Connections with the National Quality Framework

Developing children’s social and emotional skills
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.

Disclaimer:

While every care has been taken in preparing this publication, Beyond Blue Ltd, The Australian Psychological Society Limited, Early Childhood Australia Inc. and the Commonwealth of Australia do not, to the extent permitted by law, accept any liability for any injury, loss or damage suffered by any person arising from the use of, or reliance upon, the content of this publication.

Important Notice:

KidsMatter Australian Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative and any other KidsMatter mental health initiatives are not to be confused with other businesses, programs or services which may also use the name ‘Kidsmatter’.

Copyright

© Commonwealth of Australia 2014

This work is copyright. Provided acknowledgment is made to the sources, early childhood education and care services are permitted to copy material freely for communication with teachers, staff, parents, carers or community members. You may reproduce the whole or part of this work in unaltered form for your own personal use or, if you are part of an organisation, for internal use within your organisation, but only if you or your organisation do not use the reproduction for any commercial purpose and retain this copyright notice and all disclaimer notices as part of that reproduction. Apart from rights to use as permitted by the Copyright Act 1968 or allowed by this copyright notice, all other rights are reserved and you are not allowed to reproduce the whole or any part of this work in any way (electronic or otherwise) without first being given the specific written permission from the Commonwealth to do so. Requests and inquiries concerning reproduction and rights are to be sent to the Communications Branch, Department of Health, GPO Box 9848, Canberra ACT 2601, or via e-mail to copyright@health.gov.au.

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.
Contents

2 Social and Emotional skills and mental health
3 About KidsMatter Early Childhood
3 Connections between national initiatives
3 Using this resource

4 Supporting the National Quality Agenda
4 KidsMatter Early Childhood, the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standard
6 Social and emotional skills: similar but different
7 Understanding children’s development
8 Essential aspects of mental health and wellbeing

10 Planning for social and emotional development
11 Fostering inclusion and security
13 Children and play
16 Friendships and pro-social behaviours

20 Wellbeing
20 Supporting social and emotional learning
23 Teaching social and emotional skills

26 Summary: Educators’ roles in developing social and emotional skills and wellbeing
27 Read more
Early childhood is a unique period when the structure of the rapidly growing brain is organised through a child’s early care experiences. This development includes the social and emotional skills essential for mental health and life success.

For young children mental health is about social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing. When experiencing good mental health they can learn, using positive interactions with their families and others, to:

- understand, regulate and express emotion
- form close, secure, satisfying relationships
- explore and discover the environment and the world around them.

For young children mental health is about social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing.
About KidsMatter Early Childhood

KidsMatter Early Childhood is a continuous-improvement framework that supports early childhood education and care (ECEC) services to promote children’s mental health and wellbeing, through:

- professional development and implementation support that informs planning and daily practice
- assisting educators to recognise when children may be at risk of experiencing mental health difficulties
- creating greater understanding of pathways to accessing professional intervention for children showing early signs of difficulties.

The initiative acknowledges the critical role that educator’s play in enhancing factors that promote children’s mental health and wellbeing.

Connections between national initiatives

Relationships are central to both Belonging Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the National Quality Standard (NQS). Both give priority to children’s social and emotional health and wellbeing.

Working with the KidsMatter Early Childhood Framework will support the achievement of the goals of these initiatives.

Using this resource

This is the second in a series of KidsMatter Early Childhood resources that highlight connections between the KidsMatter Framework, NQS and EYLF. This resource will focus on connections with Component 2: Developing children’s social and emotional skills.

Supporting the National Quality Agenda

KidsMatter Early Childhood, the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standard

When educators have a deep understanding of children’s social and emotional development, they are able to scaffold experiences that assist children in becoming confident learners.

Component 2: Developing children’s social and emotional skills places particular emphasis on:

- play as a vehicle for young children’s emotional and social learning
- helping children to manage their emotions
- supporting children in developing the capacity for positive separations
- the skills involved in getting along, friendships and empathy
- fostering curiosity and confidence
- developing intrinsic motivation
- learning to manage life’s ups and downs.
The goals of KidsMatter Early Childhood Component 2: Developing children’s social and emotional skills align with those of the NQS and EYLF.

