, whether or not the applicant has received reflective supervision before beginning the process, how much time and how often the applicant works on the application, how quickly the applicant sends in his/her transcripts, whether or not the applicant is required to take the exam, etc. You can discuss the timeline with us before beginning the process.

How can I use the IMH-E designation if I earn my Endorsement?

You can use the designation with your title, along with other professional degrees or certifications, such as:  
- *Jane Doe, LCSW, IMH-E® (Infant Family Specialist)*

What happens to my Endorsement if I do not renew it in time?

Renewal deadlines are August 31 of each year (the same as membership). If you do not turn in your renewal form documenting 15 hours of additional training from the previous year by that date, we will send three reminders out. If, by the third reminder, you still have not submitted your renewal form and/or renewed First3Years membership, you will be taken off of the Registry and will no longer have use of the IMH-E designation.

What happens to my Endorsement if a move to a different state?

There are 36 other states and 2 international associations with Endorsement, and more are in the process of licensing it. If you move to one of these states, you will be transferred to their Registry and will renew with them from then on.

Can I receive reflective supervision from someone who is not endorsed?

Yes. While ideally you would seek out reflective supervision from a First3Years endorsee, we realize that this is not always possible. Your reflective supervisor can be any professional in the early childhood field who would meet the requirements at Category III or IV; before beginning supervision, you would need to verify this with us.



Can I have access to my reference rating forms?

Applicants cannot see the forms themselves, but if you do *not* waive your right to know their contents and you are deferred for some reason related to the reference ratings, we or your reference(s) will relay the reasons for the deferral to you.

How is the review process conducted?

After you submit and pay the processing fee, we will pick two reviewers for your application - they will be current First3Years endorsees at your category or above. They will go through your application one after the other to check whether or not all of the competencies have been met through the education, work, training, references, and supervision (if applicable) aspects of your application. Once both are finished, they must reach consensus about whether to approve or defer your application, or put it on hold. If the latter decision is made, we will reach out to you to let you know of any changes the reviewers recommend for your application. If you are deferred, we will give you a chance to amend or add to your application before rereviewing it. If you are approved, you will receive a congratulatory e-mail followed by an official certificate and letter in the mail.

Why are we matched with an advisor and what is his or her role?

Applicants are matched with advisors so the latter can guide them through the Endorsement process. All First3Years advisors are Endorsed, so are a good resource to applicants on completing the application, using the EASy site, knowing what to expect, and, for Categories III and IV, exam preparation. They are responsible for contacting applicants assigned to them throughout the process to encourage their work on the application, identify strengths and weaknesses in their portfolios, relay any issues to the Endorsement coordinator, and provide any other general support.

Category III and IV applicants are required to take an exam; what do I need to know about it?

- After submission and approval of your application, you will have 6 weeks to review and study for the exam. Your advisor is there to help you prepare and can give you approved study materials during this time.
- The exam has two sections: multiple choice and essay. There are 60 questions in the multiple choice section and 1-2 essays (depending on your category and sub-designation: Clinical, Research/Faculty, Policy) in the essay section. You will have 1.5 hours to complete each section; you are allotted 3 hours for the whole exam.
- An official proctor will administer the exam at an appropriate location upon which you both agree. If there is no eligible proctor near you, you can take the exam at a testing center. First3Years will cover the testing center fee the first time you take the exam and you will be responsible for payment for any retakes.
- In the event an applicant fails the exam, he/she will have the option to retake it 1 year after the exam date.

First3Years recently changed its name from Texas Association for Infant Mental Health; did this affect the Endorsement process?

No. The steps, requirements, and protocols remain the same. First3Years is still the Texas affiliate of the World Association for Infant Mental Health and the Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health, all of which recognize Endorsement and the competency system it utilizes.



## Glossary

**Advisor:** a professional/service provider who meets the requirements for Endorsement at Categories I, II, III, or IV, is a member of First3Years, and who agrees to guide an Endorsement candidate through the First3Years Endorsement process.

**Attachment:** an emotional bond between a parent/primary caregiver and infant that develops over time and as a result of positive care seeking behaviors (e.g., crying, smiling, vocalizing, grasping, reaching, calling, following) and responsive caregiving (e.g., smiling, talking, holding, comforting, caressing).

**Candidate:** a professional/service provider who has applied for First3Years Endorsement at Categories I, II, III, or IV.

