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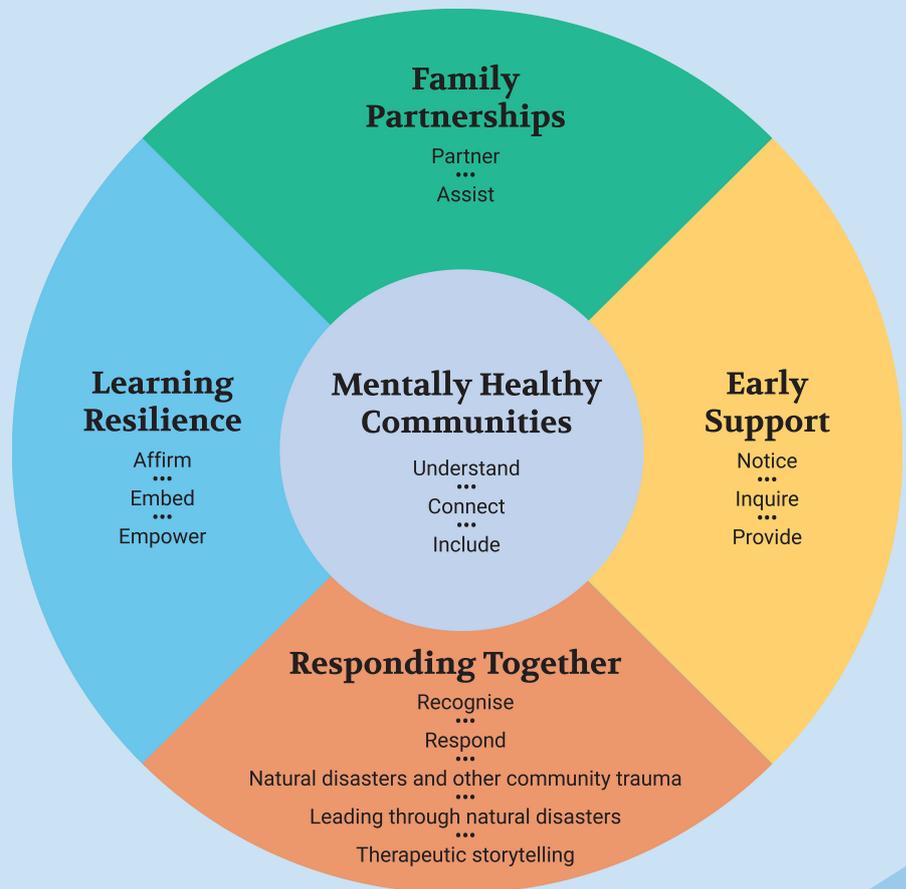
Mentally Healthy Communities

A mentally healthy learning community is where children and young people can achieve their best possible mental health.

We continually strive to develop strong connections and support the social and emotional wellbeing of all in our learning community.

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Understand

You play a central role in building mentally healthy learning communities.

This module introduces core concepts relating to mental health and wellbeing in early learning services and schools.

It explores the role of educators in promoting mental health and wellbeing for themselves, the children and young people in their care and other educators. It also offers strategies to help educators apply this knowledge within the boundaries of their role.

Mental health and wellbeing

This module introduces the Mental Health Continuum. People may shift back and forth along this continuum throughout their lives.

Mental health issues encompass various cognitive, emotional and behavioural issues that may cause concern or distress. They affect how a person thinks, feels and behaves.

When an individual has seen a health professional for their mental health, they might be diagnosed with a **mental health condition**. This is a clinical diagnosis (such as depression or anxiety) relating to a condition that significantly interferes with a person's cognitive, emotional or social abilities.

We know that almost 1 in 7 children and young people will experience a mental health condition in a 12-month period. Mental health conditions are associated with lower learning outcomes, more absences, poorer connectedness and poorer engagement.

Mentally healthy learning communities

A mentally healthy learning community is critical to children and young people achieving their best possible mental health, no matter their developmental stage.

Learning communities are a place of socialisation, where social and emotional needs, including the need for belonging and connectedness, can be met.

It's helpful to appreciate the benefits of working within a collaborative whole learning community approach that brings together children, young people, families and educators to achieve systemic change. Promoting mental health and wellbeing in everyday practice is an integral step in creating a mentally healthy learning community.

We know that the most effective way to achieve the aims of promotion, prevention and early intervention is by using a whole-setting approach where everyone is involved.

How can you contribute to a mentally healthy learning community?

As an educator, you have a central role and can make a big difference in influencing children and young people's mental health and wellbeing through positive mental health promotion.

Your main role is to observe and support children and young people. Rather than trying to diagnose or solve mental health issues or conditions, approach your work in a way that supports positive mental and health wellbeing.

This may include having a conversation with someone you're worried about, linking families to health professionals or support services, becoming involved in community-based mental health initiatives, and seeking support for yourself if required.

By completing the Understand module, you will be able to:

- appreciate the importance of developing mentally healthy learning communities
- understand mental health and wellbeing as it relates to your role as an educator
- apply strategies to support the development of mentally healthy learning communities
- begin to take actions that support the development of mentally healthy learning communities.

