

Be You In Focus Webinar Transcript

Relationships Transforming into Partnerships

Presented by Sara Richardson, Jennifer Koutoulas, Rebecca Fitzpatrick, Alison Boyd-Law and Chris McMahon on 12 August 2020

Sara Richardson:

Hello everybody and welcome to the Be You In Focus webinar, Relationships Transforming into Partnerships. It's great to have you all here, and it's a pleasure to welcome our panel. We're hoping that you will stay for the duration of the webinar, and also stay online afterwards for the post-webinar Q&A chat, which we'll explain shortly. Firstly, I'd like to introduce you to the panel that are joining us today. We're really lucky to have educators who've had some experience with Be You. Hopefully you'll hear some really interesting stories, suggestions and practical ideas. I know I've certainly learned a few things along the way. We'll now cross over to the panel so everyone can introduce themselves before we begin. Jennifer, over to you.

Jennifer Koutoulas:

Hi everyone. I'm Jennifer from Kids and Co Preschool. It's a very small, stand-alone centre-based preschool environment in Hurtsville Grove, Sydney. We are a very multicultural community, not only just in terms of our families and children, but also our educators. We consist of 21 different languages and cultures. Most of our parents work and we have a lot of contact with grandparents, so they are an integral part of children's lives.

Sara Richardson:

Thank you, Jennifer. We are looking forward to hearing stories from your service a bit later. Over to you, Rebecca.

Rebecca Fitzpatrick:

Hi, I'm Rebecca. I'm the nominated supervisor at Intereach Family Day Care. I'm based in Deniliquin today, but our Intereach Family Day Care service operates across Riverina-Murray, NSW and Victoria. We have 65 registered educators currently providing family day care to children and their families.

Sara Richardson:

Thank you. Rebecca, I look forward to hearing from the family day care perspective a bit later on too. Now to Alison.

Alison Boyd-Law:

Hi, I'm Alison Boyd-Law. I'm the educational leader and nominated supervisor at the Shine Bright Woorinen South Kindergarten located in rural Victoria in the north-west part of the state. Chris McMahon, who you will meet shortly, is my co-worker. We've been working together for 22 years. We currently have 29 children in our four year old group and 18 children in a three year old group, which accounts to 47 families.

Christine McMahon:

Welcome. My name is Christine McMahon. I'm a Certificate III Educator for both three year olds and four year olds at Shine Bright Woorinen South Kindergarten. I have a strong connection in our local community, and I've worked in this centre for 41 years.

Sara Richardson:

We look forward to hearing from the rural perspective that Alison and Christine will bring today. We will now say goodbye to the panellists while we do a bit of housekeeping and welcome them back to the screen shortly.

Be You is a national initiative led by Beyond Blue in partnership with Early Childhood Australia, who is bringing you this webinar today, and headspace. Be You is funded by the Australian Government. My name is Sara Richardson. I'm a State Manager with the Be You Early Childhood Australia team. Be You's aim is very aspirational. It aims to transform Australia's approach to supporting children and young people's mental health in early learning services and schools across Australia. The vision is that every early learning community and school is positive, inclusive and resilient, a place where every child and young person, every educator, and their families can achieve their best possible mental health. Be You offers a range of innovative ways of working together.

We understand that creating and being part of a collaborative learning community for educators is helpful in helping us achieve that work. If you're already a participating Be You service you probably have already connected in some ways and are already part of our community. If you're not, we are so glad to have you join us today. You'll see some things coming up in the chat that might help you register and join Be You.

Part of the work that we do with Be You is engage in an ongoing process of embracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, pedagogy, and ways of knowing, being and doing, to bring that focus to our conversations and learnings and understandings of mental health. The way we do that is through our Always Be You symbols.

I'd like to now acknowledge that I'm meeting with you on the land of the Ghana people in the Adelaide Region. I'd like to pay my respects to Elders past, present, and emerging. I'd also like to acknowledge all the lands that we're meeting on today. The presenters are all meeting on lands other than mine and they would particularly like to pay their respects to those lands that they are meeting on.