**Candidate's Waiver:** an agreement signed by an Endorsement candidate waiving the right to review professional reference forms.

**Competency Guidelines:** describe specific areas of expertise, responsibilities and behaviors that are required to earn First3Years Endorsement at Category I (Infant Family Associate), Category II (Infant Family Specialist), Category III (Infant Mental Health Specialist), and Category IV (Infant Mental Health Mentor). Areas of expertise, very generally described here, include theoretical foundations; law, regulation and policy; service systems; direct service skills; working with others; communicating; reflection; and thinking.

**Cultural Sensitivity:** the ability to respect and acknowledge differences in beliefs, attitudes and traditions related to the care and raising of young children, remaining open to different points of view and approaching families with respect for their cultural values.

**Early Childhood-Related Professional:** a professional/service provider who works with infants and very young children (birth to five years). Examples include a child care provider, an early head start teacher, a family support specialist, a home visitor, a maternal support specialist, and an infant mental health specialist.

**Endorsement:** recognition and documentation of competency within the infant and family field.

**Endorsement Committee:** members identified by the First3Years President and Executive Board to develop the Endorsement for infant and family professionals/service providers for the association.

**Endorsement Designations:** there are four categories of Endorsement. They are designed to target different professional areas within the infant-family field. The categories are not meant to act as a hierarchy, but rather as categories to organize the wide range of occupations that exist in this field.

**Family-Centered Practice:** the infant and family professional/service provider's ability to focus on the infant or toddler within the context of the family and to respect the family's strengths and needs as primary.

**Infant Family Associate:** a professional/service provider who meets the requirements for First3Years Endorsement at Category I. Might be a child-care worker or a Head Start/Early Head Start professional.

**Infant Family Specialist:** a professional/service provider who meets the requirements for First3Years Endorsement at Category II. Might be in ECI, CPS, or work as a therapist, nurse, or social worker.

**Infant Mental Health Specialist:** a professional/service provider who meets the requirements for First3Years Endorsement at Category III. Applicants are graduate level mental health providers who provide therapeutic services.

**Infant Mental Health Mentor:** a professional/service provider who meets the requirements for First3Years Endorsement at Category IV. Applicants are graduate level providers who choose one of three additional designations listed within the Infant Mental Health Mentor designation: Clinical, Policy, and Research/Faculty

**Infant Mental Health:** an interdisciplinary field dedicated to promoting the social and emotional well-being of all infants, toddlers, and families within the context of secure and nurturing relationships. Infant mental health services support the growth of healthy attachment relationships in early infancy, reducing the risk of delays or disorders and enhancing enduring strengths.

**Intensive In-Service Training:** training experiences that offer opportunities for discussion and reflection about the development, behavior or treatment of infants and toddlers within the context of the family; full day training experiences or training over time, e.g., 6 hours monthly for 6 months; 3 hours monthly for 12 months.

**Mentor:** an experienced infant mental health professional who offers guidance, support and learning opportunities to professionals/service providers within the infant and family field. An Infant Mental Health Mentor meets the requirements for First3Years Endorsement at the highest category, Category IV.

**Observation:** the infant and family professional/service provider's ability to describe what he/she sees when working with infants and families and to examine and reflect on the meaning of those observations with a colleague or supervisor/consultant.

**Professional Development Plan:** an individual approach to professional growth within the infant and family field that encourages the fulfillment of requirements for First3Years Endorsement through education, training, and supervised work experiences.

**Reflective practice:** able to examine one's thoughts and feelings related to professional and personal responses within the infant and family field.

**Reflective supervision:** a learning experience in which a professional/service provider meets regularly with an experienced infant mental health professional to examine professional and personal thoughts and feelings in relationship to work with infants, toddlers, and families.

**Relationship-based practice:** values early developing relationships between parents and young children as the foundation for optimal growth and change; directs all services to nurture early developing relationships within families; values the working relationship between parents and professionals as the instrument for therapeutic change; values all relationship experiences, past and present, as significant to one's capacity to nurture and support others.

**Reviewer:** a professional/service provider who meets the requirements for Endorsement at Categories I, II, III, or IV, is a member of First3Years, and who agrees to review Endorsement candidates' applications upon submission in order to verify they have met the requirements and competencies corresponding to their designation Category.

## Acknowledgements

First3Years gratefully acknowledges the Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health (MI-AIMH) for designing the Endorsement credential. We thank MI-AIMH for their vision and leadership in the field of Infant Mental Health.