**Quality Areas**

Component 2 connects to three Quality Areas of the NQS:

- **Quality Area 2**: ‘Children’s health and safety’
- **Quality Area 3**: ‘Physical environment’
- **Quality Area 5**: ‘Relationships with children’

And articulates conditions that enable social and emotional learning and can therefore guide goals for:

- **Quality Area 1**: ‘Educational program and practice’
- **Quality Area 4**: ‘Staffing arrangements’

**Principles**

It complements EYLF Principles:

- Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
- Ongoing learning and reflective practice

**Practices**

And EYLF Practices:

- Responsiveness to children
- Intentional teaching

**Learning Outcomes**

It is possible to see the contribution of social and emotional development in each of the EYLF Learning Outcomes:

- **Learning Outcome 1**: ‘Children have a strong sense of identity’
- **Learning Outcome 2**: ‘Children are connected with and contribute to their world’
- **Learning Outcome 5**: ‘Children are effective communicators’
Social and emotional skills: similar but different

We all have emotions and we all need to learn to manage them. Then we can make the most of our own lives and develop respectful and fulfilling relationships with others.

Emotional skills are about learning to manage and express feelings appropriately.

Social skills are about relating to others. They involve learning to be a friend, to negotiate personal needs and deal with difficulties, to be assertive without being aggressive and to relate effectively with adults and peers.

ECEC services support social and emotional development and mental health when educators:

- build positive relationships with children and families
- design and organise the environment
- plan a daily schedule and implement daily routines
- establish the ‘rules’ in collaboration with children and families
- provide experiences that promote children’s engagement
- individualise experiences to meet the needs of each child
- provide encouragement and precise feedback to children.

Reflection

Using the dot points above, reflect on and list the ways you support children’s social and emotional learning.

Think about how and why you might provide differently for different children.
Understanding children’s development

Knowing children well is crucial for robust, positive relationships. Knowing about development and learning helps educators to be aware of the evidence of children’s progress, to celebrate achievements and to support further learning.

Child development and developmental milestones have guided practice for specific age groups in children’s services for many years. Current thinking in the sector sees educators as knowing about child development, but viewing each child in a more holistic and individual way.

Knowledge of expected patterns of children’s development for a particular age range is a valuable tool for families and educators to notice how children are progressing. However, developmental milestones do not provide the whole picture of the child, because they do not:

- account for individual differences in the rates and patterns of development
- inform us about the context the child is growing up in, or their prior experiences.

A child’s home context and culture have a significant impact on what and how they learn. Recognising this enables educators to respect different ways of learning and to view the child as a unique learner across interrelated developmental domains.

Reflection

What ‘markers’ do you use in your service to observe and measure children’s social and emotional progress over time?

How do you know if additional advice or intervention may be required?
Essential aspects of mental health and wellbeing

A sense of self

KidsMatter Early Childhood recognises that a strong and positive sense of self is an essential prerequisite to children developing social and emotional skills.

A child’s first few years of life are crucial in developing their sense of self and identity; they learn about themselves as being separate from—yet simultaneously connected with others. This sense of identity defines them and makes them unique. A strong sense of who you are and who your people are develops through relationships and interactions within your community.

It is important for children to see themselves as powerful, valued and constructive contributors to their community. Children’s sense of self influences their capabilities across all areas of development. While it changes throughout life, it is in the early years that the foundations of self-esteem or self-worth, form and establish.

Learning Outcome 1: ‘Children have a strong sense of identity’ highlights the significance of identity in relation to children’s strong futures and general wellbeing.

Being a member of a group in an early childhood care and education service itself becomes part of children’s sense of identity. The roles that they play—observer, friend, co-constructor, leader, the messages they get from educators and other children, the contributions they make to the functioning of the group: these all become part of how they see themselves.

Learning Outcome 2: ‘Children are connected with and contribute to their world’ acknowledges how the experience of participating in communities contributes to children’s sense of self and agency. This Learning Outcome has to do with children learning how to:

- be members of a community
- get along with other people
- read others’ feelings and feel empathy
- resolve conflicts
- understand their own and others’ rights and responsibilities.