One of the things that we can do to support reconciliation and bring about the change that we're looking for that supports the mental health of all of us is to do acts of reconciliation, and acknowledgment is one of those. We encourage you to do that via the chat box now, and also to access the Be You resources to support you to do that, too.

The other thing that's really important when we start having conversations about mental health and wellbeing – and those of you who are already participating in Be You will know how important this piece of work is – is acknowledging self-care. Today we are using the Always Be You symbol 'Make Safe' which talks about the notion of self-care and cultural safety. It's also coming from a strength based perspective. Self-care is really important when we have a bigger conversation about mental health and wellbeing, but also in this space. Sometimes thoughts and feelings might arise with you and I really encourage you to support each other, take care of yourselves and make sure that whenever you're sharing stories or talking about things, you are sensitive and maintain confidentiality as well, because that's a really important strategy and approach to taking care of ourselves and each other.

If things do arise for you or you feel like you need some help, seek out help and talk with trusted people.

During the webinar today we're going to learn in many ways and we're going to hear some different perspectives. As we continue to do this piece of work, it is important that we listen. Sometimes that means suspending what we're thinking and use play as a way of approaching things. That includes taking some risks or trying some things out. When children are playing we know that those risks aren't seen as

mistakes, they are just seen as part of the process of learning things so we need to keep that in mind for ourselves as well.

During our webinars, we really like to support people to make this as interactive an opportunity as possible. We know that, especially over the last few months, there have been a lot of online opportunities for people. Every space is a bit different so to help you engage with us there are some tips that we will give you. If you're not familiar with the GoTo Webinar platform your screen will typically look like this. You can ask questions throughout the webinar. We have Renee and Sammi in the background who will be responding to your questions. You will have the opportunity to stay online after the webinar and join a free forum to ask questions to our panellists. Throughout the webinar you will not be able to use your microphones to interact.

You can ask as many questions as you like via the chat box. Some of them will be pushed through to the panel. If you're having trouble connecting then use the contact details provided on the screen and in the chat box. If you're having trouble with the audio, you may find phoning in helps with bandwidth issues. During the webinar you will have the opportunity to respond to a couple of polls. We encourage you to interact this way.

That helps us get a sense of what things you're interested in and what you're thinking about.

There is also a handout for you to download. It's important to acknowledge that this webinar only goes for one hour so you will continue to have conversations when we are done today. There will be more conversations to be had back in your service. If you're watching this together with your colleagues, either live or later on, you can use the handout which includes references and reflective questions to consider what we talk about today and what it means for you and your practice. If you need some more support throughout the webinar, just reach out in the chat and people will be able to offer you some support to engage with us. Let's now move into what is going to be the focus of today's webinar.

The title of today's webinar is Relationships: Transforming into Partnerships. The four things we're going to talk about are relationships with children, families and colleagues and what this looks like for our panel, strategies for how to develop those relationships into partnerships, how Be You supports your learning community to do this work and also the benefits of partnerships for the wellbeing of the whole community. One of the aims and the vision for Be You is that we have mentally healthy communities. Looking at the whole community approach, not just what you've learned or what you've done, is a really critical part of this work. Let's get straight into the webinar with a poll so that you can tell us what you know and understand about the strategies you've used to support relationships in your early learning service. While we start the poll we will also welcome back our panellists.

You can select any or all that apply when thinking about relationship building in your service.

Relationships are fundamental to the work we do, and I'm sure that most people would acknowledge that. Good relationships don't just happen. Time is an important, critical element of relationship building. We're thinking not just about relationships with families, but also relationships with children and colleagues. If, as colleagues, we don't have good, strong relationships, then we're not able to provide strong relationships for children and their families, either.

Feel free to type your other thoughts or strategies that you've used in the chat because as I said, this is something that's really critical and core to the work we do.

It's not surprising that making time to be available and listen to families is a strategy that 91% of you have used. You have to be really intentional about that. It's very tricky and it's a complex part of our work.

It is interesting that sharing your documentation and getting to know families really well are both lower down the list. Thank you so much for your contributions, everybody. Now we will turn to our panellists, and we'll get them to share a story where relationships in their service were transformed into partnerships. So, Rebecca, if we start with you, would you like to share a story from your perspective?

