

Understanding mental health in early childhood

What is mental health in early childhood?

Early childhood mental health has been defined as a young child's ability to 'experience, regulate and express emotions; form close and secure interpersonal relationships; and explore the environment and learn—all in the context of family, community and cultural expectations for young children. Infant mental health is synonymous with healthy social and emotional development.' (Zero to Three, 2002).

Getting in early for children's mental health

Keeping children healthy and happy involves looking after their mental health as well as their physical health. Mental health is about having a healthy mind and body, and influences how we feel about ourselves, what we do, how we think, and how we relate to others. Good mental health helps us to form positive relationships with others, handle ups and downs and generally enjoy life. With good mental health, children can feel good about themselves and be more open to trying and learning new things. Good mental health in early childhood lays the foundations for positive mental health and wellbeing now and into the future.



Mental health difficulties in early childhood

Mental health difficulties affect children's behaviour, feelings, learning, relationships with others, as well as their physical health and wellbeing. There are many ways that parents, carers and staff can support children who are experiencing mental health difficulties. Some of these may be parents, carers and staff working in partnership to come up with ways of supporting the child, attending information sessions on particular childhood mental health difficulties or getting a referral to a mental health professional. While there are many effective supports for children experiencing mental health difficulties, many children do not receive the help they need. This can happen because families are unsure of whether their child has a difficulty, or they do not know where to go or what to do to get mental health support. Early childhood services can be ideal places for families to access information about supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their children.

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What causes children's mental health difficulties?

Unlike some medical conditions that have a direct cause (for example, a virus causes the flu), mental health difficulties are caused by multiple factors that interact in different ways depending on the individual child, family and social circumstances.

Biological, psychological and social factors all influence children's mental health. Any one of these factors can have either a positive or negative influence on a child's mental health. For example, high self-esteem might impact on confidence; positive family relationships could help a child adjust to change.





Parents and carers can work with early childhood services to support children experiencing mental health difficulties by:

- ▶ Sharing discussions with staff and other families about topics related to mental health, in order to increase understanding and reduce stereotypes.
- ▶ Having frequent face-to-face contact with staff to ask questions and discuss how your child is going at the service.
- ▶ Reading mental health resources that are offered at your early childhood service.
- ▶ Meeting and talking with staff about particular things your child may be going through, (for example, concerns about how they are behaving, or changes at home that may be influencing their behaviour).
- ▶ Following up on what you have discussed with staff to see how your child is going at the service.
- ▶ Finding out what local mental health support services are available in your community.
- ▶ Attending information sessions on particular topics related to children's mental health.
- ▶ Accessing mental health information from quality sources (for example, books, internet sites, mental health organisations, maternal child and health centres).
- ▶ Going to parenting and family support groups and sharing useful strategies you have learnt about responding to your child with the early childhood service.



What early childhood services might also be doing

Early childhood services may be working with, and supporting children and families experiencing mental health difficulties in a number of ways, including:

- ▶ Learning about mental health in early childhood and sharing understandings with families and other members of the early childhood service community
- ▶ Obtaining mental health resources for parents and carers to access
- ▶ Having information related to children's mental health available at the service (for example, information sheets, pamphlets, books)
- ▶ Arranging guest speakers to conduct information sessions about children's mental health at the service.



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Where can I learn more?



Articles on a range of issues relevant to understanding early childhood mental health are available at:

www.cyh.com – see 'Parenting and child health'

www.kidscount.com.au – see 'Understanding children's experiences' and 'Responding to children'

www.himh.org.au – see 'Current projects – Foundations' tab

This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The team at KidsMatter Early Childhood also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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A voice for young children

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