The experience of being in an ECEC service community supports children as they learn skills and understanding that will help them to be active participants in their communities now, and constructive citizens into the future.

‘It’s good to be me’ is another KidsMatter Early Childhood resource that will assist in supporting young children’s developing sense of self.

Reflection

How do we ensure children are proud of their culture and family?

How do we let families and children know about children’s achievements—small and large?

Do we allow children to make mistakes and feel that it is okay?
Attachment and exploration

A secure attachment provides the ‘home base’ from which a child begins to explore new environments. As children grow and change, these attachment relationships, developed in infancy, continue to be significant. A secure attachment enables children to feel confident to explore new environments and to feel safe and reassured that someone will be there for them when they feel scared or uncertain.

Over time, a young child is able to internalise that feeling of security. They develop an ability to manage worries and fears for themselves when the adults who make up that ‘secure base’ cannot always be immediately available.

On orientation visits, one service encourages families to remain close by and seated in a familiar place so their child can ‘wander off’ and return as often as they need to. This enables the explorer to return to seek reassurance and comfort as they need to and build confidence over time. Gradually, the educator also takes on the role of being a ‘secure base’. This is especially significant for mobile infants and toddlers as they balance their needs for separateness and connection.
Planning for social and emotional development

‘In the early childhood setting, curriculum means “all the interactions, experiences, activities, routines and events, planned and unplanned, that occur in an environment designed to foster children’s learning and development”.’

(EYLF, p. 9, adapted from Te Whariki)

Because ‘curriculum’ is all-encompassing in early childhood, educators need to think about, plan for, implement and reflect on every part of the child’s experience in their setting. This includes planning for and acting intentionally in relation to children’s social and emotional development.

Component 2 of the KidsMatter Early Childhood Framework, Developing children’s social and emotional skills aligns easily with the goals and outcomes of the EYLF.

Component 2 is connected to Quality Area 1: ‘Educational program and practice’, with particular emphasis on:

- Element 1.1.1: ‘Curriculum decision-making contributes to each child’s learning and development outcomes in relation to their identity, connection with community, wellbeing, confidence as learners and effectiveness as communicators.’
- Element 1.1.5: ‘Every child is supported to participate in the program.’
- Element 1.1.6: ‘Each child’s agency is promoted, enabling them to make choices and decisions and to influence events and their world’.

Quality Area 5: Relationships with Children also emphasises social and emotional learning:

- Element 5.1.1: ‘Interactions with each child are warm and responsive and build trusting relationships.’
- Element 5.1.3: ‘Each child is supported to feel secure, confident and included.’
- Element 5.2.1: ‘Each child is supported to work with, learn from and help others through collaborative learning opportunities.’
- Element 5.2.2: ‘Each child is supported to manage their own behaviour, respond appropriately to the behaviour of others and communicate effectively to resolve conflicts.’
Fostering inclusion and security

Educators have an obligation to provide a curriculum that is inclusive—one that applies to all children, that builds on individual strengths and caters for individual needs; a program that promotes full participation by everyone. In an inclusive service, diversity and difference are valued and efforts are made to ensure that everyone feels that they belong.

For example, arrival time at an ECEC service is a significant occasion and one when educators need to be available to children and cater to their individual needs.

Arrival time

One service has educators arriving earlier than the children to set up the environment in ways that facilitates arrivals.

Another service, where children all arrive at the same time, opens the doors half an hour earlier and encourages families to come in with their children and stay to join in with their child until the official licensing time of 9.00 am.

In another service, staff arrive as some of the children turn up. To enable educators to be ‘available to children and families’, the playrooms have many resources visible on open shelving, consumables like paint and glue are made the day before and cleaners place chairs around the tables after cleaning.

Another service ensures that the non-teaching director is on hand at this time to support children, educators and families.

Educators in one service noticed that a two-year-old boy would separate happily with his favourite matchbox toy. This prompted the service to review its ‘toys from home policy.’ A lively debate took place around—what was different about this toy to a favourite ‘blanky’ or teddy? ‘But they will get lost, or taken home by someone else’ was a concern expressed by both parents and educators. All of these barriers were broken down when the needs of the child were placed first.

