



# Help-seeking for children and young people in schools

Help-seeking is about communicating an issue or challenge to obtain support, advice or help. Asking for help can act as a protective factor for a child or young person's mental health and wellbeing.

Getting support early can help prevent small issues or challenges continuing, or even getting bigger.

## What is help-seeking?

### Help-seeking is a positive coping strategy.

Help-seeking could mean asking for assistance with day-to-day events such as learning experiences, and relationships (e.g. negotiating with peers on a task, managing anxious feelings or relationship breakups).

It could also mean seeking help for developmental queries or general health matters, including mental health. Examples include speech and language delays, understanding puberty or behavioural challenges.

Help may come in many shapes and forms. It could come from within the learning community or from external agencies, resources and organisations.

It may occur through daily interactions and conversations between educators, children and young people, and families. Other good sources of information and support are brochures, fact sheets,

reputable websites, family, friends and health professionals.

Support may be focused on the children and young people, their families or the school, or a combination of both. The goal in providing support is to find the best possible pathway to maintain or improve the wellbeing of children and their families.

## Why is help-seeking important?

### Seeking help is important because it can foster children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

There are a range of influences and experiences – both positive and negative – that impact on an individual's mental health. These influences and experiences are known as risk and protective factors.

Being able to ask for help can act as a protective factor because help-seeking can lead to accessing resources that support mental health and wellbeing.

When children and young people view help-seeking positively, it builds a sense of agency and confidence that they can influence their world and receive help if needed.

Children and young people who have a positive experience of help-seeking are empowered to access available supports in future.

Getting help when needed may buffer the impact of risk factors that challenge a person's mental health and wellbeing.

The earlier individuals can access support, the better. Issues that aren't addressed can become more difficult to manage, continuing to affect the child or young person as they grow.

Educators play an important role by:

- supporting children, young people and families to develop positive attitudes about help-seeking
- empowering children, young people and families to reach out for support when necessary
- being aware of their school's policies and procedures on supporting children and families
- role-modelling help-seeking behaviours.

### **Be You Professional Learning**

Learn more about risk and protective factors in the Understand module of the [Mentally Healthy Communities](#) domain.

## **What promotes help-seeking?**

### **Recognising and describing emotions**

Supporting children and young people to recognise and describe their emotions builds help-seeking confidence. Instilling positive beliefs and attitudes about accepting support empowers children and young people to recognise when help is required and seek assistance when needed.

### **Relationships and role modelling**

Educators are well-placed to promote help-seeking. Children and young people tend to approach someone they know and trust as a first step in help-seeking.

Educators who engage in positive relationships and who are role models for help-seeking can

encourage children, young people and families to reach out.

### **Clear systems and referral pathways**

When learning communities have clear systems and referral pathways in place, and communicate these to children, young people and families, it encourages help-seeking.

Children, young people and families who have positive experiences of support, and who are confident the person they reach out to will know how to support them, are more likely to seek assistance in the future.

### **Maintaining boundaries**

In conversations where help has been sought, it's important to refer only to what is known, noticed or observed without mentioning any label or diagnosis.

It is important to follow your service policies and procedures and involve the leadership team or wellbeing representative, as necessary.

Where young people self-refer for support (for example, seeking help from their teacher), the following considerations help maintain boundaries:

- Have clear policies and procedures in place, including guidance on parental consent.
- Provide unobtrusive ways to seek help, including suggesting reliable sources of digital and web resources.
- If required, talk to young people about the limits of confidentiality. For example, if their circumstances raise safety concerns, you may need to notify another adult or family member to keep them safe. (Refer to your school's policies and requirements on confidentiality if you need to know more about the limits of confidentiality).

### **Be You Professional Learning**

Learn more about inquiring sensitively into a child's circumstances and having conversations with families in the [Early Support](#) domain.

## **How can schools support help-seeking?**

Here are some ways to develop help-seeking behaviours.

- Create an environment where help-seeking is encouraged and valued.
- Support children and young people's social and emotional learning, and to help them understand and name their emotions.
- Be a positive role model and demonstrate help-seeking. For example say out loud, "I'm not sure how to solve this problem – I'm going to ask for help".
- Provide encouragement and positive feedback for help-seeking. For example, "It looked as though you felt upset. I'm really glad you came to talk to me about it".
- Encourage mental health literacy. Discuss and integrate mental health and wellbeing as a core component of children and young people's learning.
- Talk to children, young people and families about the benefits of asking for help.
- Have systems that enable children, young people and families to ask for help (such as a key person they know they can talk to, if needed).
- Invite a range of professionals such as the school nurse, GPs and mental health professionals to talk to children, young people and families about their role, support they can offer and how to access their services.
- Include a range of flyers and information on support services around the learning community to make it easy for children, young people and families to access information.
- Build confidence to talk to families about help-seeking and to offer support. It might be useful to prepare for these conversations with a colleague before meeting with the family. Use the [Be You BETLS Observation Tool](#), a template for gathering and documenting information and observations, to keep a record of your observations and to support conversations.
- Work with external professionals where appropriate to implement ideas and strategies that support children and young people's development and wellbeing.

## References

Gulliver, A., Griffiths, K.M., and Christensen, H. (2010) Perceived barriers and facilitators to mental health help-seeking in young people: a systematic review, *BMC Psychiatry* 10, Accessed 27 August 2019: <https://bmcp psychiatry.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-244X-10-113>

Lawrence D, Johnson S, Hafekost J, Boterhoven De Haan K, Sawyer M, Ainley J, Zubrick SR (2015) *The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents. Report on the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing.* Department of Health, Canberra.

Rickwood, D.J., Deane, F.P., and Wilson, C.J. (2007) When and how do young people seek professional help for mental health problems? Accessed 27 August 2019: <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2007/187/7/when-and-how-do-young-people-seek-professional-help-mental-health-problems>

## External links

[Breaking down barriers to help-seeking](#)

[Supporting children and young people](#)