



Help-seeking in early childhood

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's mental health and wellbeing.

Early childhood is an ideal time to support children and families develop positive attitudes towards seeking and accepting help. Getting support early can help prevent small challenges continuing or even getting bigger.

What is help-seeking?

Help-seeking is a positive coping strategy.

Help-seeking could mean children and families asking for assistance with daily activities or learning experiences, such as a baby learning to eat solid food, a toddler learning to climb or a preschooler wanting to join a game with their peers.

It could also mean seeking help for developmental queries or general health matters. For example, speech and language delays, sleep issues or changes in behaviour, or supporting children in School Age Care manage their social interactions.

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

It may occur through daily interactions and conversations between educators, children 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 children, their families or the early learning community, or a combination of these. 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'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 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 families 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 access support, the better. Issues that aren't addressed can become more difficult to manage, continuing to affect the child as they grow.

Early childhood educators are well placed to support and promote help-seeking through their positive relationships with children and families.

Educators play an important role by:

- responding positively to help-seeking behaviors demonstrated by children and families
- empowering families to reach out for support when necessary
- being aware of their service'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 to recognise and describe their emotions builds help-seeking confidence. Children who understand what they are experiencing are better equipped to recognise when they may need assistance.

Relationships and role modeling

Educators are well-placed to promote help-seeking. Children and families 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 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 the community, it encourages help-seeking.

Children 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 the policies and procedures at your service, and involve the leadership team or wellbeing representative where necessary.

Be You Professional Learning

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

How can early learning services support help-seeking?

Here are some ways to develop help-seeking behaviours.

- Support children's social and emotional learning, and to help them understand and name their emotions.
- Be a positive role model and demonstrate how to ask for help. 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".
- Read stories that show children getting support from others such as family members, doctors, psychologists or other children.
- Invite professionals into the early learning service to talk to children, families and educators about what they do and how they support children.
- Be aware of the different types of support available in your area, and the referral pathways. Consider showcasing various agencies and supports in your communication with families. See the [Overview of Mental Health Services](#) fact sheet.

- Include a range of flyers, posters, brochures or other displays of support service information around the learning community to make it easy for families to access information.
- Display infographics or simple illustrations of help-seeking processes to help a diverse audience (including children and young people) to understand and access help-seeking supports.
- Offer information on how families can access support when required and discuss the positive impact this can have for children. Help them to understand that accessing support is an appropriate and positive response to any concerns.
- Build positive relationships with families so that they feel comfortable seeking support or raising concerns.
- Build confidence to talk to families about their children 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's development and wellbeing.

References

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.

Oh, E., and Bayer, J.K. (2014) Parents' help seeking processes for early childhood mental health problems, *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 20(3), 149-154.