These examples recognise the significance for children of comfort objects and the role that educators play in facilitating positive separations that meet children’s mental health needs.

Reflection

How do you support successful separations for children and families?

What is your service policy on toys from home? Whose needs does this policy meet? Do you have different policies for other comfort items, such as soft toys? Why?
Connections with home

Educators found that children settled more readily when they had photos of their families placed so they could access them at any time. Older babies and toddlers are often seen talking to each other and pointing to each other’s family. ‘My mummy—no my mummy—Mummy work’. This gives educators opportunities to engage in conversations and empathise with children: ‘Yes, mummy’s at work but she will be back after sleep time/afternoon tea’.

These connections help children keep their family in mind and add to their feelings of security. Such simple artefacts also help other children to see the child in the context of their home and family, and subtly present the diversity of family types. The conversations that occur around those photos can be powerful lessons for children about diversity and difference, contributing to each child’s social and emotional wellbeing.

Each child’s experience needs to be individualised, based on information shared between families and educators. As a result, children sense that their own and other children’s families are welcomed and they witness warm, friendly interactions between their family and educators.

The environment

The physical environment, including group size, is another factor to consider when thinking about children’s developing social and emotional skills. When we understand how young children grow and learn we provide spaces so that children are not forced to be in close contact with each other. We enable them to choose to be together or to be apart, to be inside or outside.

For example, a service began providing an indoor-outdoor program at arrival time as they observed parents taking their child outside, children asking to go outside, or non-verbal children ‘banging on the door’. This worked particularly well for infants and toddlers as it gave children options and opportunities to work and play alone or together. With educators available in all areas, the new approach reduced the numbers of unsettled and crying children and each day began more peacefully and stress-free.

Predictability builds confidence

Supporting children’s social and emotional development can be as simple as noticing and letting children know when another educator or child is absent, or going to be absent. This is particularly important for children who have a strong attachment to a particular educator or friend. It gives the child an opportunity, with support, to change their plans: ‘Michael is away today I might play with Jai and Josh’.

Or, when an educator tells a parent, ‘I am going on leave for two weeks, but Lauren has been interacting quite readily with Sonia lately so she will greet you as you arrive’, parents have an opportunity to discuss this change with their child before they arrive at the centre.

Rituals, traditions and predictability are an important part of children’s daily experience and emotional wellbeing. Not only does this build security and a sense of agency —’I know what is about to happen’—but familiarity and predictability also help children to feel a part of the group. Early Childhood Australia (ECA)’s Everyday learning booklet ‘Responding to the emotional needs of children’ provides further ideas for educators to develop children’s social and emotional skills.
Play provides an opportunity for children to experience, express, regulate and learn about their emotions in genuine, self-directed ways.

**Pretend play**

Pretend play supports children’s emotional development by providing a way to express and cope with feelings. Through pretend play, children find ways to reflect on and process their emotional state.

Joseph became increasingly drawn to the dolls in home corner after his mother gave birth to a baby brother. He would feed and comfort the baby, patting him to sleep before becoming ‘busy cooking the dinner’. He would at times become frustrated and state to other children—‘I can’t come out to play, I am too busy!’

Pretend play also gives children the chance to make sense of rules. For example, as children play in the sandpit and ‘eat cake’ for every pretend ‘meal’, they experience the consistency of household rules. It also gives them an opportunity to play out situations that were frightening to them as well as to create situations that excite them, as they take on the roles of family life and of book or television characters, for example. In addition to expressing their feelings, children learn to cope with them as they act out being angry, sad, or worried in different situations. This process helps the child to make sense of experience and to feel strong and in control.
Developing children’s social and emotional skills

Connections with the National Quality Framework

Families and educators support children by actively engaging with the child in play. Playing alongside and with children gives them a real sense that what they are doing matters and that the adults care about this. This supports children’s self-esteem and the ongoing building of social skills as, with adult support, they learn to listen, negotiate tasks and roles, begin and finish tasks and work cooperatively with others—all important social skills that impact on later school and life success.