Connect

A mentally healthy learning community is characterised by strong, supportive relationships.

In this module, you will learn about the importance of social connection on mental health outcomes. You will also learn about your role in fostering an environment that promotes connectedness and belonging and how to support the development of positive relationships.

Why should you support positive social interactions, connectedness and belonging?

Connectedness is the sense of caring for and being cared for by others. Children and young people feel connected when they feel they belong, are an active part of their learning community, are treated equally, and feel safe, accepted, respected and included.

Belonging is the sense that you're a valued member of a community. When children and young people feel like they belong, they're more likely to develop a strong sense of identity, a positive sense of self, and strong relationships.

Connectedness and belonging are associated with positive mental health – both as protective factors and in assisting in recovery from mental health issues. However, when a child or young person feels lonely, isolated, unsupported or like they don't fit in, a range of negative outcomes can occur.

This module explores how learning communities can build connectedness and belonging through:

- relationships
- active participation
- inclusion.

Positive and respectful relationships

Positive and respectful relationships occur when all parties feel respected, secure and supported in their interactions.

This module explores the key aspects of positive and respectful relationships and how you can nurture them in your learning community.

It also explores peer relationships for children and young people as protective and risk factors.

Promoting connection in your learning community

As an educator, you play an important role in supporting children and young people to develop healthy and supportive relationships with peers, families and the community.

This module explores skills and strategies you can use to:

- promote connection within your early learning service or school
- foster a sense of belonging
- promote connections with families and the broader community.

By completing the Connect module, you will be able to:

- appreciate the influence positive social interactions, connectedness and belonging in learning communities have on mental health outcomes
- understand the central role social connectedness and belonging play in positive mental health outcomes for children and young people
- apply strategies to support the development of positive and respectful connections in your learning community
- feel empowered to create an environment where children and young people feel a sense of connectedness and belonging.

Include

Inclusive practice for educators relates to creating opportunities for everyone in a learning community to be who they are and to achieve their best mental health.

As an educator, you play a key role in developing inclusive environments for children within your learning community. You can provide a safe place where diversity is acknowledged, respected and embraced, which contributes to strengthening the entire community.

Inclusion and diversity

Inclusion occurs when people feel valued and respected, have access to opportunities and resources, and can contribute their perspectives and talents. It also supports empowerment for people to contribute their experiences, skills and perspectives to improve their environment for everyone.

If people feel invisible or experience bullying, harassment or discrimination, this can affect their sense of self-worth. It can also interfere with learning and may impact their mental health and wellbeing.

Diversity is about understanding and embracing different ways of thinking and being. Differences can include age, religion, gender and gender identity, socioeconomic status, sexuality, ethnicity and culture, education level, family arrangements and circumstances, personality, interests and abilities, mental health status, disabilities and physical attributes.

The importance of fostering inclusive environments

Learning communities are made up of children, young people, families and educators with their own strengths, needs and circumstances. Understanding this diversity of experience can support you and your colleagues to consider how you can create a welcoming and supportive experience for everyone.

Your learning community may include:
- rural and remote communities
- people impacted by trauma
- older people
- people impacted by eating disorders
- people with disability
- veterans

- people impacted by substance misuse
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- multicultural communities
- gender and sexually diverse people.

Educators should aim to provide children, young people, educators and families with a sense of belonging and connection within a safe environment (emotional, social and physical). This can motivate them to participate actively in learning experiences and the wider community.

How you can foster inclusive environments

This module explores the Universal Design for Learning principles and how to implement them in your early learning service or school. At its heart, inclusion is about encouraging everyone to participate.

By completing the Include module, you will be able to:

- appreciate the importance and benefits of supporting inclusion and diversity in your learning community
- understand inclusion and diversity and how these support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people
- use inclusive practices in your role as an educator
- feel confident using inclusive practices to foster mental health and wellbeing in your learning community.

Family Partnerships

Working together to promote positive mental health and wellbeing in children and young people.

Our learning community fosters meaningful partnerships between educators and families, to support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Partner

Partnering with families is a key factor in supporting positive mental health outcomes. Working with families helps to support children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing, learning and development opportunities.

Families are their children's first educators

Family involvement in education is a known protective factor for children and young people's mental health.

The benefits of strong educator-family relationships are clear, with research showing their importance to social and emotional wellbeing and learning outcomes, among other factors.

Many learning communities have a long history of family involvement – families may assist in the classroom or canteen, help with fundraising, or participate in various committees. These interactions support family-educator relationships and offer a greater sense of community. However, there's a difference between involving families and engaging with them.

The importance of family engagement

The goal of engagement is to develop an equal partnership around the child or young person's everyday experiences.

Engaging families motivates them to contribute to mental health and wellbeing and learning outcomes at home as well as at the early learning service or school. Though there are barriers to partnerships from time to time, these can be overcome.

Key principles of effective family partnerships

This module explores the key principles of building effective family partnerships.
Planning, gathering information, preparing staff and promoting the learning community as a place of support takes effort. However, the benefits of this work are significant. **Key principles include:**

- Trust
- Empathy
- Family-centred practice
- Engagement
- Inclusion.

