

## Belonging and connectedness

### Mike's story



Mike held his daughter Belinda's hand tightly. It was her first day at preschool and he was feeling nervous about how she would settle in. Mike's heart pounded as they reached the door to the preschool room. There was the teacher, Ms King. She smiled warmly at them. "Welcome Belinda, nice to meet you. Hello Mike."

Belinda quickly spotted the home corner and asked if she could go and play. Mike watched as another child pretended to make Belinda a cup of tea. She seemed happy to have a friend to play with. So why was Mike still nervous?

"We're having a morning tea for families next week. Are you able to come? It would be a good opportunity for you to meet other parents" Ms King asked. "I'll try", Mike said.

"It seems a lot different than I expected" he thought as he headed out the door. "They seem to want parents to be involved. Maybe they'd like me to help out with the vegie patch some time..."

### Belonging and connectedness improves mental health and learning

All children need to feel that their world is a safe place where people will care about them, where their needs for support, respect and friendship will be met, and where they will be able to get help to work out any problems. When these needs are met children develop a sense of belonging.



**A sense of belonging** has been found to help protect children against mental health problems and improve their learning. Children who feel that they belong are happier, more relaxed and have fewer behavioural problems than others. They are also more motivated and more successful learners.

**Being connected** is about knowing you can seek support when you need it, that you will be listened to, and that you can work together with staff to help your child learn and develop. Support may come from talking with staff or from making connections with other families. Sometimes you might be feeling that things are going well, but just want to have a general chat about your child.

**Being connected helps keep parents and carers informed.** Parents and carers are better able to support their children's early learning experiences when they are informed about what their children are learning and doing at their early childhood service.

## What services might do

As part of KidsMatter Early Childhood, services look closely at ways they can continue to build positive relationships with all children and families. This includes, but is not limited to:

- ✦ making the surroundings welcoming for all children and families
- ✦ encouraging staff to get to know all the children and their families
- ✦ encouraging children to bring in items, photos or stories from home to share
- ✦ making sure that policies on safety, wellbeing and behaviour are developed in collaboration with families and are clearly communicated so that these policies support a sense of belonging and connectedness
- ✦ having a wide range of activities that families can be involved in to help them connect with the service and each other
- ✦ focus on child and family strengths
- ✦ provide information about different supports available in the local community.

**Working together** to care for children is the best way for early childhood services and families to support children's mental health. Families and staff can help to create a bridge between home and early childhood services. When the adults responsible for children take a positive interest in what happens at their service, it helps children feel more at home when they are there. It also makes it easier to pick up any concerns early when they are easiest to resolve.

**Making friends and having positive relationships with staff helps children develop a sense of belonging at their early childhood service.**



**Belonging and connectedness is continued on the next page**





## What families can do

Going to child care, preschool or kindergarten can be scary—and not just for children. Parents and carers also need to feel welcome and at ease to get the most out of being involved with their children's early learning. When families feel they belong to the early childhood service, children find it easier to understand what is expected of them and are better able to manage the ups and downs of life. They learn better and have better mental health.

Some ways you can help you and your family feel you belong and are connected to your early childhood service:

- ▶ Find out about your service and what your child does when he or she is there.
- ▶ Make time to listen to your child tell you about what he or she has done during the day.
- ▶ Let the staff know if your child is having difficulties and discuss what kinds of things can be done both at home and at the service to help.
- ▶ Make contact with your child's key staff member/s and keep in touch.
- ▶ Ask for help if you don't understand something.
- ▶ Share information about your child's likes, interests and preferences with staff.
- ▶ Get involved—find out if there are ways you can help out or take part in activities at your service. Attend information sessions and social activities at your service whenever you can.
- ▶ Be informed—check for notices that are sent home and keep informed about activities through newsletters and other communications.
- ▶ Make contact with other families at your service. Perhaps meet up informally with family members of other children in your child's group, find out about parent social groups that meet at or near your service or join a parent committee.

## Seema's story



Seema dialled the day care centre's number nervously. Aamir was 6 months old now and Seema was returning to work, but she was feeling anxious and guilty about being apart from her little boy.

However, the voice on the other end of the phone was very welcoming and friendly. "Why don't you and Aamir come in and have a look around—then we can sit down, have a chat over coffee and you can ask me any questions you might have? We have so much going on here, I can't wait to tell you all about it!" said Jenny at the day care centre.

Seema put the phone down and breathed a sigh of relief. "They seem so enthusiastic and caring," she thought, "and I wouldn't mind finding out more about their parenting groups. Perhaps it won't be so bad after all!"

Taking opportunities to get to know other families, finding out how to support children's learning and getting involved in activities can help you feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to your early childhood service which will help your child's mental health and learning.



This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at [www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au). The team at KidsMatter Early Childhood also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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