Component 1: Creating a sense of community

Key messages of Component 1

The KidsMatter Framework can help your service to develop a shared understanding of the importance of mental health and wellbeing in early childhood, the role of ECEC services in supporting its development, and how to promote mental health and wellbeing in the ECEC service community.

Creating a sense of community helps services give children a good start to life, protects children against mental health difficulties, and supports families and staff.

A sense of belonging and connectedness helps children feel happier and cope better with life’s challenges.

From birth, children’s positive relationships enable their development, mental health and wellbeing.

An inclusive service values diversity and helps everyone feel that they belong.
What is a sense of community?

A positive sense of community exists where everyone:

- feels a sense of belonging and inclusion within the ECEC service and with each other, and therefore feels valued for who they are
- engages in positive relationships that are responsive and caring
- promotes mental health and wellbeing within the community and works with each other within the service in meaningful ways, such as through decision making and participation.

ECEC services can create a positive sense of community by respecting and acknowledging diversity, and encouraging positive relationships between all individuals that are warm, safe and foster feelings of security.

Why is a sense of community important?

A positive sense of community within ECEC services promotes the wellbeing of children, families and staff. It may also protect children against developing mental health difficulties. A sense of community contributes to protecting against mental health difficulties in children by creating a positive climate, connectedness, inclusivity, positive relationships and collaboration in ECEC services.

Creating a sense of community in KidsMatter Early Childhood

Component 1 focuses on the following two areas which contribute to a positive sense of community:

A community that promotes mental health and wellbeing

Through KidsMatter, staff in ECEC services can develop a shared understanding of mental health and wellbeing in early childhood, its impact on learning and development, and the significant contribution ECEC services can make to improve children’s mental health. Through this understanding, the service community can begin to work together to promote the mental health and wellbeing of those who are part of the service, including children, families and educators.

Relationships, belonging and inclusion

Relationships influence mental health and wellbeing during childhood. Positive early relationships allow children to develop a sense of trust and security in others, to learn and grow as individuals, and gain skills to develop positive future relationships.

A sense of belonging establishes strong foundations for building meaningful relationships. ‘Belonging’ relates to feelings of being valued, accepted, respected, cared about by others and happy to be a part of the community.

Inclusion involves understanding and respecting the diversity of children, families and staff. An inclusive service has a positive impact on children’s mental health and wellbeing.
Understanding the importance of mental health and wellbeing in early childhood

The KidsMatter Early Childhood Framework provides a range of information about young children’s mental health and wellbeing, including the context in which it develops, the factors that support its development, and the factors that place children at higher risk of developing mental health difficulties. Participating in KidsMatter involves educators understanding and communicating the importance of positive mental health and wellbeing in early childhood, and its impact on learning and development.

As outlined in the previous section, early childhood mental health is about young children’s social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing. This includes children developing the capacity to experience, regulate and express emotions; to form close, secure, satisfying relationships; and to explore and discover the environment and the world around them. Child development can be viewed through a socio-ecological lens (see the socio-ecological model on page 9), where all children grow within a diverse range of contexts, including (but not limited to) their family, the ECEC service that they attend, and their broader community. The child is at the centre of this model and their mental health and wellbeing is influenced by all of these contexts. As an ECEC service is a place where children, families and ECEC educators of diverse backgrounds frequently come together, it is important for ECEC educators to have a good understanding of both the family and community contexts and how they interact in order to support children’s mental health and wellbeing.

Given that Australian children are attending ECEC services in increasing numbers, these services can play a significant role in promoting and improving children’s mental health and wellbeing. This can be done by providing high-quality care that focuses on children experiencing warm and trusting relationships, a sense of belonging and inclusion at the service, and good social and emotional opportunities. When ECEC educators understand and believe in the contribution that they can make to children’s development, it enhances the sense of community at the service and ultimately supports children’s mental health and wellbeing.

