

Assist families to support and promote mental health and wellbeing

You can help families to understand the importance of mental health and wellbeing, and to develop appropriate strategies at home. You can also 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. Families

can boost protective factors by taking the time to listen, helping children and young people to feel understood and loved, taking time to have fun, and helping children and young people learn coping skills.

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

Your role

Understanding your role in supporting the mental health of children, young people and their families is essential to providing the right support at the right time.

Keep in mind that there are boundaries around your role as an educator and your interactions with families in providing support. If a family comes to you with concerns about their child or young person, think about whether you're the best person to discuss the issue. You might need to refer them to a member of the wellbeing team or a member of the leadership team. Together you can work with the family to clarify areas of

concern and make decisions about possible referral options.

By partnering with families, you can direct them to information and services that will help them support their child. 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 help you provide effective and timely support – and allow you to look after yourself.

Support families and parenting

When you support families in their parenting role, children and young people benefit.

Families who have a greater understanding of child development and mental health and wellbeing are better able to meet the needs of children and young people, and to recognise the early signs of mental health issues or conditions.

Support families by:

- **providing information** such as age-appropriate behaviour and developmental milestones
- **providing options for families to choose from** when and if they want information and services
- **being open, approachable and understanding:** Many people are reluctant to seek help because of the stigma associated with mental health issues. Families may also fear they'll be blamed for not 'doing enough' for their child or young person. You can listen empathetically, build and maintain positive relationships, and respond to concerns quickly and appropriately.

Self-care and stress management

Supporting the mental and physical health of families is just as important as looking after that of children and young people.

You can do this by encouraging families to practise self-care. When families are supported to look after themselves, they are more likely to provide their own children with the best care possible, helping them to feel secure and relaxed, and to learn how to manage life's difficulties.

Respond to concerns

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

Simply listen and acknowledge what's been said, and inform the family that you'd like to consult with colleagues about the concern. However, knowing where to find appropriate information and support is one of the best ways to prepare for questions from families.

Tips for responding to concerns from families:

- **Provide quality information:** Have current parenting resources available. Arrange information sessions with guest speakers such as local health professionals.
- **Familiarise yourself with sources of support** including information, resources and specialised staff within your learning environment, local community or nationally. Think about whether you're the best person to discuss various issues – you might need to refer them to a more specialised colleague or a member of the leadership team.
- **Link families to support:** This may be internal resources, a related community program or a mental health professional.
- **Use a strengths-based approach:** When concerns are raised, it can be easy to forget about the strengths of the individual and focus only on problems and negative behaviours. A strengths-based approach doesn't mean issues or concerns are not raised; rather, it includes strengths in the conversation. Often solutions to problems can be found when strengths are identified.
- **Problem-solve:** When a family or educator raises a behavioural concern, it can be helpful to acknowledge the times when the child or young person behaves well. This assists in identifying more clearly where the problem may lie and helps the child or young person to maintain a sense of self-worth.