Educators’ roles in play

Educators support children’s social and emotional development through play when they:

- help children to feel safe and be safe
- provide a time and a place for play
- follow the child’s lead
- provide opportunities for children to play with others
- offer guidance, modelling ways to join in and solve conflicts that may arise.

This is significant for young children as they learn to negotiate the demands of play with others.

Educators plan for and use intentional teaching to support the development of children’s social and emotional skills through playful experiences and relationships with others.

These roles are linked directly with the EYLF and the principle of secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships. This principle asks educators to provide children with consistent emotional support; to develop the skills and understandings they need to interact positively with others (p. 12).

Similarly, the key component of Learning Outcome 1: ‘Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect’, details the skills that educators help children to acquire (p. 21).
**Play is not always positive**

Whilst most play enables children to be themselves and is generally positive, at times, play can leave some children hurt, disappointed and frustrated. When a child’s individual desires override the needs of others it is important that adults intervene to protect the wellbeing of all children.

In ECEC services this can often be seen when children are excluded or exclude others. Not all children express these feelings explicitly but educators should notice children whose behaviours change—become quiet, act out aggressively, begin to dominate play, are unable to concentrate, reluctant to join in, etc. **Educators** who notice these symptoms work closely with all children and listen to their concerns, discuss everyone’s feelings and find ways to support children to manage temporary disappointments, and find solutions together.

Opportunities for teaching occur naturally throughout the day when educators observe a conflict, a change in play or an empathic or caring act and use this to reinforce positive relationships. Learning about ‘**Positive behaviours through educator and child relationships**’ will support educators to do this.

An educator noticed that two boys were excluding another child from their play creating a series of canals in the sandpit. ‘That looks like hard work’, commented the educator. ‘Ryan would like to help you dig. Where could he begin?’ ‘Over here’, said Joshua, ‘It sure is hard work’.

Another service uses the **Pals Social Skills Program**: Playing and Learning to Socialise as a useful tool for them to promote children getting along with others.

**Opportunities for teaching occur naturally throughout the day when educators observe a conflict, a change in play or an empathic or caring act ...**

**Reflection**

What verbal and non-verbal communication skills do you practice with children to support their social and emotional learning?
Friendships and pro-social behaviours

As young children interact with others, and learn the ‘give and take’ of social relationships, friendships develop. In an ECEC service, routines allow children time and meaningful reasons to practice how to communicate, cooperate, solve problems and make decisions. Through interactions with friends, children learn important social skills and learn that different situations and different people call for different behaviours.

They learn how to:

- lead, how to follow
- set up rules and play games with rules
- win and lose
- deal with satisfaction, anger, aggression, and rejection
- understand who they are through these social relationships
- have fun with other people.

Friendships sustain healthy psychological development as they support children in their emotional and social growth. Children with friends have a greater sense of wellbeing, better self-esteem and fewer social problems than individuals without friends, even later when they are adults. Children who have difficulty making and maintaining friends are more likely than other children to feel lonely, to be bullied by peers, to have problems adjusting to school, and to engage in attention-seeking behaviours.

Friendships are a big part of young children’s lives and are some of the most important relationships over their lifetimes. KidsMatter’s resource ‘Support for developing friendships’ describes a significant and intentional role for educators in ECEC services.

Friendships sustain healthy psychological development as they support children in their emotional and social growth.

... friendship skills develop over time with regular support, guidance and practice ...

Relationships children have with immediate family, extended family and close family friends are different to friendships outside of this close family experience, as responsiveness from families is almost ‘built in’. ‘Making friends’ is one of the areas of development families often identify as a desired outcome for children’s learning in an ECEC service.

Knowing how to make and maintain friendships, resolve conflict, make decisions and solve problems helps children to get along in the world. Children are not born with these abilities—friendship skills develop over time with regular support, guidance and practice and contribute to a child’s mental health and wellbeing.
Children have different capacities and needs for friendships at different ages, and friends play different roles in children’s lives. A young baby is beginning the basics of friendship-making when they smile and respond to other children and adults who are close by. Toddlers begin to establish contact with peers, as they play alongside and copy others; they develop their play behaviours and show preferences for certain playmates. Preschoolers identify specific children as friends and often interact differently with friends and non-friends, engaging in more conversations and negotiations with chosen friends.