Relationships, belonging and inclusion

Relationships, belonging and inclusion are essential elements in creating a positive sense of community.

Relationships

Positive relationships are very important in creating a sense of community. There are significant long-term effects of having positive relationships with others early in life; one of the most significant being good mental health. Other benefits include a positive sense of self, a sound sense of morality, competence in emotional regulation (for example, self-control), and good social skills. Importantly, these early life experiences of positive relationships influence the ability to form and maintain new relationships. Characteristics of positive relationships that foster a sense of community include responsiveness, warmth, sensitivity, consistency, respect for diversity, security and stability.
From birth, children establish and experience relationships with the people in their lives. Staff in ECEC services play a key role in establishing and engaging in positive relationships with children, families and other colleagues. This includes modelling and demonstrating positive relationships for children in their service. Developing meaningful and trusting relationships with significant others is an important milestone of the early childhood years, and forms a foundation for the development of future healthy relationships. These relationships influence all aspects of a child’s development, including social, emotional, language and cognitive development.

Along with children’s relationships with their families, other types of relationships can influence children’s mental health and wellbeing. In the ECEC service setting, children experience and observe a ‘hub’ of relationships. These include the relationships between:

- children and families
- children and staff
- children
- families and staff
- families
- staff
- staff and other professionals.

These relationships are important because when children experience and observe mutually enjoyable, caring and respectful relationships with others, they learn to respond accordingly in their interactions with others, and they also feel accepted, valued, and a sense of belonging.

This ‘hub’ of relationships is particularly helpful for those children whose relationships with their families may be affected by difficult circumstances.

For these children, the formation of at least one positive relationship with another adult is a protective factor and can make a positive difference to their mental health and wellbeing. Early childhood professionals are uniquely placed to provide such a relationship, given the significant amount of time they spend with children in their care.

Continuity of meaningful relationships is also an important factor in enhancing a sense of community. A consistent relationship with at least one person satisfies our need for belonging and connectedness better than when people constantly come and go in our lives. ECEC services can foster continuous, meaningful relationships in many ways to support children’s development and wellbeing.
Belonging

When individuals have a sense of belonging within a community, this promotes feelings such as being valued, accepted, respected, cared about by others and happy to be a part of the community. A key factor in building a positive sense of community is for ECEC services to create opportunities for children and families to be involved and work together. This sense of belonging enriches experiences for all children, families and early childhood staff.

A sense of belonging is fundamental to good quality of life. People seek out meaningful, lasting relationships with others in order to meet their need to belong. Relationships with significant others need to consist of interactions that are enjoyable, frequent, and involve mutual and genuine regard for each other’s wellbeing. Connectedness brings people together and provides a sense of having a place in the world.

ECEC services are also part of the broader community and collaborate with a range of external services in their day-to-day practices. Links with services in the local community (including health, cultural, welfare and recreation) are important in creating a sense of community. Early childhood services and families need to be supported to engage with, and be involved in, these services.

Inclusion

An inclusive service promotes understanding and respect by welcoming children, families and staff from diverse backgrounds. An ECEC service that celebrates and honours the diversity of children, families and staff, demonstrates an acceptance of diversity and the value of inclusion.

Respecting diversity is important in creating a sense of belonging and inclusion for children, families and staff. The different backgrounds of the children, families and staff that make up the ECEC service enrich the service’s character and identity. When children feel that their family, community background, culture, and individual uniqueness is respected and valued by others, their sense of identity is affirmed and nurtured.

Cultural diversity

Children develop within the context of their culture. An appreciation of the cultures that make up the ECEC service enables families and staff to work well together, which impacts positively on the children who attend the service.

