



**Professional learning: Helping children who are
experiencing mental health difficulties**

Topic 3: Discussing concerns with families

Leadership team guide



Acknowledgement:

KidsMatter Australian Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative has been developed in collaboration with *beyondblue*, the Australian Psychological Society and Early Childhood Australia, with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health and *beyondblue*.

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While the resources are available freely for these purposes, to realise the full potential of KidsMatter Early Childhood, it is recommended that the resources be used with the appropriate training and support under the KidsMatter Initiative.

Discussing concerns with families

What will participants learn from this topic?

When you have completed this topic, participants will:

- have an understanding of how the relationship between educators and families can support discussions about a child's mental health and wellbeing
- be introduced to the Discussing Concerns Flowchart to support educators to talk through a concern with a family
- gain an understanding of how to apply the Flowchart in order to generate strategies that support children with mental health difficulties
- have identified some of the barriers that might prevent families from seeking help with concerns they have about their child
- have considered strategies to overcome or reduce the impact of some of these barriers.

Preparation for this session

Resources

- Component 4, Topic 3: Professional learning *Participant Workbook*
- Video 3.1: Discussing concerns with families
- Video 3.2: Help-seeking in families

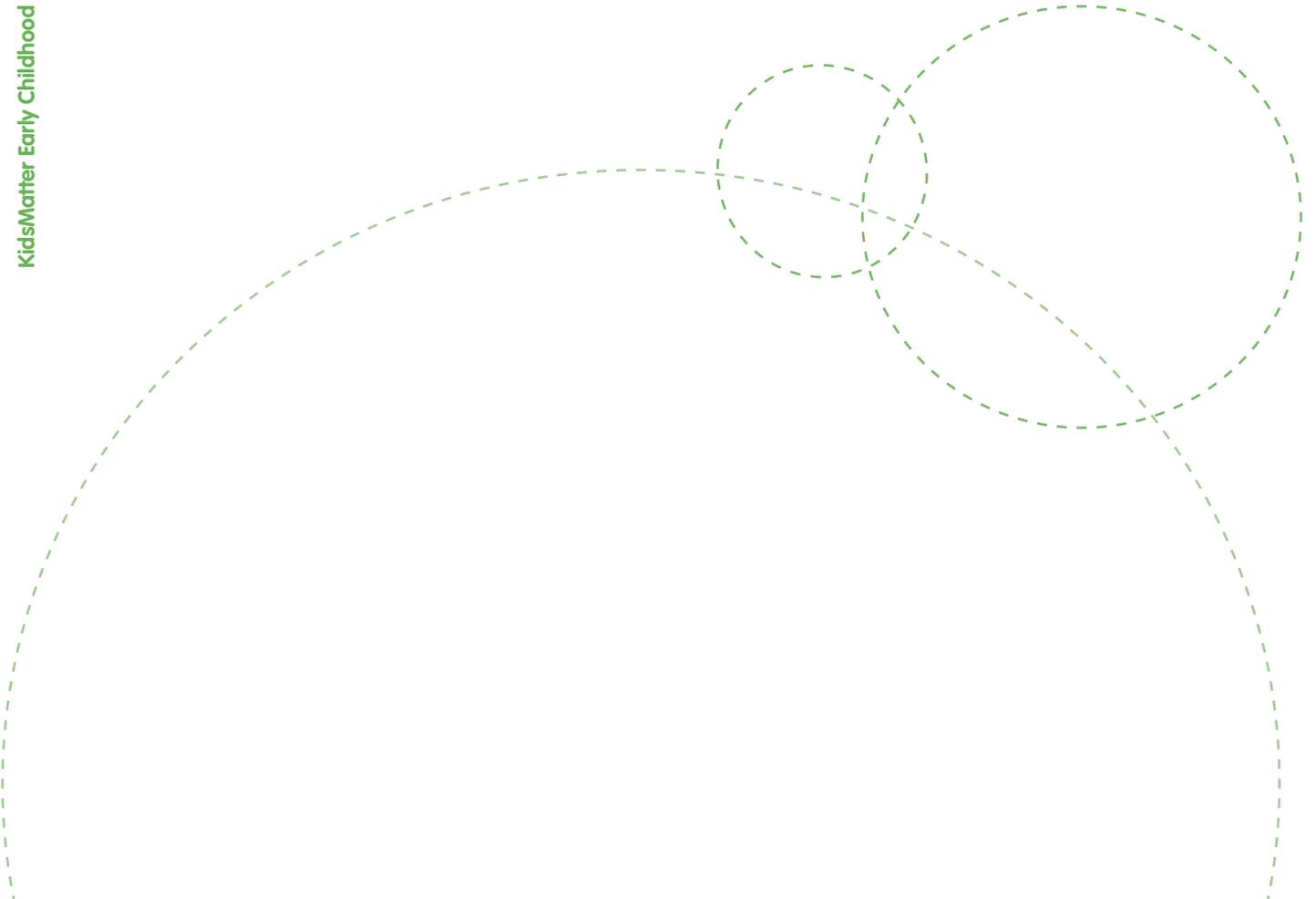
Suggestions for how to run this topic

1 Introduce the topic to the group

This topic focuses on discussions between families and educators about their concerns for a child's mental health and wellbeing, and barriers to families seeking help.

Content includes:

- a **video** that looks at conversations between educators and families where there are concerns about a child's mental health and wellbeing
- a **discussion** about how educators can engage parents or other family members in a discussion about their concerns
- an **activity** to practise applying the Discussing Concerns Flowchart for discussing concerns
- a **video** about barriers to family help-seeking
- a **discussion** about how to promote help-seeking for families within their service.



2 Video 3.1: Discussing concerns with families



The video covers:

- how the relationship between educators and families supports discussions about concerns for a child's mental health and wellbeing
- how to approach and engage families in conversations when educators have concerns about a child.

Tips for watching this video