Quality Area 5: ‘Relationships with children’ requires educators to support children in making and maintaining friendships.

Building cooperative skills

As young children play with others they increase their ability to sustain relationships. Active and ongoing play with others requires children to use language to engage in meaningful conversation as they compromise and use conflict-resolution skills to attempt to solve problems in socially acceptable ways.

ECEC services facilitate this when educators support a new child in a daily routine such as lunch, remind them to wait to take a turn in an activity, organise materials so that young children can play side by side, or give children opportunities to work cooperatively on projects with other children.

Through such experiences, children find out that cooperating and collaborating is often more fun, more creative and gives a better result, and their sense of belonging to a group is strengthened. An effective ECEC service strives to create a culture where everyone’s efforts are valued and the successes and achievements of others are a cause for acknowledgement and celebration. This is evident here with children in mixed aged groups and opportunities are made for children to work together.

... children find out that cooperating and collaborating is often more fun, more creative and gives a better result ...
Connections with the National Quality Framework

Problem solving with young children

1. **Approach children quickly and calmly**: Position yourself down at child’s level and stop any hurtful words or actions: ‘I can’t let you hurt Mary—it’s my job to keep everybody safe’.

2. **Acknowledge children’s feelings**: Gently reach out to children who are upset—’I can see you are both upset, sad angry’, or, ‘I need to hold the keys (toy/object) while we sort out the problem’.

3. **Gather information from children**: Listen to all sides to find out, without making judgements, about what might have happened: ‘You both want the keys’; ‘He was using it first’.

4. **Restate the problem. Repeat what children have told you using their words**: ‘You both want the keys.’ Reframe children’s words if they are hurtful; say, ‘You don’t want to play with Tommy’, rather than the child’s words, ‘I don’t like Tommy’.

5. **Ask for solutions and choose one together**: ‘You both want the keys. What are you going to do about it?’; ‘What’s your idea?’; ‘What’s another idea?’. Only offer your own possible solution when children are ‘stuck’ and ask, ‘Do you want to hear my idea?’ Encourage children: ‘You guys solved the problem—you worked it out together’.

6. **Follow up and see if children need further support**: Be sensitive to children’s need for further support—check back with them later.

Reflection

Do you provide materials and experiences that encourage children to rely on each other as they interact in play?

How do you provide opportunities for children to work in small groups in which each child has a specific responsibility?

How do you support children to work through conflict together?
The development of self-control/self-regulation

Play gives children opportunities to develop self-control. A curriculum that sees children as capable and competent gives them many opportunities to express their feelings and show concern for others. Educators model awareness and respond appropriately to the feelings of others: ‘Yes, Michael feels sad and just wants to sit on my knee. He likes to watch you make cakes in the sandpit’; ‘I will make cakes for everyone—that will make him happy’.

Children are supported in expressing their emotions, both positive and negative, when educators engage actively alongside them as they play and participate in routines. Participating in group games and songs that intentionally foster conversations about and recognition of children’s feelings will also develop their emotional skills and understandings. When children learn to participate in daily routines willingly and educators are able to provide comfort and support when things do not go to plan, this builds self-control or self-regulation a term known as executive function.

When implementing KidsMatter Component 2: Developing children’s social and emotional skills, one service incorporated an occupational therapy program called ‘Heavy work’ into their curriculum to promote self-regulation, especially for children with sensory motor difficulties. Another service found that teaching children self-regulation supported their social and emotional learning, and offered practical suggestions.

Reflection

How do you support young children in expressing their feelings and showing concern for others?

How do you give children opportunities to express strong emotions constructively?

How do you support children so they feel able to express their fears and accept comfort from you?
Wellbeing

Supporting social and emotional learning

Wellbeing includes both physical and psychological aspects and is central to belonging, being and becoming.