By completing the Partner module, you will be able to:

- appreciate the benefits of partnering with families to support children and young people
- understand the key principles of effective family partnerships
- apply strategies to establish effective family partnerships that support children and young people
- take action to establish effective family partnerships.

Assist

Help families understand the importance of mental health and wellbeing. Collaborate with families to support children and young people experiencing mental health issues and conditions.

Acknowledge the role of the family

Families are central to development and long-term wellbeing.

For most people, the home environment and family relationships have the biggest impact on later life outcomes. Children and young people who grow up in a nurturing family environment are more likely to experience better health outcomes in adulthood.

Protective factors within the family include strong and stable relationships, supportive parenting, and consistency in routines and limits.

In healthy family relationships, people communicate well, trust and rely on each other for support, love, affection and warmth. Conflicts, which are a normal part of family life, are dealt with safely and respectfully. Children and young people may also be exposed to risks within the family, such as family conflict, inconsistent parenting, family violence, child abuse, neglect, mental health issues, substance abuse or financial difficulties.

Your role in assisting families

Understanding your role and responsibilities in assisting families to support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people is essential to providing the right support at the right time.

If a family has concerns about their child or young person, consider whether you're the best person to discuss the issue. You might need to refer them to a member of the wellbeing or leadership teams. You can work with the family to clarify areas of concern and make decisions about possible referral options.

By partnering with families, you can apply frameworks and tools that will help them support their child or young person. Families may not be linked to other organisations in the community and often look to an early learning service or school for guidance on services and resources or to connect with other families.

Being prepared for these scenarios and understanding your role within this process will provide effective support and allow you to look after your wellbeing.

How you can assist families

All questions from families require a response and a follow-up, but you don't have to offer a complete response immediately. Sometimes you may not feel you have the knowledge, expertise or availability to answer questions, and that's OK.

This module explores the Stop, Reflect, Act model, which encourages you to:

1. Stop before reacting to the situation and jumping into solution mode

2. Reflect on the situation and think about how you can move forward

3. Act after consultation with colleagues, if necessary.

Listen to families, acknowledge what has been said and inform the family that you'd like to consult with colleagues about the concern.

By completing the Assist module, you will be able to:

- appreciate the importance of supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people through effectively assisting families with their concerns
- understand the roles and responsibilities of the educator in assisting families to support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people
- apply the frameworks and tools to assist families
- feel confident responding to family concerns about the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

Learning Resilience

Support the development of positive mental health and wellbeing in children and young people.

Our learning community listens, supports and provides children and young people with opportunities to develop their social and emotional learning.

Affirm

Learning how to manage feelings and friendships and solve problems supports mental health and wellbeing.

What is social and emotional learning?

This module introduces and affirms the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) and resilience – the ability to cope with challenges. It outlines the specific skills and aspects that make up SEL and looks at how developing these skills helps build resilience.

It also covers a range of everyday strategies educators can use to help foster these important skills in children and young people.

SEL refers to learning the values, knowledge and skills that help children and young people relate to others effectively and contribute positively to their environments. Children and young people who have developed these skills find it easier to manage their emotions, relate to others, make decisions, resolve conflict, and feel positive about themselves and the world around them. They're also likely to have enhanced motivation to engage and achieve.

What do you need to know about SEL?

From infancy, children are motivated to relate to other human beings and develop socially in the context of relationships.

However, a person's ability to understand others and consider their needs and views develops over time. Young children are naturally self-focused. As they get older, they learn that others may see things differently. Then, as their thinking skills develop, they're more able to understand another person's point of view and, finally, to appreciate multiple ways of looking at the same event or situation. Childr   en and young people develop socially in the context of relationships. Warm, responsive and trusting relationships help them feel safe and secure to explore the world around them.

This module explores how you can affirm children and young people's SEL skills as an educator.

What do you need to know about resilience?

Resilience shares a close relationship with mental health because being able to bounce back from challenges or adversity is a significant protective factor that supports children and young people's mental health.

Resilience is not something a person is born with – it can develop and change over time and is best expressed on a continuum. Depending on their circumstances, people may have more or less resilience to draw on at any given time.

Children and young people develop resilience through individual, family, community and societal factors. Building a child's resilience involves both improving their skills and capabilities and improving the environments around them.

Supporting SEL and resilience in your learning community

SEL is an effective way to foster resilience and promote children and young people's mental health.

Children and young people benefit from having plenty of opportunities to learn and practise these skills in their everyday experiences. They'll develop these skills at different paces due to having different temperaments, skills, opportunities, experiences, and various risk and protective factors in their lives.

Your role is to make the most of opportunities to model, teach and support them to do so.

By completing the Affirm module, you will be able to:

- appreciate the interplay between social and emotional learning, resilience and mental health and wellbeing in children and young people
- understand how social and emotional learning and resilience develop
- apply everyday skills to support social and emotional learning and resilience in your learning community
- build on your ability to role model social and emotional skills and resilience.

