

# Inquire sensitively about the child or young person's circumstances

The first step in supporting a child or young person you've noticed might be experiencing a mental health issue is to have a conversation. Having a conversation, and showing your concern and willingness to help, gives children and young people an opportunity to share what they're going through.

## Inquire

There are lots of ways to inquire about a child or young person's circumstances. It's important to consider the time and place for the conversation, as well the language you use. Keep your learning community's policies and procedures in mind when you're having the conversation, and take care of yourself after the conversation.

## Be prepared

Starting conversations about mental health is about showing you care and are prepared to listen. Throughout this process, 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. Be careful using labels of mental health conditions because children, young people and their families will respond differently. Inquiring should demonstrate that you care and you're there to support them.

After reflecting on what you've observed in a child or young person, it can be helpful to consider the following:

- **Check in with colleagues:** A colleague's perspective can help to confirm your observations and develop a cohesive strategy to support the child and their family.
- **Consider** who's 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.

## Conversations with children and young people

**How you have a conversation, and who you have it with, will depend on the child or young person's age and developmental stage.** If after reflecting on what you've observed and checking in with colleagues you've decided to have a conversation with a child or young person about their mental health, the next step is to approach them. Depending on their age and their trust in you, they may share feelings, fears or anxieties, or an incident that occurred which they're trying to make sense of.

**You use developmentally appropriate language every day in your service or classroom.** While it might feel daunting, discussing mental health means transferring the skills you already have to this area, rather than learning new ones. You don't need a magic wand or a perfect phrase to engage a child – just be genuine and kind.

**Talk openly, accurately and respectfully.** Consider the child or young person's language skills. You want them to hear and understand you, so use everyday language that won't confuse or frighten them. Remember, when someone's distressed, depressed or anxious, their cognitive skills may be reduced.

## Conversations with families

It's best to plan ahead before talking with a family. Any conversation with a family is going to be best placed if you have an existing strong relationship with that family, but regardless, you should seek to create an appropriate space for the conversations, assume those caring for the child or young person are the experts on that individual, be aware of barriers and cultural contexts, start the conversation by voicing a concern you've observed, and allow time for reflection.

**Discussing your concerns about someone's mental health might not always be easy.**

Sometimes there are barriers to discussing children and young people's mental health and wellbeing with families. They may be related to the service or school itself, a family's connectedness with the learning community, the family-educator relationship or your availability.

A family's previous experiences with your service or school, or another learning community can

also impact on their willingness to discuss their child's concerns. This can be a disincentive to engage in any other related conversations about mental health. Other barriers may stem from a family's negative attitudes about the availability and usefulness of support. In particular, this can be an issue for families living in hard-to-reach populations in remote areas.

## Next steps

**Whether or not a conversation with a child or young person or their family has gone well or not, individuals and families are more likely to ask you for help if they trust you.**

They may also be more willing to work collaboratively to develop and agree on a plan to help the child or young person. You may or may not have similar concerns to the family about their child or person. If so, it's an opportunity to introduce families to the idea of seeking help. No matter who initiates, help-seeking is a positive step that can help to prevent mental health issues from developing or escalating into mental health conditions. Remember, the earlier the intervention, the better.

**If you're concerned a conversation with a child or family didn't go as well as you hoped, have a chat with a colleague.**

Their perspective may help you to understand the situation or work out next steps or future strategies. However, while open and respectful conversations are important, if a child, young person or family has told you about their experiences in confidence, you should ensure you follow your learning community's policies and procedures for debriefing. You may need to share general information (for example, that a child or young person is seeking support for a problem) if it's important to enable other educators to offer support. And you can share specific information if you believe a child or young person is at risk.

If the child, young person or family doesn't talk to you about what's going on, continue to monitor them and check in again if your concerns persist.