Rebecca Fitzpatrick:

Thanks, Sara. I think from a family day care perspective, our focus relates predominantly on the relationships we have with the educators that are providing the education and care to children and families. From a co-ordination unit perspective, that's who we're seeing and supporting on a regular basis. Our philosophy really underpins the importance of relationships, making sure that they're supporting, respectful and equal. We really focus on making sure all the educators feel that they can contribute and feel valued for their contribution. It's really about acknowledging the value of each of our roles and our relationships with each other and also our families and children.

We also talk about mental health and wellbeing of not only the children, families, and staff, but our learning community. For us that's the co-ordination unit and team of educators. That's where we start with relationships as well as mental health and wellbeing. What we focus on is getting to know the educators, their passion, their beliefs and values, and really taking the time to actively listen. Sometimes it's easy to respond rather than listen, so we have placed a big emphasis on listening so educators feel that they can really share anything with us. In family day care, personal lives do tend to be impacted a little bit more, because they're not going away to work, so it's really important for us to spend time getting to know the educators personally and getting to know their why and their passion which really helps relationships initially.

Sara Richardson:

That's so important, isn't it, Rebecca? We continue to be reminded that, although sometimes relationships can naturally happen, we need to be very intentional and work really hard at all aspects of our relationships that are part of our work. Jennifer, would you like to share a story from your services perspective?

Jennifer Koutoulas:

Because our service is so culturally and linguistically diverse we have to take more steps ourselves to be intentional with our families. We've been very fortunate to be part of Be You for some time, so we've been able to do the training and be involved in the process of the initiative. For us it's more about working as a unified team and from there having an approach that is sensitive and consistent so that we can support families. When we first started we went through the Be You training. That was excellent.

There were a lot of discussions in action where we were able to reflect a lot of our learning through our own personal philosophies. We reached a point where we felt we needed more of a personal support towards each other. I introduced 'mentor meetings' and I did that based on the staff's personal philosophies and some of the ideas and feelings that they had. We tried different methods, whether it be in a group or individually, but we found that we do it on a one to one basis. I'm very fortunate to work with another ECT who was nominated as educational leader, so between the two of us, I'm able to mentor her so she is then able to mentor the educators and then come together in our surroundings as I am still a hands-on director and involved with the children.

The 'mentor meetings' are not appraisals. It's not professional development time. It's about making time to connect with the educator, who is free to talk about feelings or concerns in a confidential and safe space, which I think is really important. Often when we do come out of those meetings, we all feel very happy and relaxed, and quite inspired by each other. We also sit and eat with our children and make a lot of time for our families in the afternoons and mornings, much like what a lot of services would do. We also try to be as open as we can. If we don't hear from families, we will contact them by e-mail or call them just to be as open as we can. The aspect of time is really important and I think our parents and grandparents really value that.

Sara Richardson:

Thanks, Jennifer. And now, Alison and Chris, over to you about what this looks like in your service.

Alison Boyd-Law:

There's just so much that we all do, it's hard to know where to start. It's just so important to be inclusive and respectful, to stay connected and to maintain open communication and take time to listen to your families,

children and educators. We have a warm, friendly and supportive environment, and it's inviting to everybody. Children, families and educators feel relaxed and comfortable. If you get the environment right, it's like having an extra adult. It's an enabling environment with natural materials that can really help. We greet the children with a smile and take them by the hand, and that's that first step of developing a sense of trust and belonging.

We like to follow the children's interests. At the beginning of the year, we gave out treasure bags that the children can use to collect things that they wish to share with us when they start their preschool days.

That strengthens the ties between home and the service. We have set up a 'belonging tree' and encourage the children to bring in a photo of them to hang up on the tree. We give the children jobs and responsibility such as changing the weather chart, watering the garden and leading the Welcome to Country. We have mounted photos of the children onto blocks that they can use in their play, and that really helps them take ownership of their environment and regularly have conversations with the children and, of course, provide praise, encouragement and celebration of their achievements with their family and other educators.

These are really important foundations for successful transitioning from home to an early childhood setting and helps to support the social and emotional wellbeing. While we're doing all of this with the children, we're also developing relationships with families. Chris, you're going to talk a little bit on this now.