Embed

Social and emotional development involves learning the values, knowledge and skills that enable children and young people to regulate their emotions, relate to others effectively and contribute in positive ways to their family and education.

How can you embed SEL skills development in your learning community?

In this module, you will learn about strategies for embedding social and emotional learning (SEL) in your early learning service or school and the broader learning community. The module looks at children and young people's developing identities, ability to regulate emotions, social awareness, and capacity to form relationships and make decisions.

The module also outlines specific strategies you can use to embed opportunities to support the development of these skills in your practice and across the learning community.

You can embed SEL through:

- **incidental learning**, such as unplanned learning that occurs during other activities when you respond to spontaneous opportunities
- **intentional learning**, which is the persistent, proactive process of acquiring, understanding, and applying knowledge; the formal teaching of skills and providing opportunities to practise them.

A strengths-based approach incorporates the underlying assumption that skills can be taught, practised, developed and mastered.

Developing social awareness and forming relationships

Social awareness is the ability to take the perspective of and empathise with others and recognise, interpret and respond to social situations in ways society sees as appropriate.

Healthy relationships are built on trust, communication, mutual respect and empathy. You can teach this by intentionally teaching children and young people about respectful and healthy relationships, role-modelling how and when to use a skill and using formal SEL programs.

Decision-making

The skills for making good decisions are learnt gradually and guided by values.

Children and young people learn these skills when taught the steps and given opportunities to practise using them. You can view children and young people as capable contributors to their world (for example, by providing tasks that require a meaningful contribution, letting them make decisions and experience consequences), while also helping them learn from mistakes, teaching values and using the curriculum.

Modelling resilience

As an educator, you can model resilience while working with children, young people, families and communities.

Healthy thinking, problem-solving, talking about adversity and developing positive relationships are all helpful in building a picture of what resilience can look like. This can be a great starting point for conversations and continuing learning at home for children, young people and their families.

By completing the Embed module, you will be able to:

- appreciate the role you play in embedding social and emotional learning in your daily practice and your whole learning community
- understand how to embed social and emotional learning in your setting
- create opportunities to embed social and emotional learning
- seek opportunities to further embed social and emotional learning in your daily practice.

Empower

An empowering environment is one where children and young people have a voice, actively participate and have routine opportunities for leadership. Empowerment helps foster resilience and positive social and emotional learning.

Your role in supporting empowerment

As an educator, you have the opportunity to, and responsibility for, promoting an empowering environment where children and young people are trusted to exercise autonomy and agency.

What does empowerment look like in learning communities?

Empowerment starts with your understanding of, belief in and commitment to children and young people taking an active role in their education.

True empowerment actively engages children and young people as full partners in initiatives. Empowered education settings recognise children and young people's rights and actively plan the learning environment to foster their developing capabilities and autonomy.

Participation in decisions that affect us is a fundamental human right.

When you support empowerment for children and young people, you acknowledge that they have rights and can actively contribute to the learning community and their learning. Empowerment teaches children and young people about equality, equity and democracy. It contributes to a fairer, more inclusive society.

Empowerment means giving children and young people the opportunity to actively participate in activities and decisions that shape their lives, where they have a voice and routine opportunities for leadership. Being empowered is a protective factor for children and young people's mental health.

Promote empowerment in the learning community

Learning occurs everywhere – when you provide information to families, they can use consistent strategies to support empowerment at home. You can:

- promote children and young people as competent, capable and active participants in learning
- help families understand how empowerment supports learning, motivation, engagement and mental health

- promote children and young people as competent, capable and active participants in learning
- help families understand how empowerment supports learning, motivation, engagement and mental health
- acknowledge that learning occurs through all experiences
- reinforce that families are the first educators of their children
- enlist support from adults in a child or young person's community to support empowerment for those from diverse backgrounds.

By completing the Empower module, you will be able to:

- appreciate the interplay between empowerment, mental health and wellbeing in education settings
- describe what is meant by empowerment in an education setting and how this supports a child or young person's mental health and wellbeing
- create opportunities for agency, autonomy, voice and participation in decision-making and leadership in your learning community
- identify further opportunities to support children and young people's empowerment in your learning community.

Early Support

Early intervention is key to preventing mental health issues.

Our learning community provides educators and families with information and support for noticing and responding to mental health issues in children and young people.

Notice

As an educator, you have a unique perspective and opportunity to observe where the children and young people in your care might sit along the Mental Health Continuum. You may notice behaviours or expressed emotions that aren't typical for a particular child or young person, which may indicate signs of an emerging mental health issue.

Early Support

This module is the first of the three Be You Professional Learning modules within the Early Support domain.

The **Notice**, **Inquire** and **Provide** modules are designed to be completed in order as the information in the later ones builds on your learning from the earlier ones.

- **Inquire** elaborates on how educators can use their observations to talk to children, young people and their families about their concerns.

- **Provide** explores how educators can support a child or young person with a mental health issue.

Be You recommends you complete this module before proceeding to the Inquire and Provide modules.

