Component 3: Working with parents and carers

Key messages of Component 3: Working with parents and carers

- Collaborative partnerships help in supporting children’s mental health and wellbeing.

- Good communication skills help build partnerships.

- ECEC services can provide opportunities for families to connect with one another. Having strong social support networks is a protective factor for good mental health and wellbeing.

- Many factors affect parenting and children’s mental health and wellbeing. Supporting parenting can enhance children’s social and emotional skills, thus supporting children’s mental health and wellbeing. Due to their high accessibility to families, ECEC services play an important role in supporting parenting.

- Early childhood educators do not need to have answers to all parenting queries but can offer suggestions on where to seek further help. The ‘Stop-Reflect-Act’ Framework can provide some guidance for responding to such queries.
Working with parents and carers
Parents and carers include any people who play a significant parenting role with a child. They may not necessarily be biologically related to the child or even live with the child all the time. A child may have one or several parents or carers. In addition to their biological parents, this could include grandparents, step-parents, foster parents, adoptive parents, aunts, uncles and any other person who fulfils a significant portion of parenting and caregiving for the child.

A sense of family is central to children’s mental health. When implementing any strategies that promote children’s mental health and wellbeing, including the family will lead to better outcomes. More and more families are accessing ECEC services for their children’s care and education; this puts early childhood educators in an ideal position for working in partnership with parents and carers to support children’s mental health and wellbeing.

Working with parents and carers in KidsMatter Early Childhood
Component 3 focuses on the following three areas which contribute to working with parents and carers:

Collaborative partnerships with families
This involves families and ECEC services working together with the shared goal of optimising the child’s development and mental health and wellbeing. Children, families and staff benefit from families and ECEC services working together in a collaborative partnership.

Connecting families
ECEC services are well placed to help connect families with one another by providing opportunities for them to develop support networks with other families. These connections can be a source of support for families, which can be a protective factor for the mental health of children and parents.

Supporting parenting
Parenting is a key factor in promoting children’s mental health. ECEC services are often seen by parents and carers as a source of support and information. There are many ways that ECEC services can work with families to support their parenting.

Collaborative partnerships with families
One of the best ways that early childhood educators can support parents and carers in their parenting role is to develop collaborative partnerships with them. In a partnership, each person is valued for their unique perspectives and contributions and these are shared through open communication. There is a sharing of power, where everyone is viewed as competent and able to participate together in the decision-making process. Partners work towards a shared goal and trust and respect each other.

‘Partnerships are based on the foundations of understanding each other’s expectations and attitudes, and build on the strength of each other’s knowledge. In genuine partnerships, families and early childhood educators:

- value each other’s knowledge of each child
- value each other’s contributions to, and roles, in each child’s life
- trust each other
- communicate freely and respectfully with each other
- share insights and perspectives about each child
- engage in shared decision making.’ (Principle 2 of the EYLF, p. 12)
Partnerships are considered an important element in Australian early childhood education and care. They are included as one of the Quality Areas in the National Quality Standard (‘Collaborative partnerships with families and communities’) and are also one of the five Principles of the Early Years Learning Framework (see box on the previous page). Connections between the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standard related to Component 3 are explored at the end of this section.

Working towards a partnership is a process that happens over time, and may take longer with some families than others. When parents, carers and educators feel comfortable with each other, they are able to work together for the child’s benefit. When ECEC services have collaborative partnerships with families, it can have a positive impact on children’s mental health and wellbeing. Good relationships between early childhood educators and parents and carers are a known protective factor for children’s mental health. Parents, carers and early childhood educators can use their increased knowledge and understanding to benefit the child in their learning and development.

Partnerships between parents, carers and early childhood educators also support the relationships between parents and their children. Research has shown that people with large support networks have enhanced health and wellbeing, and recover better when things get tough. Partnerships between parents, carers and early childhood educators act as an additional support network for parents and carers, increasing their own wellbeing and having a positive flow-on effect for their children. Parents and carers are also more likely to access external information and support when they have a positive relationship with their ECEC service.