Christine McMahon:

I'm a great believer that with support from educators, families can feel comfortable leaving their children with educators who are working with their children's best interests.

When families feel understood and supported by those around them, they experienced better mental health and wellbeing. For an example, for us the meet and greet at the front door or gate is very, very important. It's so important to acknowledge family members, to remember the names of grandparents and extended family and to know the names of other children that might be with them, because that gives them that sense of identity already. It shows that we're interested in them as a family. So to us, it's a really important part of our journey to make sure that we're making our families relax with that smile and have reassurance that we are interested in them.

Sara Richardson:

Thank you, everybody. One of the things I was thinking about as you were talking is being intentional about the small things that are a critical element to relationships. Given the current circumstances, sometimes we've actually been forced into thinking about doing things differently and changing some of our approaches to how we support transitions. We have to think differently and carefully about what's important. We've talked about relationships, but now we want to think about how those relationships underpin and transform into real partnerships.

As we head into this next poll we are going to ask everybody to select any or all that apply. After you've had a chance to respond, we will ask the panellists to respond to this question as well. The reason why we're discussing this is because relationships very much underpin partnerships. We want you to think about what the difference between a relationship and a partnership is, because sometimes we use those words interchangeably.

Rebecca, from your perspective, which do you think you would choose?

Rebecca Fitzpatrick:

Relationships are definitely important to create partnerships. From my point of view, I think that you need to have the relationship so that they can develop into partnerships and they are both just as important so as I think about the responses available on this poll, I would be choosing all of them.

Sara Richardson:

Alison, what about you? Which ones would you select?

Alison Boyd-Law:

For me, I think these all happen naturally. Initially they might. You might have a lovely relationship, but then for it to turn into a partnership it has to be genuine and intentional. There are so many things that we do to develop strong partnerships. Relationships probably need to come first before that true partnership can happen.

Jennifer Koutoulas:

I agree with Rebecca and with Allison. I think relationships do form into partnerships later, and what really stands out to me is the importance of the respectful relationships that you have. When you have established respect and trust, it really does start to transfer into more of a bonding relationship and towards a partnership.

Sara Richardson:

The language from the Early Years Learning Framework and My Time Our Place is around that respectful, reciprocal relationship. It's really critical, isn't it? Chris, would you like to add anything else before we close the poll?

Christine McMahon:

I agree with everything you have all said. It's really beneficial that we meet the needs of the families through our relationships but I think one point we have to say to everybody and make clear is that this is ongoing. This is something that just doesn't happen overnight and you've got to understand that. You have to put a lot of time into what you're doing and don't expect things to happen overnight, because it is an ongoing thing.

Sara Richardson:

The results are similar to what you were saying, Jennifer. Respectful relationships are most important. A lot of people have said you can't have one without the other. Only 14% of people said that relationships just happen naturally without planning, which is similar to what we've said as well.

We now want to come back to the panellists and hear some stories from their services. We will start with you, Rebecca.

Rebecca Fitzpatrick:

From the first time a potential educator inquires with our service to see if they want to pursue a role with us and pursue providing family day care in their own home, we try to make them feel as comfortable as possible by making sure we're listening to their questions, responding appropriately and giving them time to think about the process. Once they start a lot of our educators maintain a relationship with Intereach for a long period of time. Most of our educators have been providing family day care with Intereach for five years or more. We have a lot of educators just going up to 20 to 25 years which promotes what we believe about relationships.

COVID-19 has really emphasised the importance of those relationships transitioning to partnerships. I think that sometimes family day care educators maybe expect that we as coordinators have all the answers, and I think that we have shown some vulnerability over the COVID time, because we haven't had all the answers to every question. We've had to do a little bit of deciphering of information and we've really had to say, we don't know the answer to that question but we'll find out and get back to you. I did a lot of live streams during the first three months of lockdown from my home in my bedroom with five children in the background. For us, that was able to show the educators some personal connections and vulnerabilities and we found that educators were reaching out to us to ask more questions and wanting to be more engaged.

It just gave them empowering ability to think, wow, these people do care about us. These people trust us, and we can see that they're feeling a little bit vulnerable at this time.