- There is space for participants to make notes about this video on page 2 of their *Participant Workbook*.

3 Discussion: Engaging families in a discussion about your concerns



The aim of this discussion is for participants to explore how to build relationships with families that support communication about their concerns for a child, and how to effectively engage families in this discussion.

Instructions

Lead a discussion around the following questions:

- What can you do to establish a collaborative relationship with families so that they are open to a discussion about your concerns for their child?
- When would it be important to initiate a discussion with a family about your concern/s?
- When sharing your concerns with families, is there anything you could do to reduce the likelihood of a parent or family member experiencing distress?
- How would you know whether a discussion about your concerns with a family was effective and helpful?

4 Activity: Practise using the Discussing Concerns Flowchart



The aim of this activity is for participants to practise applying the Discussing Concerns Flowchart to prepare for discussions initiated by themselves as educators, and those initiated by a parent or carer.

Tips for this discussion

- There is space for participants to write notes on pages 3–4 of their *Participant Workbook*.
- Help participants to reflect on the skills they currently use to build strong, collaborative relationships with families.
- Invite participants to reflect on how they might use information gathered from the BETLS Tool (see 'Using observation to inform practice' Component 4, Topic 2) to decide when a discussion with a parent or family member might be helpful.
- Reassure participants that it's not always possible to avoid difficult emotions, or distress, when discussing concerns with families. A review of communication and listening skills can help when planning for how to deal with a possibly upset parent or family member.

Instructions

1. Break participants into small groups (three to four people).
2. Invite participants to discuss and share their ideas about each of the three presenting scenarios.
 - » Ask participants to apply the Discussing Concerns Flowchart to each scenario.
 - » Advise participants to review the table that follows the Flowchart (in their *Participant Workbook* on page 5), and ask them to consider the questions and relevant issues for each segment of the Flowchart.
 - » In working through the Flowchart, encourage participants to draw on their own past experiences and knowledge of working alongside families.

3. Bring everyone back together in a large group to share their thoughts about each scenario. Invite participants to consider how the Discussing Concerns Flowchart and table assisted them in thinking about how they would handle difficult conversations about a child's mental health and wellbeing.

