



# In Focus Webinar

## Secure, responsive educator-infant relationships to support mental health

### Webinar summary

Warm, responsive relationships between educators and infants support children's mental health by creating a sense of safety, trust, and predictability in everyday experiences.

This webinar was facilitated by Be You National Manager, Sara Richardson, with Doctors Robyn Dolby and Belinda Friezer, psychologists, and co-founders of Secure Beginnings.

Robyn and Belinda shared insights from their body of work into educators' secure, respectful and responsive relationships with infants to support their mental health.

### Key messages

- Infant mental health refers to the capacity of infants to grow well and love well. This involves expressing and regulating the full spectrum of emotions and having the capacity to move through these emotions steadily, recovering when needed.

- Secure and responsive educator-infant relationships support infants' social and emotional health and wellbeing. A focus on mental health supports infants to establish trusting relationships and to learn skills to repair conflict.
- When infants are empowered to be confident explorers and confident learners, they are more readily able to rely on themselves and tolerate frustrations.
- A foundational element of infant mental health is giving infants time, space, and opportunity to engage with their peers, so that they can form close personal bonds and develop a sense of belonging.
- Infants come to understand that they matter and are important through their interactions with their caregivers - including their educators. This sense of 'mattering' lets them know they are significant in someone else's eyes.
- Mattering flourishes when educators get the sense that THEY themselves matter, and that the work they do is noticed and valued by those around them.
- Infant mental health centres on relationships. Building and sustaining relationships often means slowing down, taking time to connect meaningfully.
- Managing big emotions is made easier for infants and young children when they can 'borrow' from the calmness of their educator and learn more about how to move through their feelings.
- In group settings, infants have multiple caregivers and many same aged peers. Research is showing that rather than focusing on one-to-one relationships, there is a need to respond to the need of one child, while keeping other children close. This helps all children feel safe, secure, and to experience mattering.

## Reflection questions

A wellbeing lens can be applied to educator-infant relationships, supporting reflection on current strengths, emerging practices, and opportunities for improvement. Some practices, strategies and approaches will be easier to address, while others may need more thought.

Consider:

1. What does infant mental health mean in the context of your service?
2. What does a mentally healthy infant look like in your setting?
3. How are secure and responsive educator-infant relationships currently supported in everyday practice?
4. What role do relationships and attachments play in supporting infant mental health and wellbeing?
5. How might the service describe this practice from a wellbeing perspective?
6. What opportunities are there for educators to create and nurture relationships with infants to support their mental health?

To progress this thinking a Be You Consultant can help your learning community to critically reflect on current practices and plan improvements. This can support your service to identify opportunities for change and strengthen practice across educator-infant relationships and mental health.

## Guest speakers

- **Dr. Robyn Dolby - Psychologist, Secure Beginnings:** Robyn holds long-standing Health and Education appointments. She has led research projects into children's experiences of educator availability and how educators can stay in close to children's feelings around distress and conflict with peers. Robyn is a Licensed Marte Meo supervisor.
- **Dr. Belinda Friezer - Psychologist, Secure Beginnings:** Belinda is an Adjunct Research Fellow in Education at Charles Sturt University. Her main area of research has focused on infant sociality and social development in peer groups. She was awarded the Early Childhood Australia Doctoral Thesis Award for her PhD research.

## References

Ahnert, L. (2021). Attachment to child care providers. In R. A. Thompson, J. A. Simpson, & L. Berlin (Eds.), *Attachment: The fundamental questions* (pp. 31-38). Guilford Press.

**Burghardt, L., & Wallace, J. (2025).** *Mattering in early childhood: Building a strong foundation for life.* Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University.

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/working-paper/mattering-in-early-childhood/>

**Dozier, M., & Bernard, K. (2019).** *Coaching parents of vulnerable infants: The Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up approach.* Guilford Press.

**Siegel, D. J., & Bryson, T. P. (2020).** *The power of showing up.* Random House.

### **Be You resources**

- [Be You](#)
- Event recording: [Infant and toddler wellbeing](#)
- Fact sheet: [Transitions for babies and toddlers](#)