We do believe we have always had strong relationships, but I think this COVID time has really allowed educators to see that we want to be working alongside them and supporting them. We want them involved. We want them actively engaging with us about how our service runs and operates. COVID has been really challenging, but there have been some really positive outcomes. Our educators have been able to see that we are listening, looking at compliance and really care about what's happening. We don't have all of the answers – and that's OK.

Sara Richardson:

That's really interesting, isn't it? That notion of relationships being equal, reciprocal and based on respect is really well illustrated in that story. Jennifer, I know you've got a story that has very much developed over time and is a beautiful example of that ongoing relational work that underpins those partnerships. Would you like to tell that story?

Jennifer Koutoulas:

This story started a few years ago. We had a lovely young child that started the centre with no English. After their transition period, we noticed that the child started to want to connect socially with other children, but just didn't have that social language and capacity to typically interact, connect and communicate.

We noticed during the times that we would eat, the child was bringing in very cultural food. We would sit down and talk about our different foods and I shared my cultures with the children. The children and I were really excited by a particular lunch this child brought in.

I contacted the mother by telephone and I asked who cooks these dishes, thinking maybe we could find a way to connect with the family because the grandmother would come in and drop the child off so we really didn't see the family a lot. We knew that we could try and develop a partnership with the family in some way. The mother explained it was the child's grandfather who was cooking these dishes.

She shared that the grandfather won't come in because he doesn't speak English. We collaborated and talked about how can we try and bring this family into our community in a really simple, sensitive way. We really drew on the mother and father and we asked if we could possibly create a time where the grandfather could come in and cook with us. The mother's response was not just yet, but she would see if she could arrange that. There was a lot of exchanging e-mails and telephone call for about a month to organise a time.

We arranged a fantastic day which is now an ongoing thing we do with different families. It's really informed our practices. On the day all the children got involved in the cooking experience, which was creating the dish which originally sparked excitement with the children. We sang their cultural songs and you could see visual gestures of the grandfather smiling with the children. I emailed the mother and asked if she could give me some feedback on how the grandfather felt because we were so happy after such a lovely experience.

Her response was that the grandfather was actually overwhelmed because the children were so happy and involved, as were the educators. He felt he was also involved with the community and felt a sense of belonging with us. His wish is that he will be able to speak English to the children one day. We've used a lot of this knowledge and thinking in our practices with families individually, because we have so many different cultures that we are coming from the unknown.

We have to take those steps really sensitively. It's been lovely to now see the grandfather and this lovely relationship that we've developed with the family which has turned into a partnership because it's very deep, meaningful and reciprocal.

Sara Richardson:

That's lovely. You've got some comments coming through – someone has goose bumps listening to that story, Jennifer. You talked a lot about belonging, connectedness, being and involvement. I think the other thing that struck me this time, as I've heard that story a few times now, is that you made an assumption that it was the grandmother cooking the meals.

We make so many assumptions and go forging ahead based on our assumptions.

Jennifer Koutoulas:

That's exactly right. I didn't vocalise it, but we thought it. When we realised it was the grandfather, we realised we need to get to know this family, and then we understood that we really didn't know the child holistically, and we needed to. A beautiful outcome that came from this relationship is that as time went on, this child, who was very shy and didn't want to communicate or know how to, actually took on the leadership role themselves before they started school which was so lovely to see.

When we start seeing that development and see the child, families and educators happy, we know we've got the right recipe working.

Sara Richardson:

The critical element of that is the partnerships we develop are because of the child, and that helps us with boundaries around our relationships with families as well. The reason for the partnership is because we want to do the best for and support the child to develop into their potential, which is what happened for you. However, that's a really good segway into what the experience is for Alison and Chris who are in a very rural community where those partnerships, interactions and relationships go beyond the service because you're very integrated into everything and connected in a whole range of different ways. I'm sure you've got some stories that you'd like to share about this as well.

Alison Boyd-Law:

That's right, Sara. When my children were younger you'd often see siblings and children you work with at the football, the netball, the swimming carnival, the tennis, everywhere. Being in a small community you need to be on your toes all the time because you're actually exposed all the time. We have so many stories, as you all would. For us, it's a journey with all children, families and educators. Developing relationships and maintaining partnerships is an ongoing thing, and it becomes embedded in your day-to-day practices and your pedagogy.

