



CLINICAL PSYCHIATRY – Sarah Birss, MD



Dr. Sarah Birss is a child and adult psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, with training in pediatrics and developmental pediatrics. She has a longstanding interest in working with infants, children, parents, and families, and in learning and teaching about early emotional development. She is also interested in the integration of knowledge of infant research and early development into psychoanalytic theory and in applying these ideas to clinical work with children and adults.

In her medical training, Dr. Birss followed a circuitous route. Infant Psychiatry was emerging as a field, and by pursuing her interests, she managed to craft training in that area. After an internship in pediatrics, she entered a general psychiatry training program at the University of Washington in Seattle. Reading charts on the inpatient units, she noticed how many times frequently hospitalized patients had histories of difficulties in their families from very early in childhood. While at UW, she heard T. Berry Brazelton speak about his work with parents and infants, and she decided to return to pediatrics training to work with Dr. Brazelton, hoping to work with psychiatric difficulties as they were emerging. She finished pediatrics training at The Floating Hospital at Tufts and completed fellowships in Developmental Pediatrics and in Child Psychiatry at Children's Hospital in Boston.

On completion of training, Sarah began private practice in child and adult psychiatry in Cambridge. She specialized in seeing very young children, from 2 ½ to 6 years of age, though her practice encompassed children, adolescents, parents, adults, and couples of all ages. She enjoyed supervising child psychiatry fellows at Cambridge Health Alliance and was a Lecturer in Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School in Psychiatry and Behavioral Pediatrics until 2018. In 2016 she moved her practice to Concord, Massachusetts, where she continues to see children and adults.

Dr Birss is a graduate of the Boston Psychoanalytic Society & Institute, where she is also a member of the faculty. She teaches in the Adult and Child Psychoanalytic Training Programs and has been involved in revision of the Child Analysis Curriculum. She is the immediate past co-chair of the Child Analysis Training Program at BPSI.

In addition to her private practice, Sarah continued to work in the field of parent-infant mental health. For many years she consulted with Cambridge Somerville Early Intervention, teaching early childhood development, and helped to develop a scale to assess early emotional development of infants and toddlers.

Beginning in 1999, Dr. Birss, together with Ann Epstein, MD, developed an innovative training program in infant mental health. This two-year fellowship trained clinicians from diverse disciplines in dynamically informed dyadic parent-infant psychotherapy. In 2004, the program became the Infant Parent Training Institute, and moved to the Center for Early Relationship Support at Jewish Family and Children's Service of Greater Boston. Dr. Birss taught early development, and also built a program in Infant Observation. Based on the Tavistock model, this full year course in Infant Observation combined an intensive weekly observation of a parent and baby dyad with a small group reflective process and individual reflective practice. Over the almost twenty years of the IPTI fellowship program, more than one hundred professionals received training in Infant Observation, and over 75 clinicians completed the fellowship. These clinicians, often leaders in their community settings, have gone on to train others in the psychoanalytically and developmentally informed model of IPTI.

Throughout her career, Dr Birss has focused her efforts on helping children and families but through her direct clinical work and her educational efforts. Her work has been influenced both by psychoanalysis and findings of infant research, and she has been interested in the integration of knowledge of infant research into clinical work with patients of all ages. She is particularly interested in the impact of early relational trauma, including maternal depression, early losses and neglect. The Massachusetts Psychiatric Society recognizes Dr. Sarah Birss' impressive efforts and contributions in these areas over many years with its 2024 Outstanding Psychiatrist Award for Clinical Psychiatry.