How do collaborative partnerships develop?

Services can develop collaborative relationships with parents and carers by:

- reflecting on how they communicate with families
- getting to know families in regular informal discussions and at planned gatherings
- learning and sharing aspects of culture that are held by the families that attend their service
- undertaking professional learning activities that help to support the development of partnerships with parents and carers
- putting systems in place so that staff can have regular supervision and mentoring
- encouraging staff to engage in reflective practice and professional conversations about their everyday interactions with families.
Steps in building family partnerships

Families may choose to be involved at different levels in ECEC services. Partnerships can be formed even if families are not involved in the service on a day-to-day basis. In such instances, educators may need to find suitable ways to communicate with families, for example through email, newsletters or a communication journal that the child takes home every day. Finding out the method of communication that will best meet a family’s needs and the type of information that is important to them, can be a useful face-to-face conversation between educators and families. This helps ensure a shared understanding is reached and allows families to ask questions, seek clarification or make comments.

Partnerships can be created by:

- inviting families to participate in events at the service
- building a sense of community by helping families feel comfortable talking with staff and educators
- increasing family–educator collaboration by participating in planning children’s experiences at the service.

Parental involvement is a protective factor and can reduce mental health issues in children.

Communicating with families

Effective communication is important for developing collaborative partnerships with families.

One part of effective communication involves developing active listening skills, including attending, following and reflecting. These are described below.

Attending

When attending, the listener is there for the speaker and is considering the surroundings (for example, ensuring there is privacy and no distractions) and the speaker’s body language (for example, if their arms are crossed, they could be feeling defensive).

Some things to think about when attending include:

- letting the speaker know of a suitable time to have the conversation
- paying genuine attention to the speaker and focusing your thoughts on the particular conversation
- having appropriate eye contact and body language
- creating a comfortable space and considering individual needs (for example, needing a translator, offering a drink).

Following

This means allowing the speaker to lead the conversation. This is especially useful when a parent or carer has approached a staff member to have a conversation.

Some things to consider when following are:

- Using open questions to help the speaker continue talking and elaborate, or closed questions to derive short, specific answers. An open question such as ‘How’s Amelia’s toilet training going at home?’ may elicit more information than a closed question such as ‘Is Amelia going to the toilet at home?’ which may only receive a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response, and can imply a judgement of the response.
- Staying silent now and then to avoid asking too many questions and to convey understanding, patience and attention.
- Focusing and prioritising the conversation on the issue raised by the speaker to contain the conversation, so that the most important needs of the speaker are addressed. For example, ‘I can hear that there is a lot going on for you right now. Can you tell me what the most concerning/significant/urgent issue is for you right now so we can focus on that first?’
Reflecting

This involves responding in a way that shows that the listener has been paying attention and understands what the speaker has said or is experiencing.

Reflecting can be done in various ways:

- Using reflective responses or putting the feelings and content of what someone has said into your own words. For example, ‘When this happens it leaves you feeling … [reflects feelings experienced]’ or ‘Sounds like a really tough day … [communicates understanding of the situation].’

- Displaying empathy which shows that the listener understands and accepts the view of the speaker without judgement. For example, ‘I can’t cope with Alanah’s tantrums any longer. I don’t know what to do.’ Empathic response: ‘Sounds like things have been really tough at home lately.’

- Clarifying and checking with the speaker to show that the listener understands what the speaker has said. For example, ‘If I’ve got this right, you’re feeling really upset about how Thomas was behaving the other day?’

- Summarising what the speaker has said to show understanding of the conversation. For example, ‘Things are out of control at the moment, I’ve got so much to do I don’t know where to start.’ Empathic response: ‘You’re feeling overwhelmed with what you’ve got on your plate.’