Understanding the continuum of mental health

Mental health can be thought of as existing on a continuum; with a child or young person flourishing at one end, going OK or feeling unsettled in the middle, and mental health conditions at the other end.

The Be You Mental Health Continuum can help you recognise specific behaviour and impacts on daily functioning in children and young people. This may indicate the need for further assistance.

Mental health changes over time in response to different stresses and experiences. There are many factors, both internal and external, that affect where someone generally sits on the continuum.

Most children and young people will sit at the flourishing end of the continuum most of the time.

You're in a position to observe changes in behaviour, emotional responses, expressed thoughts, learning, social relationships and physical symptoms, which might indicate that a child or young person may be **moving toward the other end of the continuum. The earlier they obtain support, the better the chance they have of overcoming difficulties and of reducing the risk of more serious mental health issues.**

Understanding your role

Educators are uniquely positioned to notice early signs of mental health issues or conditions in children.

Your support, alongside families, can be enough to help children and young people work through their feelings and learn to respond to situations in positive ways. But sometimes, they'll need extra support, and you play an important role in helping them access it.

You don't need to be a mental health expert, and you're not responsible for providing mental health diagnoses, assessment or treatment. Your main role is to:

- approach your work in a way that supports positive mental health and wellbeing
- notice when something's not right, and check in with colleagues, the child or young person or their family
- know your school or early learning service's policies for responding to mental health issues and conditions.

Observing signs

Identifying when a child or young person needs extra support comes down to noticing.

Sometimes changes may be easily explained. For example, a teary child may be hungry or tired, or strong emotions may be how a young person typically reacts to a challenge). But in another child or young person, these reactions might be out of character, or there's no apparent reason for the change.

Sometimes, these changes aren't cause for concern. Remember, we move along the Mental Health Continuum all the time. It's prolonged, significant or disruptive change that can signal the development of a mental health issue or condition.

Behaviour and emotions can be difficult to interpret. If you notice and record, you should have accurate information if you need to talk to families, colleagues or other professionals.

The module explores the BETLS (behaviour, emotions, thoughts, learning and social relationships) Observation Tool, which can help you document your observations in an objective way.

If you're not sure what to do, it's OK to say so.

Remember, it's not your role to diagnose, label or treat mental health issues or conditions.

As an educator, you are in a position to notice changes that could be cause for concern and act appropriately. Talk to colleagues and families about what you have noticed. You aren't alone in choosing the next steps. The more collaboration and reflection, the better. Consider confidentiality, risk, self-care and mandatory reporting. Knowing who to go to for support is key.

By completing the Notice module, you will be able to:

- appreciate how educators are uniquely positioned to notice early signs of mental health issues in children and young people
- understand the educator's role in noticing early signs of mental health issues in children and young people
- identify the tools you need as an educator to observe and record the early signs of mental health issues in children and young people
- equip yourself with the tools to record your observations of mental health issues within the boundaries of your role.

Inquire

Having a conversation with a child or young person provides an opportunity for them to share what they are going through. It also shows your concern and willingness to help.

Early Support

This module is the second of the three Be You Professional Learning modules within the Early Support domain.

The **Notice**, **Inquire** and **Provide** modules are designed to be completed in order as the information in the later ones builds on your learning from the earlier ones.

If you are yet to visit the **Notice** module, Be You recommends you complete that before beginning the **Inquire** module.

Why is it important to inquire about the mental health and wellbeing of a child or young person?

As an educator, you are often in a position to observe signs that may indicate a mental health issue. As a trusted professional, you or one of your colleagues may be well placed to start conversations that demonstrate empathy, use active and reflective listening and validate a child or young person's feelings.

Making sensitive and informed inquiries about behaviours and actions you have observed is an important part of supporting a child's mental health and wellbeing.

How can you prepare for and have conversations with children and their families?

Starting conversations about mental health is about showing you care and are prepared to listen. After reflecting on what you've observed in a child or young person, it can be helpful to consider the following strategies.

- Check in with colleagues: A colleague's perspective can help to confirm your observations and develop a cohesive strategy to support the child or young person and their family.
- Consider who is the best person to have the conversation, and the timing and place of the conversation.
- Consider stigma and how this may impact how someone responds.

- Know your options: Be familiar with your early learning service or school's policies and procedures around mental health.

It's important to remember you're not diagnosing a mental health condition – you're discussing the behaviours you've observed and documented that have raised your concern about a child. Avoid using mental health condition labels. The conversation should demonstrate that you care and you're there to support them.

It will be important to support the families to feel safe and comfortable to share their concerns or factors they feel may be relevant so that together, you can understand what the child or young person is experiencing and what may be helpful for them.

This can make all the difference in ensuring children and young people get any support they may need.

This module can help you feel prepared for those conversations.

By completing the Inquire module, you will be able to:

- appreciate that educators play a role in supporting early intervention through inquiring about possible mental health issues
- understand the educator's role and the importance of confidentiality while making inquiries
- be able to use strategies to inquire about the mental health of children and young people
- take steps to prepare yourself for potential inquiries about the mental health of children and young people.

Provide

If a child or young person requires support because of a mental health condition, it's important to understand your role as an educator.

