The sentiments of the early childhood educator above were confirmed in the recent evaluation demonstrating the effectiveness of the adaptation of KidsMatter to early childhood education and care settings, resulting in an extension of funding to expand the successful program into more services across Australia. KidsMatter Early Childhood builds upon the highly successful KidsMatter Primary initiative targeting Australian primary school children in which the APS has played a major role. KidsMatter Early Childhood is a national mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention initiative specifically adapted for Australian early childhood education and care services, and the results of the pilot study are extremely encouraging.

Mental health in early childhood is characterised by a child’s capacity to experience, regulate and express emotion; to form close, secure and satisfying interpersonal relationships; and to explore and discover the environment and the world around them. Young children learn the skills for sustaining mental health through positive and responsive interactions with significant people in their lives (Zero to Three, 2001). Research has shown that mental health problems exist and can be identified in early childhood (Egger & Angold, 2006; Zeanah & Zeanah, 2009), and these difficulties are generally associated with a range of poor immediate and future outcomes (Arnold et al., 2006; Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning, 2003; Tremblay et al., 1992). Given the statistics reported for mental health difficulties in young children and the rapid brain development that occurs in the first five years of life, it is crucial to act early to encourage healthy development and intervene before problems become entrenched. Evidence would suggest that only a minority of children (one third to one half) who require professional assistance for mental health difficulties actually get the help that they need (Starr, Campbell & Herrick, 2002).

For many children, alongside their parents, carers and other family members, educators at the early childhood education and care (ECEC) service are significant adults in their lives and are well placed to support their mental health. There are various types of ECEC services which include long day care, occasional care, preschools, family day care and mobile children’s services. Educators in ECEC services are responsible for nurturing children and providing developmentally appropriate experiences for children in their care. As the numbers of Australian children attending ECEC services is increasing (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012), these services are well placed to implement an early childhood mental health initiative.

KidsMatter Early Childhood aims to improve the mental health of children, decrease mental health difficulties in early childhood and achieve greater support for children experiencing mental health difficulties. The APS is a development partner in KidsMatter Early Childhood, which also involves Early Childhood Australia (ECA) and beyondblue, with funding provided by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing and beyondblue.

Through KidsMatter Early Childhood, the APS brings psychological knowledge, expertise and high standards to the establishment of a promotion, prevention and early intervention framework for young children’s mental health. This assists in providing the community with timely access to high quality, effective psychological information and services that supports positive child development and early intervention when things go wrong. KidsMatter has been a major externally funded project for the APS since 2006, and the ongoing APS role in the initiative is delivered by a team of psychologists, mental health professionals, and academics at the APS national office.

‘One in six children with mental health difficulties at the beginning of the initiative were no longer experiencing difficulties after the KidsMatter Early Childhood pilot study.’

By Dr Vidanka Vasilevski, Project Officer and Sarah Cavanagh Assoc MAPS, Manager, KidsMatter, KidsMatter Early Childhood project team, APS National Office

“We just look at them today and go ‘wow what a difference’. You’re quite concerned about someone who’s very drawn into themselves. There’s two boys in the other group as well and you know they wouldn’t look sideways at someone and now you wouldn’t be able to pick them out. I mean before, if you came in at the beginning of the year, you would have said ‘they look like lonely little people’ but not anymore”.

Special article
KidsMatter Early Childhood

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**Evaluation of the KidsMatter Early Childhood pilot**

The two year pilot phase of the KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative (November 2009 – December 2011) involved 111 participating ECEC services (including long day care and preschool) from metropolitan, rural and remote areas across all States and Territories of Australia. Participating ECEC services were provided with a comprehensive framework of evidence-based strategies to support their role in mental health promotion and greater mental health support for those children who need it. This was delivered through a structured and supported ‘Plan-Do-Review’ process for implementing KidsMatter across the whole ECEC service involving professional learning and guidance for staff. A suite of resources on various topics related to early childhood mental health were also developed for staff and families to further support the implementation of KidsMatter.

A team of researchers from the Flinders University Research Centre for Student Wellbeing and Prevention of Violence conducted an extensive evaluation of the pilot phase of the KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative. The evaluation examined the impact of the initiative on ECEC services, children, educators and families. Educators and families of 11,224 children were surveyed during 2010 and 2011 at up to four time intervals. The evaluation also examined the quality of implementing KidsMatter and how this influenced ECEC services’ capacity to achieve positive outcomes for children’s mental health.

Key instruments used in the evaluation included the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 2005), the Australian Temperament Project Scales (ATP; Prior, Sanson, Smart & Oberklaid, 2000) and the Student-Teacher Relationship Scales (STRS; Pianta, 2001). Data was also collected from educators, families and KidsMatter facilitators using surveys and feedback forms.

A photo voice study was used to obtain qualitative data about the impact of KidsMatter Early Childhood on members of the ECEC service community. Families and educators took photos of subject material that they felt captured the role of KidsMatter at their ECEC service and were asked to describe the relevance of it, which provided rich qualitative data.

The KidsMatter Early Childhood pilot evaluation found positive outcomes for ECEC services, educators, families and children involved in the implementation of KidsMatter. Some of the key findings from the evaluation are summarised below.

**Quality of implementation and engagement with KidsMatter Early Childhood**

The KidsMatter Early Childhood ‘Plan-Do-Review’ process for implementation was valued and adopted by the service leadership and educators. The quality of implementing KidsMatter was influenced by a number of factors including: having a strong leadership team; having an enthusiastic and supportive KidsMatter facilitator; and having educators and leadership who were motivated and valued the initiative. The ECEC services who scored high on the implementation index showed steady increases in their implementation of ‘Plan-Do-Review’ over the two year period, whilst those who scored poorly did not show increases in their implementation over the same period.