Culture is fundamental to children’s identities. It is important to remember that beliefs and values about child-rearing and parenting in Australia may differ between families, based on culture, experience, priorities and belief systems. Children and families from diverse backgrounds may feel disconnected, and children may be confused about their cultural identity, if the service does not value and embrace different cultures and languages, or consider their specific needs and interests.
ECEC services can foster a sense of belonging and connectedness for children and families by:

- being open and making an effort to learn about the various cultures that make up the service
- thinking about different ways to ensure all children and families are included within the service
- encouraging others to be mindful and respectful of all members of the community
- ensuring that procedures and policies in the service provide opportunities for celebrating and acknowledging diversity and individual differences
- ensuring programs and reflections consider belonging, connectedness, diversity and respect.

Engaging children and their families requires cultural sensitivity and competence in an ECEC service. An inclusive environment can be created when staff know, recognise and respect the diversity of children’s family experiences. When families and children feel they can participate in the service in an active and meaningful way, and have shared social experiences with other members of the service, a sense of inclusion is promoted.
Other types of diversity

Inclusion is more than just being culturally inclusive. Inclusive practice involves understanding, respecting, celebrating and honouring differences, and welcoming all children and families into the service. Diversity comes in many other forms, including:

- family arrangements and circumstances
- home environment and routines
- child-rearing practices
- linguistic
- demographic (for example, age, gender)
- religious
- thinking, play and learning styles
- abilities and disabilities
- lifestyle
- socio-economic circumstances
- educational background.

Diversity also relates to individual differences. All children are different and their own individuality and uniqueness needs to be respected and valued. Respecting and valuing diversity in the early childhood setting is particularly important, as it is during early childhood that children are becoming aware of differences among people, and begin to develop views about these differences.

Children model their behaviour on the behaviour of others (for example, staff, parents and carers). Services demonstrating an acceptance of others and embracing the diversity within their service have a positive influence on young children’s developing values, with possible broader implications for the community and society.

ECEC services can make a positive difference to children’s mental health and wellbeing by creating an environment that is inclusive and welcoming. By being proactive, staff can play a meaningful role in supporting and enhancing respect for diversity. Early childhood settings that are responsive to individual needs and respect diversity, benefit all children and contribute to building an inclusive environment.

How KidsMatter Early Childhood encourages a sense of community

To support services to work towards achieving their goals related to Component 1: Creating a sense of community, KidsMatter Early Childhood focuses on factors relating to the:

- people and community who make up the service
- physical environment
- policies and practices within the service.

Each ECEC service is an established community with its own values and culture, and many will have already worked to create a sense of belonging and inclusion. KidsMatter Early Childhood provides an opportunity to systematically look at these aspects of your service’s practices and environment to continue to build a positive sense of community.
Some examples of links between Component 1 and the NQS Quality Areas:

- 1.1.2: Each child's current knowledge, ideas, culture, abilities and interests are the foundation of the program.
- 3.1.3: Facilities are designed or adapted to ensure access and participation by every child in the service.
- 5.1.3: Each child is supported to feel secure, confident and included.
- 6.1: Respectful and supportive relationships with families are developed and maintained.

Component 1 relates specifically to four Quality Areas of the National Quality Standard: Educational program and practice; Relationships with children; Collaborative partnerships with families and communities; and Physical environment. Each individual child’s knowledge, ideas, culture, abilities and interests provide the foundation of their experiences within the service environment. Responsive and respectful relationships between educators and children support children to feel secure and confident, creating a sense of belonging and feeling of being included within the service community. When respectful and supportive relationships are also developed and maintained between families and educators, the sense of community and belonging at a service is enhanced even further. Finally, through considering aspects of the physical environment, opportunities for participation and access are created for all children at the ECEC service.

Reflecting on the sense of community within an ECEC service, children’s relationships, belonging and inclusion links KidsMatter Early Childhood with the underlying Principles that support the Learning Outcomes in the Early Years Learning Framework. For example, the Principles of secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships and respect for diversity enable children to develop a strong sense of their identity, and feel connected and able to contribute to their world. This is one way that educators can integrate the Early Years Learning Framework with Component 1 of KidsMatter Early Childhood.