Good communication skills are vital to developing relationships with families. Families who feel respected, listened to and understood are more likely to share information about their child and circumstances and become involved in the ECEC service. This is not only beneficial for families but for ECEC services as well: the more that is known about children and families, the more ECEC services can support them, leading to better outcomes for children.

Connecting families

Why connecting families is important

Parenting and parent–child relationships are influenced by the types and availability of support around them. Support can be formal, such as playgroups or parenting programs, or informal, such as social networks or extended family. Families often meet each other through their children, for instance other families also involved with an ECEC service.

When building social support, it helps to participate in a wide range of social relationships. This can assist people to feel a sense of community and identify with their social roles (such as being a parent or carer). For example, a social network for parents at an ECEC service may invite a new parent along to a social function, such as a barbecue, to introduce the parent to other people in the community and help them feel comfortable.

Unfortunately, a significant number of parents and carers feel a lack of social support from friends and family outside their home. The group most likely to lack social support are those who are younger, single or born overseas. A lack of social support and community connectedness can lead to increased stress and may negatively affect mental health and wellbeing. However, if parents and carers feel supported, they can cope better with stress. An increase in social connections can help strengthen a person’s sense of identity, purpose, self-worth and positive feelings. When families feel connected and supported, they can improve their wellbeing and parenting skill. These benefits have positive flow-on effects to children and their mental health and wellbeing.
When people feel supported, they feel more capable of managing life’s stresses and demands. When parents and carers manage stressful situations and do not feel overwhelmed by them, they may be better able to form supportive and warm child–parent connections. This has a positive impact on children’s mental health and wellbeing. Social support also has positive effects on parenting, family wellbeing, and children’s resilience in families that have a child with a serious emotional problem.

For parents and carers who experience stress and mental health difficulties, social support can reduce the impact of these on their ability to engage in parenting. This, in turn, will have a positive influence on the mental health and wellbeing of their children.

**What services can do to help connect families**

Given the significant number of children attending ECEC services, the service can act as a community hub, and is a highly accessible place to provide social support and connection between families. The opportunity to become involved in a service and meet and network with other parents and carers can be invaluable to families.

There are several ways that services can provide opportunities to connect families to each other. These include:

- providing a space at drop-off and/or pick-up times where parents and carers can gather and engage in casual conversations
- encouraging parent participation at the service, such as volunteering, so families can socialise and get to know each other
- creating an email list of all families of children and sending daily or weekly updates of what is happening at the service to help parents and carers get to know one another in a ‘safe’ environment and enable them to have some shared experiences
- organising social activities that allow all parents and carers a chance to meet, share their experiences and develop friendships
- pairing a parent or carer who has been at the service for a while with a new parent or carer to act as a mentor or buddy who can help with orientating the new parent to the service.
Supporting parenting

The impact of parenting styles on children’s mental health

The family and positive parenting styles are central to children’s mental health and wellbeing. Supportive and warm parent–child connections and positive parenting practices have a positive influence on children’s development and mental health. This is especially the case when families are faced with stressful situations. A home environment that values family relationships, security and stability, communication and support for each other also has a positive impact on children’s development and mental health.

Research shows that there are a number of parenting-related issues that can negatively affect children’s mental health, such as:
- an over-controlling parenting style
- not supervising children sufficiently
- a lack of warmth and affection in parent–child relationships
- not being involved in children’s lives.

Children benefit from positive parenting styles when they have warm and secure relationships with their parents and carers. Such relationships give children examples of how to form similar relationships with their peers and other adults. When children feel secure and have strong, positive connections with their parents and carers, they can then turn their attention to other areas of their life, such as forming social connections and participating in various experiences.

Warm, secure relationships between parents and carers and children can also lead to:
- protection from a range of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and behavioural difficulties
- positive influences on children’s academic and social abilities and behaviour in early schooling
- positive influences on children’s adjustment and school achievement in later school years.
Why parents may have certain parenting styles

There are many factors that can influence the way parents and carers raise their children.

