

# Empower children and young people to look after their mental health and wellbeing

**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 (SEL).**

## Empower

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.

## Empower education settings

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

True empowerment involves a way of working that actively engages children and young people as full partners in initiatives. It occurs as a result of the interplay between children and young

people's developing sense of agency – being visible, having a voice, being competent and capable contributors to their world – and having access to opportunities to learn about and enact their rights. 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 basic human right.**

When you focus on empowering children and young people, you acknowledge that they have rights and can actively contribute to the learning community and their own learning. Empowerment helps to develop citizens who know they have value, who work productively with others, are competent, curious and willing to act. You are also recognising and conveying that all children and young people deserve respect and the opportunity to have their voice heard, regardless of age, gender, socio-economic background, culture, beliefs, abilities and so on. 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 have routine opportunities for leadership. Being empowered is

a protective factor for children and young people's mental health.

**Empowerment looks different for different children and young people – something that seems like a small step for one person might be a huge leap for another.**

It takes time to develop strategies that work for each person. And sometimes the seeds you plant take time to grow and flourish. By committing to integrating empowerment into everyday learning activities, you're communicating to children and young people that they matter, they have rights and they can exert some control and influence in their lives. This message helps them to develop a sense of self-worth, which supports mental health and wellbeing.

## Empowerment principles

**The Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) consists of fundamental principles that support you to actively plan and develop empowering learning environments.**

When these principles are considered and embedded into learning environments, you can intentionally plan and support activities that develop resilience, independence and social and emotional skills.

Empowerment is a process where children and young people are supported to develop a sense of agency and increasing control over decision-making that corresponds to their developmental stage, increasing motivation and engagement in learning. Empowerment is child or young person-led and will therefore look different in every educational setting. It will also differ depending on age and developmental stage.

**Genuine empowerment means children are supported by adults to lead projects and discussions.**

Although they require preparation and support, this process may challenge existing power relations in a service. It might be hard for you to step back and give children space to explore an initiative or an approach. It's important to know when and how to step back, as well as when and how to step forward.

## Autonomy and agency

**Agency relates to an increasing ability to make decisions and do things without help, understand how to act in a group, behave in ways that take others into account and cope with difficulties successfully.**

This is the usual way of going through life for children with a strong sense of agency. However, it doesn't mean children will always be confident and strong in these ways.

As children's sense of agency develops, they grow as individuals who know they have value, who contribute to problem-solving and decision-making, who work productively with others and can make a difference. When you actively plan the learning environment to develop children's sense of agency, you support their capacity for self-determination. This is central to becoming empowered.

## Involve families and the community

**Learning occurs everywhere** – when you provide information to families, they can use consistent strategies to empower their children and young people 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
- 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 own community to support empowerment of those from diverse backgrounds.