Partnerships are developed and maintained in so many ways. We welcome children, families, and educators into our service. We listen to them, answer their questions, offer advice, exchange information and exchange learning – the family's learning, the children's learning and our learning about their children by discussing individual learning goals and many opportunities that are offered for families to become involved. It's a little bit tricky now with COVID-19, but there are still ways. We can still email and text.

We set up a 'tree of hope' and we asked our families to write a message about what they hope for post-COVID-19 and we had the most beautiful messages. This was a great way of connecting families with their preschool community.

We're currently setting up a parent library with the priority of mental health and wellbeing and mindfulness. We also keep communication lists so we can keep track of families that we have spoken to and if we haven't spoken to a family for a little while we reach out to touch base.

We also organise community projects where we have something at the front gate or the front door – it's at the gate at the moment because of COVID-19 – and have the children and families work on a piece of artwork together which creates a lovely bond between the children, their families, educators and brings a sense of community and belonging. Chris, you had a few more things that you were going to add.

Christine McMahon:

Alison, you've covered it really well. One of the most important things that I'm hearing today is the use of communication, which we're all doing on a daily basis. It's just the key. It's the number one thing. There are so many ways that we're all using communication. One of the things I've found I can do best, especially with what we are dealing with lately with COVID-19, is just making a simple phone call or text and sharing a story a child may have shared with me that was funny, kind, or just a little bit out of the usual sort of thing that they talk about.

Families like to hear that and it gives them the sense that we are interested in them and interested in what their children are sharing with us. I think it's a wonderful, positive way for educators to have that relationship and partnership with the children that they're working with, as well as the families.

Sara Richardson:

Thanks, Chris. While you were talking, Alison, I was thinking about that notion of hope. There are a lot of times in early childhood where we are telling parents what we want them to do – make sure you don't put this in your child's bag, make sure you fill in that note. I think we don't often give families opportunity to talk about what they really want for their child. We are busy telling them about what we've programmed and then we get a bit upset when they haven't had a look at the fabulous programming we've invested a lot of time in, but when have we actually asked them what they really want for their child? Not what they want them to learn, but what is it that they hope for their child. That's what parents care about.

We put our layers of our professionalism on, and we should, but we have to be mindful to give space to parents to share and have that opportunity as well. That's one of the dimensions that turn relationships into partnerships in a reciprocal way, where we actually offer a space for parents to talk and share what their hopes and aspirations are for their children.

Rebecca Fitzpatrick:

It is beautiful to talk about what parents hope for their children. It's also important for educators as well. From a family day care perspective, there are lots of regulations, rules and National Quality Standards. From a service perspective, we have lots of policies and procedures as well. What we really focus on is going back to the educator's why, the educator's passion and what they really want for the children as well. Sometimes what we need to do to ensure that educators are really feeling valued and supported because there are lots of things happening in the early childhood world. I think it's beautiful to ask parents what they hope for, but I think it's really important to continue asking educators what they hope for themselves as educators and professionals, as well as what they hope for families and children.

Sara Richardson:

Thank you, Rebecca, for reminding us about that. We will move on to the next question because this is a good segway into thinking about how Be You might have supported you. All of you are doing this work anyway, and I'm sure everybody out there is as well. That's one of the things that is critical to Be You – it builds on and acknowledges what you're already doing, what you're already value and what's already important to you and it helps shape how that goes. What we will hear from each of you now is how Be You has helped you turn relationships into partnerships. Jennifer, we might start with and see how Be You has helped you do the work that you have already been doing.

Jennifer Koutoulas:

Be You has given us the ability to have a toolbox that we are able to go back to all the time. When there are circumstances, for example the onset of COVID-19, it was Be You that actually informed our practices. It was Be You that gave us the opportunity to meet because we join a community of practice, which was around relationships with families.