Some of these include:

- the way parents and carers themselves were parented
- personality characteristics of parents and carers and their children
- perceptions of parents and carers about their children’s behaviour (for example, why they behave the way they do)
- parents’ and carers’ expectations of their children and knowledge of child development
- parental physical or mental illness, disability or stress
- child illness or disability
- cultural influences
- societal expectations and government regulations
- contextual factors, such as financial or social pressures.

How services can be involved in supporting parenting

There is strong evidence to show that supporting families with their parenting is one of the most effective ways of improving the mental health and wellbeing of children. ECEC services are well placed to support families with their parenting and help them access parenting information. Parents and carers may feel more comfortable asking early childhood educators for information rather than health care providers. Early childhood educators may find it easier to support parents and carers if they have developed positive relationships with them. When families and educators work together they are more able to find solutions and best meet the needs of children.

Educators can provide support parenting to families in different ways. These include:

- encouraging and helping parents and carers to form positive relationships with their children
- modelling caring and supportive ways of interacting with children
- providing children with consistent expectations and positive behaviour guidance
- supporting family involvement in children’s experiences at the service
- creating opportunities for parents to connect with other families attending the ECEC service
- providing parents and carers with access to high-quality parenting resources
- answering questions about parenting practices and child development and, when necessary, seeking information from more experienced educators.

ECEC services can also support families in their parenting role by facilitating access to parenting programs. By participating in parenting programs, parents and carers can learn more about positive parenting practices. These practices can enhance children’s social and emotional wellbeing, through developing important skills such as managing strong feelings and supporting positive behaviour. Many programs also encourage parents and carers to become more involved in their children’s education. All of these factors can lead to improvements in children’s mental health and wellbeing.
Individual staff may feel that they do not have the knowledge, expertise or availability to answer some of the questions families may have about child development and parenting. It can be challenging to feel like you have to have all the answers for families. Being aware of evidence-based parenting resources that are available, such as books, websites, tip sheets or locally run programs, so that you can pass on the information, can be useful for educators. You can also refer parents and carers to other professionals who have specialist training in parenting issues or child behaviour guidance strategies (for example, psychologists, social workers or maternal child health nurses). In this way, instead of having to provide all the answers yourself, you can offer parents guidance about where they can seek further help.

The next section provides a framework that staff may find helpful when talking with families who may have a question or need support that relates to child development or parenting.

A framework for responding to questions

Similar to the concepts in the ‘Stop-Think-Do’ Program by Petersen and Adderly (2002), this ‘Stop-Reflect-Act’ framework may be a useful way to help staff reflect on responding to questions from parents and carers about parenting practices and/or child development and learning.

- The framework requires you to **stop** before reacting to the situation, **reflect** and think about the situation and how you can move forward, and **act** (after consultation with colleagues, if needed). It is a multi-directional and dynamic process (moving back and forth). For example, while you are taking action, you may need to reflect again on the situation, or even stop to pause and listen. You can move back and forth between **stop** and **reflect**; **reflect** and **act**.

- You may not need to deal with queries on your own and it is okay not to have all the answers. All questions from parents and carers require a response and follow up but you do not have to come to a complete solution straight away. A response can also include listening to the parent or carer and acknowledging what he or she has said.

- You may also need to think about what your service’s policies and procedures are around communicating with parents and carers.
Pause and listen to the parent or carer before responding to their question. No immediate action is taken.

- Stop what you are doing and focus on the current situation.
- Be mindful that there is a question to be dealt with and that the Stop-Reflect-Act framework can assist you.

