



# Overview of mental health services

**This snapshot offers educators an overview of mental health services in Australia.**

Providing access to support can be instrumental in helping a child or young person. Early learning services, School Age Care services and schools have their own policies and procedures to support this process.

Follow the policy and procedures in your learning community to understand both your role and whose responsibility it is to arrange support for a child or young person.

Educators have a vital role in noticing when children and young people need support; just remember not to diagnose or make conclusions about their state of mental health.

## Levels of service

The levels of service available in Australia's mental health system are broadly described as follows.

### Universal services

Universal services are designed to be available for everyone and are at the frontline of Australia's healthcare system.

This tier of services includes internal supports available in your learning community, such as the wellbeing team or inclusion advisors. Other examples are GPs, maternal and child health nurses,

school nurses, Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) partners, youth workers and wellbeing staff.

This tier could also include activities or services in the community that everyone can access, such as parenting groups, community activities and online resources.

### Secondary services

Secondary health services are for people who need targeted support from a specialist. For children and young people, secondary services might include, pediatricians, psychiatrists, allied mental health practitioners including psychologists, mental health social workers, ECEI partners in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and occupational therapists.

### Tertiary (or specialist) services

These are for children and young people who are experiencing complex mental health issues or conditions and are at high risk of harm, and who may need to be referred to a specialist mental health service.

This level of service includes paediatric clinics, child and adolescent/youth mental health services (CAMHS, CYMHS) or hospital inpatient services.

Often a GP or secondary health service, in consultation with the child or young person and their family, would make a referral to this level of service. A hospital may also refer a child or young person from its emergency department to a specialist service.

## Accessing mental health services

GPs are a good place to start to arrange a referral to a mental health professional. They often have knowledge of services and mental health professionals in the local area. Referrals can also be made through an NDIS ECEI partner.

Families starting the process of accessing a service may benefit from some support, such as making the initial phone call to a service or an appointment.

Here are some key things for you to consider when supporting the family to explore which service or professional is most appropriate:

- What information do you have about how the mental health services operate (e.g. is it family-centred, individual or play-based)? What's important to the family?
- Is the family able to travel? Do any services offer home visits or teleconference appointments?
- Does the child or young person have a preferred gender when it comes to the practitioner or mental health professional?
- What is the waiting period to access the service? What about cost?

If you are concerned about a child or young person in your care at risk of immediate harm, call 000 or your nearest hospital emergency department.

## Mental Health Treatment Plans

Mental Health Treatment Plans are available under the following schemes and require a referral from a GP.

### Better Access initiative

The Better Access initiative was developed to improve access to psychological treatment for community members, including children and young people.

Under the scheme, anyone experiencing a mental health condition can access up to 10 individual and 10 group treatment sessions per year and receive a

Medicare rebate. This has been increased to 20 sessions per calendar year for a time-limited period due to the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Families can obtain a Medicare rebate for services provided by allied mental health professionals under the Better Access to mental health care initiative.

Often, the mental health professional delivering the service through Better Access will charge a gap fee – this means there's likely to be some out-of-pocket expenses for the family to consider.

### Primary Health Networks (PHNs)

In 2015, the Australian Government established 31 Primary Health Networks (PHNs) across Australia. PHNs aim to make health services more effective, improve how care is coordinated and tailor services to the community.

The PHN in your area will have some options for no fee short-term psychological interventions (usually up to 12 sessions) delivered by a qualified mental health professional such as a psychologist or mental health nurse. This includes mental health services for children under 12.

This scheme is for people who have limited access to Medicare-subsidised Better Access mental health services, and who may not be able to afford a gap fee.

Each PHN has its own eligibility criteria to access this free mental health service, so check with your PHN about eligibility. There may also be longer wait times due to demand.

### Telehealth services

Telehealth services can improve access to mental health professionals – particularly for families living in remote and rural locations. This includes video conferencing and telephone support (although video is encouraged where possible).

During the COVID-19 pandemic Medicare lifted previous restrictions on access to telehealth and many mental health providers now offer this as an option. A Mental Health Treatment Plan for psychological support includes telehealth as an option for accessing services.

## Before visiting the GP

Here are some things to consider before the family or young person's trip to the GP for a Mental Health Treatment Plan.

- Talk to families about the process of seeing the GP so that they understand what to expect. If you've completed a [BETLS observation](#) of a child or young person, share these observations with the family to support this process.
- Suggest to the family that when they make the appointment, they should inform the GP practice that the visit is for a Mental Health Treatment Plan. Most practices would require a double appointment to ensure enough time is allocated.
- If a gap fee is a barrier to accessing mental health services, suggest to the family that they ask their GP for a no cost option – either a bulk billing service or a referral through the PHN.

The PHN in your region will have a website outlining their services. Find your PHN using the Department of Health's PHN [map locator](#).

## Private health insurance

Some families will have private health insurance, which they can use to cover some or all the cost of mental health services. If using private health insurance, they cannot access funding through Medicare or the PHN.

## Not-for-profits (NFPs), charities and non-government organisations

Not-for-profits (NFPs), non-government organisations (NGOs) and charities don't operate for profit or gain for individual members. They often rely on grants, philanthropic funding, government funding and other donations.

These organisations seek to make a difference in areas such as health, education, social welfare and religion and can be an important source of support for families.

They often provide a range of services – including individual services, groups, events and celebrations – that promote wellbeing.

Some of these organisations have experience, knowledge and expertise in specific areas such as working with cultural groups, mental health, parenting or disability, and can be invaluable partners for learning communities.

There may also be local community organisations in your area delivering a range of services.

## Mental health services and support

These are some national organisations that offer mental health support services.

Beyond Blue Support Service  
[beyondblue.org.au/get-support](https://beyondblue.org.au/get-support)  
1300 22 4636

headspace (12–25 years)  
[headspace.org.au](https://headspace.org.au), [headspace.org.au/eheadspace](https://headspace.org.au/eheadspace)  
1800 650 890

Kids Helpline (5–25 years)  
[kidshelpline.com.au](https://kidshelpline.com.au)  
1800 55 1800

Lifeline  
[lifeline.org.au](https://lifeline.org.au)  
13 11 14

## References

Australian Government Department of Health. Fact sheet: Primary Health Networks. Retrieved from <https://www.health.gov.au/our-work/phn/what-PHNs-are>

Australian Government Department of Health: The <https://www.health.gov.au/our-work/better-access-initiative>

Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (2014). Not-for-profit. Retrieved from <https://www.acnc.gov.au/for-charities/start-charity/not-for-profit>

Reay, R.E., Looi, J.CL. and Keightley, P. (2020) Telehealth mental health services during covid-19: summary of evidence and clinical practice. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/1039856220943032>

## External links

[Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists, and General Practitioners through the MBS \(Better Access\) initiative](#)

[Mental health care and Medicare](#)

[Mental health services, resources and links](#) (Raising Children Network)

[Primary health networks \(PHNs\)](#)

[Support for children](#) (Head to Health)