All educators joined this community with me as a team and because we had that background knowledge and we had all the messages and the understandings of the relationships with our families, we had a clearer picture of how to approach the next steps. Because of Be You, that journey from wanting to connect with families to build that partnership with them during this time wasn't as challenging as it was before while we were still learning and that's where the connection between the relationship and the partnership does grow. It is a process and it takes a while. Like Rebecca said, empowering the educator is so important. When you have the time to meet with educators one-on-one, you can actually support each other's feelings and emotions and that's really important.

Sara Richardson:

Yes, self-care and educator wellbeing is a critical element to Be You. Chris and Alison, do you want to talk a bit about the bits of Be You you have tapped into and how that has helped you to build on this work?

Jennifer Koutoulas:

Be You offers a range of resources to educators and families. We've really enjoyed the mentoring sessions and webinars. It's just fabulous. It's given us the confidence to support families and children and ourselves and it guides us and reinforces that we're heading in the right direction. As Jennifer said, Be You gives you that little toolbox of things that you really can use.

It reminds us to nurture social and emotional wellbeing in our children. I think that's been the biggest thing for me. When we initially started back with KidsMatter, mental health and wellbeing just seemed so daunting. I thought, how can I say this to families? But it's all about children's social and emotional wellbeing and it also reminds us to nurture and strengthen protective factors in children – their self-esteem and confidence, resilience, and that sense of belonging and identity. The more protective factors children have, the better they cope. This has been particularly significant during the COVID-19.

If our service was the one normal thing in a child's life, then that was a really good thing because we're able to offer those and support those protective factors.

Be You is not something that when you've completed all the components, you tick the box and think you don't have to do anything else. It's really an ongoing journey. Supporting mental health and wellbeing are ongoing things. It's become such an important part of our teaching, our philosophy, our service goals and our QIP.

Christine McMahon:

Be You has been recognised by our managers at Shine Bright. It has been found to be such a valuable resource and framework that they're going to make it a priority for the other services that they manage. Chris, do you have a few thoughts to add here?

I was actually thinking along the same lines as Jennifer. Be You is a wonderful toolbox. It's a toolbox that I take with me most days, one that I can even have at home. It relates to ourselves and our own wellbeing. It is terribly important. If our wellbeing is 100%, we are going to be able to come to work and function at a really good level. The most important thing with the toolbox is keeping up that maintenance and making sure that we keep in tune with our Be You, keep our regular online meetings and encourage other people to perhaps get on board. The benefits that have come out of it are absolutely wonderful and I've thoroughly enjoyed doing Be You and I hope I can continue doing it for a long time.

Sara Richardson:

Thanks, Chris and Alison. Rebecca, would you like to talk about how Be You has support your priorities and your direction as well?

Rebecca Fitzpatrick:

A lot of what Alison, Chris and Jennifer have said definitely relates to what we've done in our organisation. We had a little bit of resistance. Some of the educators thought Be You was just something else they have to complete. We did start with one of the modules that really gave some statistics about the impact of mental health and wellbeing on young children. I think that resonated with educators and made them think that they can all really make a difference to the young children in their care. They were able to see the importance. The importance with Be You is that it's not an add-on.

It really just reinforces the practice that we're doing on a day-to-day basis and gives us, as educators, the confidence to communicate with families, colleagues, other professionals and children and really helps reduce the stigma of mental health and wellbeing. That's something that our organisation and service is really committed to. We have been a part of Be You since it was under KidsMatter, and I'm really pleased to say that we have done this for such a long time and our organisation, which has a lot of different programs, now has a mental health strategy.

Sara Richardson:

Thank you, Rebecca. Be You is a framework and it can be contextualise to every context. What it looks like in each of your services is going to be very different, but you're still using the same framework to guide you and the toolkit it offers you.

As a way of finishing off, let's think about partnerships and how they continue to create a sense of community and wellbeing for the whole community, again going back to the Be You vision. Chris and Alison, would you like to speak to that first?

Alison Boyd-Law:

When families and children feel welcome, comfortable, accepted and respected, you have positive, strong partnerships and a strong sense of trust and identity developing. In turn, that nurtures and fosters positive mental health and wellbeing in the community. As you can see here today, Chris and I have a very strong partnership and we work well together as a team. We have done so for 22 years. Promoting mental health and wellbeing is a team responsibility. We are supportive of each other, the children in our care and their families. We strengthen relationships, create partnerships and ultimately create better outcomes for children and families. For me as a leader, it's not about following a recipe or sitting at the top. It's about being open and taking into account everybody's opinion and working together in partnership to contribute to the wellbeing of our preschool community.