Self-reflection: Think how you could go forward with the question. Consider:

- Timing—is this an appropriate time to answer the question? How immediate is the question? This is a good time to also reflect on the priorities. For example, if it is drop-off or pick-up time and you need to attend to other duties, you may need to consider what to say to the parent or carer immediately and when you can realistically deal with a query.
- Environment/atmosphere—is this a good place for answering the question?
- Background of the parent or carer (for example, culture, personal values and beliefs, social context, what they could be feeling).
- Do I need to find out more from the parent or carer? For example, when did this happen, how frequently, how does it impact on the family?
- Can I answer the question without consultation based on my skills, knowledge and experience?
- Do I need to consult with a colleague before dealing with this query? What are my centre’s policies about dealing with queries?
- How am I feeling right now about what the parent or carer has said? (For example, interested, upset, confused, angry or calm.)
- What could the parent or carer be feeling? (This may help you manage your own reaction/feelings to what the parent or carer has said to you.)

Remember: You do not have to pause for a long period of time. Sometimes reflecting is done almost instantaneously. However, it is helpful to bring this stage to our awareness so that we know we are reflecting on something and what our thoughts are.

Respond to the question by acknowledging what the parent or carer has said. Start with an opening statement(s) such as:

- ‘I’m glad that you have come to talk with me.’
- ‘That is a really good question. Let’s find out together.’
- ‘That is a really important question/concern. I want to be able to give you the time to really talk about this properly. Let’s make a time to chat.’

Then, start addressing the query:

- Using your own skills, knowledge and experience (however, it is always good practice to check with a colleague so that you are not dealing with any situation on your own).
## Target Areas of Component 3: Working with parents and carers

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TARGET AREAS</th>
<th>GOALS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>TARGET AREA 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaborative partnerships with families</td>
<td>■ There is a culture of partnership between educators and parents and carers.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>■ Educators develop their skills, confidence and commitment to building partnerships with parents and carers.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>■ The service invites partnership with parents and carers, giving consideration to the diversity and culture of the families in their service.</td>
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<td><strong>TARGET AREA 2</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Connecting families</td>
<td>■ Educators actively encourage families to become involved in the service and address barriers to involvement.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>■ The service provides opportunities for families to meet each other and develop support networks.</td>
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<td><strong>TARGET AREA 3</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Support for parenting</td>
<td>■ Educators further develop their knowledge about child development and learning and parenting practices (in the context of families’ cultural backgrounds) and continue to develop the skills and confidence to share this knowledge appropriately with parents and carers.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>■ Services work with and support parents and carers, where appropriate, to access high-quality resources that support parenting (for example, information about child development and learning, parenting practices, professional and community services).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>■ Service policies and practices are in place to support educators and families in working together to facilitate families’ access to parenting resources.</td>
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Some examples of links between Component 3 and the NQS Quality Areas:

- 1.1.4: The documentation about each child’s program and progress is available to families.
- 6.1: Respectful, supportive relationships with families are developed and maintained.
- 6.1: Families are supported in their parenting role and their values and beliefs about child rearing are respected.

Component 3 of the KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative relates specifically to two Quality Areas of the National Quality Standard: Educational program and practice and Collaborative partnerships with families and communities. Educators can assist families to feel more informed and more involved in their child’s day-to-day routines by providing information about their child’s experiences at the ECEC service. Communicating this information on a regular basis also builds a culture of partnership between families and educators to support children’s development and wellbeing. Partnerships between families and educators are a protective factor for children’s mental health because each party feels more comfortable about approaching the other for information and support. For an educator this partnership can facilitate a better understanding of a family’s parenting styles, values and beliefs. For families it can promote feeling respected and welcomed by an ECEC service.

Reflecting on collaborative partnerships with families, connecting families and supporting parenting links KidsMatter Early Childhood with the underlying Principles that support the Learning Outcomes in the Early Years Learning Framework. For example, the Principle of partnerships acknowledges the role of families, educators and other professionals in supporting children’s wellbeing. When educators have time and support to develop their skills and confidence in building partnerships with families, families feel more supported in their parenting role, able to communicate important information, and involved in their children’s care. This is one way that educators can integrate the Early Years Learning Framework with Component 3 of KidsMatter Early Childhood.