Early Support

This module is the third of the three Be You Professional Learning modules in the Early Support domain.

The **Notice**, **Inquire** and **Provide** modules are designed to be completed in order as the information in the later ones builds on your learning from the earlier ones.

If you are yet to complete the Notice and Inquire modules, Be You recommends you complete them first before proceeding with the Provide module.

A coordinated approach

The earlier a child or young person receives support for emotional, behavioural or social difficulties, the better their chance of overcoming them. This reduces the likelihood of more serious mental health conditions. Your responsibility is to understand the policies and procedures relevant to your role.

However, to support the children and young people in your care effectively, it's also useful to have a good understanding of the supports available and the most appropriate time for you or the relevant member of your learning community to contact them.

Mental health support and services

There are two key tools to support learning communities following community trauma.

This module explores the stepped care approach to mental health support and how a learning community may be involved.

These may include:

- Prevention strategies: teaching daily strategies for mental health (such as eating well, sleeping well, keeping active, and nurturing supportive social networks).
- Stress management strategies: teaching strategies to support children and young people through stressful situations (for example, conflict resolution skills, relaxation and mindfulness strategies).

- Universal (or primary health care) services: you're part of the universal service system, which includes student wellbeing coordinators, school counsellors, early learning service support staff, child and family health nurses, school nurses, and general practitioners (GPs). These services may provide assistance themselves or determine whether someone might need more specialised support.

External supports may include:

- Secondary health care services: such as psychologists, paediatricians, psychiatrists, social workers, family support workers and allied health professionals. These health professionals provide various services, such as face-to-face counselling, play therapy, cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) or medication.
- Tertiary health care (or specialist) services: such as specialist paediatric clinics, family therapy services, Child and Youth Mental Health Services (CYMHS or CAMHS) or hospital inpatient services. These services are for children and young people experiencing complex and severe mental health issues or are at high risk of harm.

A child or young person may receive support from multiple services. They may also move up and down the tiers depending on their needs. If you're unsure where an individual fits and what support they need, speak with your wellbeing team or lead educator.

Support help-seeking

Creating a mental health support network for your learning community means you'll have support when needed. This ensures your knowledge is current, well researched and of high quality. Help-seeking means actively seeking help from other people. It involves communicating to get help – including understanding, advice, information, treatment and general support – in response to a mental health issue, condition or distressing experience.

You support children and young people's mental health when you:

- are aware of relevant health services – who's available and what they offer – so that you can speak with credibility about the help available
- assist with referrals and offer to attend sessions if needed
- work to clarify issues with children, young people and families to determine if professional support is needed.

A whole-service approach to supporting mental health

More than half the children and young people who receive mental health support are referred through the education sector. It makes sense to build relationships with service providers outside of crisis situations.
By being aware of available options, your learning community can facilitate appropriate support, reducing the distress to you, children, young people and families. It also improves their experience and longer-term prospects. By linking and mobilising their resources, learning communities and health and community services can achieve significant positive outcomes for children and young people.

By completing the Provide module, you will be able to:

- appreciate the role of educators in providing mental health support to children and young people
- understand the stepped care approach to mental health support and the barriers to seeking support
- use a whole learning community approach to provide early support for children and young people's mental health and wellbeing
- take steps to prepare yourself to provide mental health support to children and young people.

Responding Together

Act effectively to limit the impact of critical incidents, by recognising and understanding the possible impact on your whole learning community.
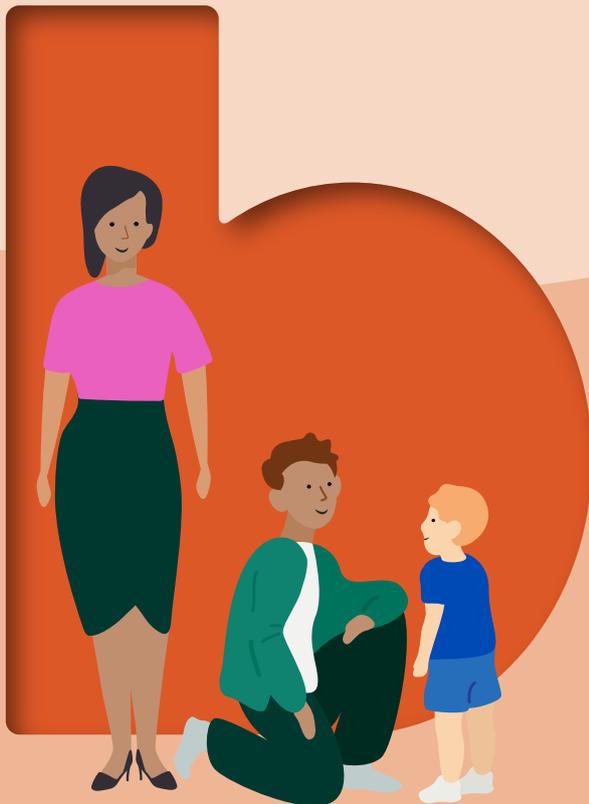
Careful planning helps inform our learning community's collaborative response to possible critical incidents, including risk assessments as needed.