Without a strong sense of wellbeing, it is difficult to:

- have a sense of belonging
- trust others and feel confident in being
- optimistically engage in experiences that contribute to becoming.

Wellbeing includes good physical health, feelings of happiness, satisfaction and successful social functioning. It influences the ways children interact in their environment.

A strong sense of wellbeing:

- provides children with confidence and optimism that maximises their learning potential
- fosters the development of children's innate exploratory drive
- encourages a sense of agency
- promotes desire to interact with and be responsive to others
- results from having basic needs met.
Developing children’s social and emotional skills

Connections with the National Quality Framework

Belonging, Being and Becoming tells us of the relationship between wellbeing and resilience. Resilience provides children with the capacity to cope with day-to-day stress and challenges. Achievement and success are possible through a readiness to persevere when faced with unfamiliar and challenging learning situations.

Jak had been attending preschool for a few months. Educators observed a change in Jak most mornings. On arrival, he had gone from being a happy and engaged preschooler to an unhappy, teary one.

Although the centre did not serve breakfast, parents were encouraged to bring breakfast in when running late. Staff observed Jak’s interest in another child’s breakfast and offered him cereal and toast. After he had eaten, he was able to join in the play. Staff spoke with Jak’s mother, who indicated that, ‘Often Jak sleeps in and there is no time for breakfast’. Together, they agreed that each morning they would have a conversation and Jak would be given breakfast if needed. This made a big difference not only to the beginning of Jak’s day but his whole day.

In another service, staff observed Sandy, aged two years and six months sobbing loudly for ‘no obvious reason’ or over ‘seemingly minor’ things, with little capacity to manage when things did not go his way. On observation of Sandy at arrival and departure times, staff noticed he often and repeatedly would say ‘cuddle, cuddle, cuddle’ and put his arms up to his mum. As she was often juggling his younger sister, children’s bags and other items, she would ask him to wait. This often caused more tears. An educator met with Sandy’s mum to discuss his behaviour and talked about how educators and staff might be able to help meet Sandy’s needs more quickly. Together they decided on some strategies that had positive results for both Sandy and his family—the tears were less frequent, as his needs were being met.

Other educators raised concerns that Sally, an eighteen month old, was suddenly ‘demanding’ to be picked up. She would walk up to educators with her arms raised. Some educators thought, ‘She should just learn that we couldn’t pick everyone up, so we should not begin to pick her up—it wouldn’t be fair.’ After much discussion and professional readings, it was decided that, ‘We must pick her up, as that is her need’ and, in fact, not everyone needed picking up as frequently as she did. It did not take long for Sally to be comfortable sitting on an educator’s lap with other children, or holding the educator’s hand as they explored the playground with only the occasional pick-up.

Achievement and success are possible through a readiness to persevere when faced with unfamiliar and challenging learning situations.
Managing life’s ups and downs is key for children’s social and emotional wellbeing. ECEC services are ideal places to support children to develop and practise social and emotional skills in their daily interactions with staff and peers. When educators have positive and engaging relationships with children, they support children in learning:

- **trust** that the world is safe and that there are caring people to help them
- **belief** in their ability to do things for themselves and achieve their goals
- **feeling good** about themselves and feeling valued for who they are by their parents and educators
- **optimism** that things generally turn out well
- **the ability to manage** their feelings, thoughts and behaviours.

Research confirms that these attributes are essential to resilience. Feeling optimistic and hopeful are key parts of mental health and wellbeing. An ECA publication, *Children’s Resilience: Working with the EYLF*, provides further reading and examples.

Each child as an individual.

The NSW Curriculum Framework, *The practice of relationships*, reminds us of how individual children really are:

“They have different temperaments. Some are very active, others are quiet. Some are outgoing, others are shy. Some adapt easily to change, others resist and react negatively to change. Some give clear signals about what they want and need, others are harder to read. Some are very predictable and regular in their habits, others are much more unpredictable. Some move into new situations readily and easily, others need to stand back, wait a while, and then become involved gradually. Some are very even tempered, others are changeable. Some are almost always happy, others are often upset or unhappy. In addition, there are children with conditions that may limit their development and restrict their functioning in particular areas. These characteristics affect learning.’ (P ??)

