

Understand mental health and wellbeing in learning communities

You play a central role in promoting and supporting good mental health and wellbeing within a learning community. Here's why and how.

Child and adolescent development

From conception to young adulthood, a person's physical, cognitive, psychological, and social development undergoes rapid change. Many factors, including genes and environment, influence this. Most children and young people will experience a positive developmental trajectory, and you can support this through your **positive relationships** with them. Positive relationships help children and young people better handle challenges, and learn skills that can improve health and wellbeing, resilience and learning outcomes.

Responsive relationships also support **brain development**. In the early years, these relationships, stimulating environments and play are crucial to the developing brain and, therefore, optimal development. These years are also when developing brains are most vulnerable to negative experiences.

Poverty, deprivation, toxic stress and trauma, and harsh or unreliable relationships, can compromise healthy development.

Mental health and wellbeing

Mental health and wellbeing are positive concepts and are not fixed – they exist on a continuum, with positive mental health at one end, emerging issues in the middle, and mental health conditions (clinically diagnosed) at the other end. People shift back and forth along this continuum. 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 one in seven children and young people will experience a mental health condition in a 12-month period. Mental health conditions are associated with lower NAPLAN results, more absences, poorer connectedness and poorer engagement.

Risk factors and protective factors

Risk factors for poor mental health include biological, psychological, and social factors, and experiences and events. The more risk factors that are present, the greater the likelihood that a child or young person will experience a mental health issue.

Protective factors help children and young people to be resilient and decrease the likelihood of mental health issues, even when risk factors are present. They include:

- family stability
- supportive and consistent parenting
- support available at critical times
- positive learning environments
- learning achievement
- an easy-going temperament
- good communication, problem-solving and social skills.

The family is central to many of these risk and protective factors. As an educator, you can seek to reduce the incidence or impact of risk factors as well as strengthen children and young people's protective factors.

Mentally healthy community

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-school approach, where everyone is involved.

Your role

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 learning community's referral policies and referral pathways can provide advice about who can help with your concern – 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 could 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.

Your wellbeing

Mentally healthy communities are as important for educators as they are for children and young people.

When educators are mentally healthy, it has a positive impact on the whole learning community. Self-care – your ability to look after yourself and seek extra support when you need it is critical to your ability to support others. Reach out for support when you need it – from colleagues, friends, family, your GP, a psychologist or an employee assistance program.