**Improvement in children’s mental health**

KidsMatter Early Childhood was associated with improvements in mental health for those children with higher levels of mental health difficulties at the beginning of the pilot. As expected, there was no significant improvement in mental health across the whole cohort of 11,224 children, most of whom were mentally healthy at the beginning of the initiative and remained that way. However, significant improvements were found for those who were initially experiencing mental health difficulties and the results are striking, given the short intervention period.

In order to examine the impact of Kidsmatten on children already experiencing difficulties, a subset of 1,808 children available for at least three of the data collection intervals over the two-year period was included in the analysis. The children were classified into three categories – normal, borderline and abnormal ranges – according to the Total Difficulties score on the SDQ at Time 1 (using both educator and family ratings). The results are summarised as follows.

- There was a reduction in the SDQ Total Difficulties score for children in the borderline and abnormal ranges across the period of the evaluation, with these reductions representing medium and large effect sizes, as rated by ECEC educators, and small and large effect sizes for family ratings respectively (see Fig.1 over page).
- A proportion of children classified in the borderline and abnormal ranges of the SDQ shifted to normal ranges by the end of the evaluation. According to educator and family ratings, this shift occurred for 2.7 per cent and 3.3 per cent of these children respectively. On average, this means one in six children with mental health difficulties at the beginning of the initiative were no longer experiencing difficulties after the KidsMatter Early Childhood pilot study. It is important to note that these children were more likely to come from higher implementing services, highlighting the benefits and importance of services implementing KidsMatter Early Childhood as recommended.

**Engaging families**

The KidsMatter framework has a specific component focusing on working with families with the aim of supporting the parenting role and enhancing family networks by fostering connections...
between families in and outside the ECEC service. The evaluation showed that families valued the information provided for them to support their children’s mental health and the results are summarised as follows.

• Family involvement at the ECEC service increased by 7 per cent at the end of the pilot.
• By the end of the pilot there was a 9 per cent increase in families’ understanding of children’s mental health issues.
• Families from high implementing services reported a significant increase in their capacity to support their children’s social and emotional development (with a small effect size). This outcome was not apparent for families who came from lower implementing services.
• KidsMatter facilitators reported that services found engaging families to be one of the most challenging aspects of KidsMatter, and the evaluators suggest that further emphasis and support in this area in the future of KidsMatter Early Childhood should be considered.

‘As a parent, I didn’t know how much work our teachers and carers were doing here especially not just for the education, but for the wellbeing of our kids.’ (Parent)

Impact on educators’ understanding and confidence in supporting children’s mental health

Significant increases were found in educators’ ratings of their understanding and ability to support mental health in early childhood.

• There were significant increases in educators’ knowledge about children’s mental health, with a medium effect size.
• Educators’ confidence and competence in supporting children’s social and emotional development and responding to children with difficulties significantly improved for high implementing services.
• Educators reported positive impacts on their experiences of the workplace, with enhancements in areas such as job satisfaction, relationships and contributions to their service.
• Educators who were involved in the photo study also reported greater understanding of their own mental health and how to support the wellbeing of their families.

‘It’s given me more professional knowledge about mental health, about children. It certainly made it okay to talk about it out there in the open a bit. I guess knowing where to go now for help, just having a lot more information about it [mental health], and having professional conversations. It has certainly made me and our staff more aware of the community, the parents and their needs.’ (Educator)

Extension of funding until mid-2014

After the success of the pilot, the Australian Government has allocated additional funding for KidsMatter Early Childhood to expand to a further 130 ECEC services. The current focus of the initiative is to increase the reach of the KidsMatter professional learning with more accessible and user-friendly formats. In addition to their relationship with a State/Territory facilitator, ECEC services will be accessing a range of information and support with their implementation of KidsMatter through

Figure 1. Change over time in SDQ Total Difficulties ratings of educators and families for children classified at Time 1 in the normal, borderline and abnormal ranges
the website. This includes a social media strategy, facilitated online learning, e-newsletters and webinars.

The additional funding provided by the Australian Government for KidsMatter Early Childhood demonstrates a commitment to addressing children’s mental health problems as early and effectively as possible to encourage healthy development and avoid problems becoming entrenched. The results of the evaluation of KidsMatter Early Childhood show that this commitment is making a significant difference to the mental health of young children in early childhood education and care settings. As a broad-based initiative involving important adults in children’s lives, KidsMatter Early Childhood promotes positive child development, increases understanding of mental health and supports families to access additional help when needed.

Further information can be found in the evaluation report that can be downloaded from the KidsMatter website (www.kidsmatter.edu.au). Queries in relation to KidsMatter should be directed to s.cavanagh@psychology.org.au

References

KidsMatter Early Childhood information resources available online from www.kidsmatter.edu.au

KidsMatter Early Childhood has developed an extensive range of mental health information resources, which are of value to psychologists working with children with mental health difficulties and their families, and for those working in ECEC settings. These resources provide evidence-based information on a range of topics relevant to early childhood mental health and development (e.g., children and play; managing life’s ups and downs; building healthy family relationships; understanding mental health in early childhood). Each pack contains:

- Information about the topic
- Practical suggestions for families and educators
- Details of other resources for further information

The KidsMatter Early Childhood Programs Guide, which was developed to assist ECEC services to make informed decisions when selecting mental health and wellbeing programs for their ECEC service community, is also available online. Key information on a growing number of mental health and wellbeing programs is presented, including documented research about their theoretical underpinnings and effectiveness. The Guide enables ECEC services, and psychologists working with young children, to compare and select quality evidence-based programs that focus on a number of areas which promote children’s mental health.

General information about KidsMatter and the full suite of KidsMatter information resources for educators and families can also be downloaded.