Tips for this activity

- There is space for participants to write notes on pages 9–11 of their *Participant Workbook*.
- Check that participants have considered all the issues in the table that follows the Discussing Concerns Flowchart (in their *Participant Workbook* on pages 5–8).

5 Video 3.2: Help-seeking in families



The video covers:

- some of the barriers to families seeking help around their child's mental health and wellbeing
- what educators can do to encourage families to ask for help and share their concerns about their child's mental health and wellbeing.

Tips for watching this video

- There is space for participants to make notes about this video in their *Participant Workbook* on page 12.

6 Discussion: Barriers to family help-seeking



The aim of this discussion is for participants to be aware of, and attentive to, some of the factors that might discourage families within their service from asking for help about concerns they have for their child. It is also an opportunity for thinking about how some of these hurdles can be addressed.

Instructions

Lead a discussion around the following questions:

- Why don't families seek help from early childhood services when they have concerns about their child's mental health and wellbeing?
- From the family's perspective, what are the obstacles to seeking your assistance? Consider factors within your service, within individual families that you work with and broader social and cultural factors.
- What are some of the ways you could address these issues (in your own practice and at the service level)?

Tips for this discussion

- There is space for participants to write notes on page 13 of their *Participant Workbook*.
- Encourage participants to think about how family help-seeking supports early detection and prevention of mental health difficulties and access to appropriate services and supports.
- When considering barriers to help-seeking, consider:
 - » the early childhood service (e.g. availability of educators, parent-educator relationship, resourcing and educator skill level)
 - » the family (e.g. socioeconomic status, negative attitudes about the availability and usefulness of support)
 - » social and cultural factors (e.g. stigma attached to identifying difficulties and seeking help, cultural perceptions about mental health, language barriers).
- Encourage participants to identify strategies to reduce barriers identified in the previous discussion question. Consider:
 - » the early childhood service (e.g. educator professional development, policies at the service level, service culture, vision and/or mission statement)
 - » the family (e.g. promoting the value of help-seeking to families, strengthening relationships with families, challenging attitudes about help-seeking)
 - » social and cultural factors (e.g. cultural understanding and competence).

7 Activity: Moving forward



The aim of this activity is to have participants set some short- and long-term goals for promoting family help-seeking at their early childhood service.

Instructions

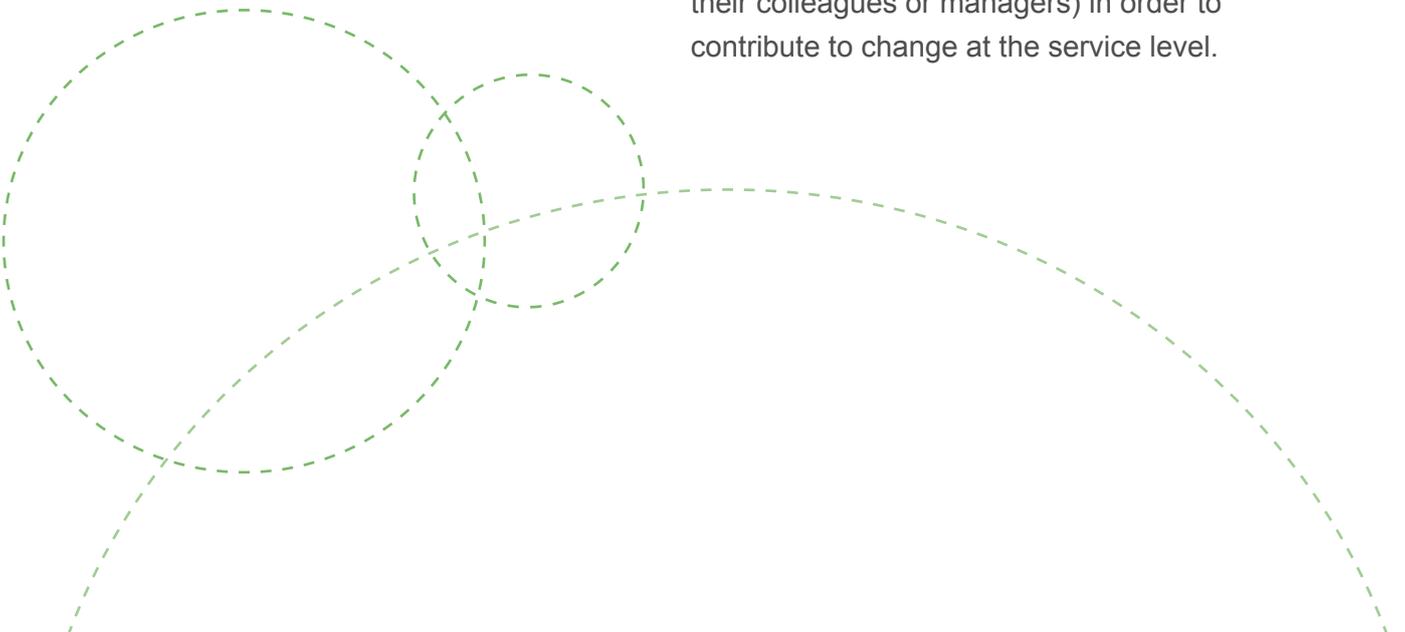
In the previous discussion, participants identified a number of obstacles that might discourage families from seeking help about their child's mental health.