Recognise

Learning communities that prepare and inform themselves about the potential negative effects of critical incidents will be better equipped to respond if they occur.

What is a critical incident?

A critical incident is an event outside the range of typical experience. It is often sudden and unexpected, involves the perception of a threat to life and can include physical or emotional loss.

Critical incidents may occur within or outside your early learning service or school.

They may include the death, suicide, or terminal illness of a child or young person, staff member, family or associated community member; accident or serious injury; natural disasters; fire or vandalism at the learning environment; and many other situations.

Experiencing a critical incident doesn't necessarily mean a child or young person will experience a mental health issue or condition.

How someone responds to a critical incident will vary according to their cognitive abilities, developmental stage, levels of resilience, understanding of the situation, level of support, presence of risk and protective factors, previous exposure to other critical events or adversities, and the personal meaning attributed to the experience. Some events may have little impact on one person but cause severe distress in another.

A coordinated and planned response is important.

What affects how we experience a critical incident?

Understanding how critical incidents can affect mental health and wellbeing will help you to best support the children and young people in your care.

This module explores what factors may affect how a child or young person might experience a critical incident. These include:

- the characteristics of the incident itself
- the characteristics of the environment
- **the child or young person's individual traits, such as their age and developmental stage, prior history of traumatic events and personality style.**

What are the impacts of a critical incident?

Understanding the range of typical responses to critical incidents, including physiological changes, can help you support children and young people in coping with their feelings, thoughts and behaviours. These include:

- behavioural responses (for example, irritability, aggression, regression, difficulty enjoying activities, children repeatedly recreating parts of the critical incident events in their play)
- physical responses (such as change in appetite, sleep difficulties, headaches, stomach aches, restlessness)
- emotional responses (such as outbursts of anger, frustration or distress, anxiety, sadness, helplessness)
- changes in thinking and cognition (such as difficulty concentrating, difficulty remembering the incident, preoccupation with the incident).

The impact isn't always obvious or immediate – sometimes a child or young person will seem to be recovering well but may then have a delayed response.

Introduction to critical incident management

A clear and considered critical incident management plan provides the overarching framework for preventing, preparing for, responding to and recovering from a critical incident.

Understanding critical incidents and their impact on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people is a vital first step in this process.

Educators can plan a response to create an environment that promotes recovery. This provides children and young people with opportunities to express their feelings, navigate the tricky moments, settle back into a predictable and supportive routine, and, ultimately, promote a mentally healthy community.

By completing the Recognise module, you will be able to:

- appreciate the importance of recognising the potential impacts of critical incidents
- understand critical incidents and their impact on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people
- recognise what you need to do as an educator to prepare for critical incidents
- start taking steps to prepare yourself and your learning community to respond to the impacts of critical incidents.

Respond

When a learning community is affected by a critical incident, a collaborative response is required. Communities with a critical incident management plan in place will be able to provide the best support to children, young people, educators and families.

After a critical incident

Following a critical incident, it will be important for your community to come together for support. It's important for you to understand your role in your community's response. A collaborative response is likely to minimise the potential negative impact on your wellbeing and the wellbeing of children and their families.

This module refreshes some of the information from the Recognise module about critical incidents and their impacts. It builds on this information by exploring the key components of a whole learning community response to a critical incident.

Support a staged response

This module explores a staged response:
- preparations before a critical incident occurs to minimise the impacts of the event
- immediate response after the critical incident to restore a sense of safety, begin the communication process and return to learning
- recovery efforts in the short and long term after the incident, to support resilience and recovery.

Critical incident management plan

A critical incident management plan contains all the information required to respond effectively. This includes information such as the contact numbers of an emergency response team, actions to take, task allocation and more. It aims to minimise the adverse effects of a critical incident on the learning community and restore everyday routines as soon as possible. Regularly reviewing emergency and critical incident management plans is important to the effectiveness of your learning community's response.

A whole learning community approach

Fostering a responsive learning environment provides ongoing support to those who need it while also ensuring children and young people have opportunities to process what's happened in a safe and supportive environment.

You play a critical role by focusing holistically on the child or young person, creating an inclusive learning environment, reinforcing appropriate behaviour, encouraging positive learning, working closely with families and having regular conversations with colleagues.

After a critical incident, you can create a feeling of security and model healthy ways of coping and leadership. Your role is to act as a mediator, educator and facilitator to support recovery – continue to teach and support children as you normally would, while playing your role in the learning community's additional proactive steps to deal with the critical incident and promote recovery.

Restore a sense of safety

After a critical incident, you can foster a responsive learning environment. A responsive learning environment proactively creates a feeling of security. It also monitors children's responses to a critical incident.

This module outlines how to restore a sense of safety in your learning community. This includes the importance of communication in the following ways:

- providing clarity
- encouraging expression
- tuning in and being responsive
- being sensitive
- respecting everyone's needs and wishes.

The module also explores different frameworks and strategies that you can use to support recovery after a critical incident. These include:

- Psychological First Aid
- A framework for supporting resilience and recovery
- Therapeutic storytelling
- Strategies for leading the recovery.

