



Preschool Field Officer Service

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Mental wellbeing is as important as physical wellbeing to children's overall health. It is important that educators are familiar with and promote positive mental health and wellbeing in children.

Mental health and wellbeing refers to a person's psychological, social and emotional wellbeing and is affected by the context of each individual's circumstances. Mental health difficulties relate to "...a range of challenges that people may experience in their thoughts, feelings or behaviour." Mental health difficulties are not the same as mental illness or neurological disorder. (ACECQA, <http://www.acecqa.gov.au/>)

All children have the right to experience quality education and care in an environment that provides for their health, safety and wellbeing. We know through research that brain development in the early years significantly impacts on a person's long term mental and physical health. A strong wellbeing in the early years lays the foundation for improved outcomes in later life. The importance of supporting children's wellbeing is recognised in the National Quality Standards.

When discussing mental health with families, the term "**Wellbeing**" can be used. This can be less confronting for families. It is important to plan for wellbeing and incorporate it into core learning spaces throughout the entire year.

Why is it important to foster Wellbeing in my early childhood program?

- It provides support for children's growing competence, confidence and independence.
- It develops healthy friendships.
- Children may develop the ability to self-soothe, and manage their emotions which subsequently may lower levels of stress.
- It helps to build resilience.
- It fosters a strong sense of identity and belonging.
- When children feel well, happy, secure and socially successful they are able to fully participate in, and learn from the daily routines, play, interactions and experiences.

What can I do to support the children in my group?

*Remember to teach children wellbeing strategies when they are calm and relaxed.

1. Set up a calm corner/Wellbeing space inside *and* outside for the entire year. Don't forget to regularly modify it throughout the year. You may like to:

- Include soft furnishings such as cushions, blankets, beanbags and soft toys
- Make the space enclosed by using a teepee/tent, draping material overhead, facing it away from the 'business' of the room
- Add sensory items for children to explore
- Play music such as Jen Jereb's "Cool Bananas" CD or relaxation music such as "Sacred Earth"
- Add soft musical instruments for children to play such as rain stick or a singing bowl
- Add tools to encourage calm breathing such as bubble blowing, a kazoo, herbs to smell
- Provide an iPad (with a locked screen) with Apps such as "Aquarium Live", "Smiling Mind" or "Drum Beats". <http://www.howtogeek.com>how-to-lock-down-your-ipad-or-iphone-for-kids>

2. Be a positive role model

- Provide examples of how you manage your own emotions effectively
- Provide examples of how you recognise other people's emotions
- Give children examples of how you take care of yourself
- Show children how you ask for help when you are frustrated and how you calm yourself down

3. Deep breathing/guided meditation/progressive muscle relaxation/Yoga

- Display visual supports to aid in deep breathing

4. Be aware of ALL children in your group

- Be aware of your quiet and passive children NOT just the children who are displaying challenging behaviour/ emotional outbursts

5. Help children calm down by using visual and verbal cues

- Allow children time to calm down before asking them to "use their words".
- Try encouraging children to "Put their lid on" as a way to calm down. Use your hand as a visual cue of putting the lid on (by placing thumb in middle of palm and covering with four fingers curled over the top) visually representing what we are aiming to achieve. This indicates the need to go from an emotional state to a more logical state. When we are in the emotional part of the brain, we cannot access the logical part of our brain.

6. If a child is anxious

- Make a "worry box" - Children can draw a picture of their worries, and "leave them" in their box. This can help them feel that their worries have been contained. These can be taken out and discussed at "worry time"
- Ensure your families know to inform you of any changes that have occurred at home e.g. death, parents separating.

Websites

Be You (formerly Kids Matter) - <https://beyou.edu.au/> – many tip sheets available for Educators and Families
Worry Wise - www.worrywisekids.org
Beyond Blue - www.beyondblue.org.au
Smiling Mind - www.smilingmind.com.au
Relax Kids - www.relaxkids.com

Apps

Smiling Mind app (guided meditations for children)

Books

When I feel Scared – Cornelia Made Spelman
The Huge Bag of Worries – Virginia Ironside
Go Away, Mr Worrythoughts! Nicky Johnstone
Why Do I Feel Scared – Pat Thomas
I Feel Scared – Kelly Doudna
Tom Goes to Kindergarten – Margaret Wild and David Legge

Services

Western Child First
Drummond Street Services
CAMHS – Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

References

<http://www.acecqa.gov.au/>

<https://beyou.edu.au/>