1. Ask participants to choose one of the obstacles, and to answer the following questions individually:
 - » What is one thing that I could do to encourage families within my service to share with me, any concern they might have about their child's wellbeing over the next week?

2. Ask participants to answer the following questions as a large group or in smaller groups, if there are a lot of people:
 - » What is one thing that I could do to encourage families within my service to share with me, any concern they might have about their child's wellbeing over the next 12 months?
2. Ask participants to answer the following questions as a large group or in smaller groups, if there are a lot of people:
 - » What is one thing that we could do as a service to encourage families to share any concern they might have about their child's wellbeing over the next week?
 - » What is one thing that we could do as a service to encourage families to share any concern they might have about their child's wellbeing over the next 12 months?

Tips for this activity

- There is a worksheet for this activity in the *Participant Workbook* on page 14.
- Emphasise to participants that promoting family help-seeking is a gradual process that requires encouragement over time. With this in mind, strategies for supporting families to ask for help can develop and change in the longer-term.
- Ask participants to consider what support or resources they might need (e.g. from their colleagues or managers) in order to contribute to change at the service level.



8 Reflective questions



Reflecting on new content is a good way to wrap up each topic and summarise what has been covered. The following questions can support reflection, although you may wish to add your own questions to suit your team. Reflective questions can be considered during the topic, at the end of the topic or at a separate time. Reflective questions can be completed individually, in pairs or as a group.

- What are some of my fears or worries about talking to a parent or carer regarding concerns I have about their child?
- How can I manage some of these worries before I engage in a discussion with the family?
- What supports are available to me (both within and external to the service) to help me manage these conversations, and how could I draw on these supports?
- Are there service guidelines around documentation and recording of parent discussions?
- What resources and professional development opportunities are available to improve my skills in handling difficult conversations with families?

Tips for this activity

- Reflective questions can be found in the *Participant Workbook* on pages 15–16
- Help participants to identify some of their fears by asking ‘What would you be most worried about happening?’, ‘What would be the worst thing that could happen when you talk to a parent about your concerns?’ You might also like to ask participants to think about how these worries might affect how they interact with parents and family members.
- Encourage participants to consider the strategies they use to manage difficult emotions in other situations in their lives (e.g. talking to a friend or colleague, taking some deep breaths, remind self that they are able to get through this tough situation).
- Remind participants about the free KidsMatter elearning: *Connecting with families: Conversations that make a difference*: <https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/early-childhood/resources-support-childrens-mental-health/connecting-families-elearning>



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