Responding to a suicide or the impacts of a suicide

Please note: this section is only in the primary and secondary school streams of the Respond module

As with any critical incident, a learning community's response to a suicide is a coordinated process aimed at ensuring the immediate and ongoing safety, care and support of children and young people, families and the wider community.

There are some important differences, however – including reducing the risk of social transmission of suicidal thoughts and behaviours. For more information, see Be You's Suicide Prevention and Response resources. Be You Consultants are available to help schools who are affected by a suicide attempt or suicide.

Death by suicide of a learning community member, or a person connected to the community, can be a very upsetting and traumatic event for children and young people, families, educators and the wider community. The death often happens unexpectedly and leaves people with many questions. You and your colleagues will have a range of responses, including shock, confusion, grief and concern for your students and one another.

Your leadership team will manage your early learning service or school's response to the critical incident. However, as trusted members of a support network, you play a critical role in responding sensitively to children, young people and families.

By completing the Respond module, you will be able to:

- appreciate the importance of responding collaboratively to critical incidents
- understand strategies and frameworks that can support you to respond within your role
- take part in collaborative responses to critical incidents using different approaches
- take steps as an educator to collaboratively respond to the impacts of critical incidents.

Natural disasters and other community trauma

Your early learning service or school is an important protective environment for supporting a child or young person's recovery after a community trauma.

The educator's role

Educators play an important role in supporting recovery following a natural disaster, such as bushfires or floods, or other traumatic event in the community. As well, educators are often impacted themselves after a community trauma.

By being informed about how to notice and respond, you are well-placed to support recovery and resilience in children and young people.

Understanding community trauma

Understanding the impact of community trauma on children and young people can help educators support recovery in their learning community. This module covers understanding:

the timeline of managing a natural disaster or other community trauma (preparedness, immediate aftermath, short-term and long-term), and key strategies to support children and young people through each stage

regulation and co-regulation to support recovery in children and young people.

Responding to community trauma

There are two key tools to support learning communities following community trauma.

Psychological first aid (PFA) offers 5 principles to promote psychosocial support: Ensure safety, keep calm, connect with others, encourage self-efficacy, have hope.

The framework for supporting resilience and recovery puts a child or young person's wellbeing at the centre of 4 approaches, which work together: Educator wellbeing, daily approaches, monitoring progress and activating support.

Conclusion

This module provides preparedness skills, a practical framework and tips for supporting children and young people following a traumatic event in the community. Remember that much of what you're already doing in your day-to-day practice can support children and young people to recover.

Lead through a natural disaster or other community trauma

Leaders provide continuity, connection and stability following a traumatic event in the learning community.

The leader's role

Leaders play a crucial role in guiding their early learning service or school through a natural disaster or other traumatic event in the community.

This module supports education leaders to:
- reflect on their role and values when it comes to preparing for and responding to a traumatic event in the community
- understand the impacts of a traumatic event on the learning community
- recognise the impacts on their own mental health and take action to support their wellbeing
- take a whole learning community approach to supporting resilience and recovery.

Leading through community trauma

As a natural disaster or other traumatic event unfold, education leaders lead the process of recovery both operationally and psychologically.
This module offers education leaders strategies, information and tools on:
- the timelines of managing a traumatic event in the community
- preparedness and psychological first aid
- the four-part framework for supporting resilience and recovery (educator wellbeing, daily approaches, monitoring progress and activating support)
- the three key responsibilities for leaders: partnerships, operations and advocacy.

Conclusion

This module provides preparedness skills, a practical framework and tips for supporting children and young people following a traumatic event in the community. Remember that much of what you're already doing in your day-to-day practice can support children and young people to recover.

Therapeutic storytelling

You don't have to be a therapist to use storytelling to help children emotionally.

The educator's role

As an educator, you're likely already using stories to help calm and settle children.

Therapeutic storytelling is a way to bring containment, structure and logic to an experience that may seem overwhelming, chaotic or fragmented to children.

With you as their storyteller, the child can engage with, learn from and potentially benefit from their experience.

Understanding therapeutic storytelling

Therapeutic storytelling is about sharing and exploring a story with children to help them process an emotional experience.
Learn more about Dr Andrea Baldwin's model for therapeutic storytelling and watch a video from the Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health (QCPIMH) demonstrating how conversational reading can be therapeutic.
This module discusses how, in the context of a traumatic event in the community, therapeutic storytelling supports preparation, response and recovery.

Practising therapeutic storytelling

Explore these areas for using stories therapeutically to support children:
- Strategies for taking care of your own wellbeing and supporting the wellbeing of a child experiencing distress.
- How to select suitable stories, adapt them and apply therapeutic techniques in your everyday practice.
- Ideas and videos on how to expand therapeutic storytelling through play-based learning, such as dramatic arts, expressive arts, and movement and music.

Conclusion

Whenever you provide a safe place for a child to process challenging feelings, you are making storytelling therapeutic. As the storyteller, the power of the stories you share comes from the nurturing, trusting **relationships you've already established with the children in your care.**