That means your staff, the children and their families. Chris has a lovely way of being in the moment, so she is now going to offer a few comments about that.

Christine McMahon:

To me, being in the moment is taking that opportunity you can see – perhaps you can see that somebody's not quite right by their body language. That's always a good opportunity to read the play and just ask a simple question: "Are you okay?" "Gee, I like your hair." "You look fantastic today."

It's really important to be aware of people around you and to be aware that sometimes there's an opportunity that you might take up because there could be some signs letting you know that perhaps things aren't right.

In a tactful way, you've always got to be there to take information back to your team and to talk about what you've noticed, what you've seen and what you're concerned about. That shows the good relationship, not only with the family, but also with your team.

It's taking back vital and interesting information that could end up being very valuable to the program, to the child and to their learning. It's so important to be in tune.

Sara Richardson:

Thanks, Chris. Jennifer, would you like to talk about what partnerships mean to you and how they contribute to the sense of community and wellbeing?

Jennifer Koutoulas:

I have an educator very similar to Christine with many years' experience in Certificate III, and she approaches the circumstances where she notices things that might not quite right the same way Christine does. To me, that resonates as somebody who has that sensitivity and understanding, but they also share that with others. We have three generations of educators here. We don't look to each other as our qualifications or experience. We look to each other by our knowledge. Bringing that together has really meant a lot for us.

Be You opens those doors for us to be able to enter into each other's world and to do that in a way where we all feel safe to do so as it's confidential and respectful. From there, we can move into supporting the best interests with children and with the families. We always make a point of taking things very slowly and step by step, and looking at each family and child individually. I'm a real believer that practices need to be

sensitive and consistent. If we can do that as a community then I think things are working well for us. Everybody's input needs to be valued and we always have that at the back of our mind.

Sara Richardson:

Thanks, Jennifer. Rebecca, do you have anything you would like to add?

Rebecca Fitzpatrick:

Thanks, Sara. From a family day care perspective, we've got lots of learning communities within our community. We look at it from a co-ordination unit. We then look at it from a co-ordination unit with our educators. Educators each have a community within their own family day care service. Looking at Be You, our focus is our peer support in learning.

We use a closed Facebook group and we use lots of tools that Be You provides to share with educators to get educators sharing their thoughts and feelings, not only about Be You, but about all aspects of facilitating a quality early childhood service. I think that's where the respectful relationships and partnerships start to develop, when everyone gets that opportunity to contribute. The peer support in learning is something that has made the partnerships in our community better from an educator's perspective.

Sara Richardson:

That's a lovely note to finish on. I'd really like to thank all of you for your stories. We've got some amazing things coming through the chat about these experienced speakers.

I'm not sure that you would call yourself experienced speakers, but you are certainly coming across like that from the audience, and I've really enjoyed your contributions.

We are really keen to have people part of the Be You community where we all belong and we can work in partnership together. Early Years Learning Communities and your Be You Consultant are great opportunities for you to connect. There's a whole range of ways you can join in. We are staying online for a Q&A panel where we will have a bit more flexibility. You might be able to ask the panel some questions and you might want to ask each other some questions as well. If you participated live today, you'll get a certificate. When you exit the webinar today you will be prompted to complete an exit survey. Please complete the exit survey, particularly if you've got more than one person watching with you today, and add their names so you all receive a certificate. They will be handouts available, and you will receive a recording of the webinar later on.

The webinars are always available on the Be You website for ongoing conversations. If you want to find out a little bit more about Be You or if you're keen to stay on for the Q&A, we look forward to having you join us. Thank you everybody. Don't forget to fill out the exit survey, we'd really like to hear your thoughts. A round of applause and big thank you to Jennifer, Christine, Alison and Rebecca. It's been fabulous having you online with us today. People have really enjoyed hearing your stories so I thank you so much for your time and for sharing.

Bye, everyone.

End Transcript