The EYLF describes dispositions, such as maintaining an optimistic outlook, being willing to persevere or approaching new experiences with confidence as ‘enduring habits of mind and actions, and tendencies to respond in characteristic ways to situations’ (p. 45).

Supporting children’s social and emotional development requires educators to be sensitive to and accepting of individual differences in children, their dispositions to learning, and knowledgeable of how to adapt their teaching practices to children’s individuality.

Supporting children’s social and emotional development requires educators to be sensitive to and accepting of individual differences in children ...
Teaching social and emotional skills

Social and emotional skills can be learned and enhanced at any age. Infants, children and adults can continue to develop their social and emotional understandings. However, the earlier young children learn social and emotional skills, the greater the positive impact on their daily lives.

Awareness of self and others is one of the first steps in building strong social and emotional wellbeing. Children need support to understand their own feelings and respond to these feelings in different and appropriate ways. This includes understanding the consequences of their actions on others and how that makes others feel, as well as how to control and manage strong feelings such as anger and jealousy.

Giving children tools to manage strong or challenging feelings constructively, including managing anger, develops the skills that will support children in life. Educators at Westlawn preschool developed a ‘talking time circle’ as one way to support children in expressing their feelings and promoting pro-social behaviours.

Stress as a factor in social and emotional development

Some children, because of their temperament, developmental stage, learning style, life stressors, or diagnosed condition find learning social skills and emotional self-regulation more difficult than others. In many situations, the patience and sensitive persistence of educators in establishing and maintaining boundaries and reinforcing positive behaviour will develop the child’s capacity.

There is no substitute for a strong educator-family-child relationship and working closely with families enables consistency of expectation and response. Children who have potential or existing mental health difficulties may require additional, expert support. The needs of these children will be examined in the fourth resource in this series, about Component 4: Helping children who are experiencing mental health difficulties.
Developing children’s social and emotional skills

Connections with the National Quality Framework

By strengthening and increasing social-emotional educational opportunities, young children’s capacity to learn and experience personal satisfaction and achievement is increased. ‘A box full of feelings’ is a useful resource, with ideas about how educators can support children’s ongoing social and emotional learning.

Putting yourself in someone else’s shoes and being able to show you care is another important aspect of social and emotional learning.

Educators, in consultation with parents, developed strategies for children to connect with one of their classmates, who was in hospital with a broken leg. This involved conversations, videos, photos and visits as a way to support children’s growing understanding of others.

Educators found that planning with children was one way to support them in making decisions for themselves and becoming active achievers and explorers. Educators laminated photo cards of equipment and experiences and children made decisions about what they might do next. This also supported their relationships and engagement with other children, as they learned to negotiate with others about preferred activities.

By strengthening and increasing social-emotional educational opportunities, young children’s capacity to learn and experience personal satisfaction and achievement is increased. ‘A box full of feelings’ is a useful resource, with ideas about how educators can support children’s ongoing social and emotional learning.

Acquiring the skills to persevere when things don’t go according to plan are significant parts of children’s social and emotional learning.

Educators found that planning with children was one way to support them in making decisions for themselves and becoming active achievers and explorers. Educators laminated photo cards of equipment and experiences and children made decisions about what they might do next. This also supported their relationships and engagement with other children, as they learned to negotiate with others about preferred activities.

Acquiring the skills to persevere when things don’t go according to plan are significant parts of children’s social and emotional learning.
Educators have a key role to play

Educators play a direct role in supporting the development of social and emotional skills. This occurs when they:

- are intentional about having a settling-in process for each child and family, where building relationships is a priority
- are responsive to all children and identify and build on strengths and interests
- have warm and caring interactions with all children
- view and know each child as an individual and differentiate their provisions for and interactions with each child
- prioritise building relationships with children, with full appreciation of their importance
- are consistent in their interactions with children
- appreciate the importance of continuity in building relationships, especially with very young children
- intentionally plan for and create opportunities for one-to-one interactions with each child
- help each child develop a positive and realistic sense of self through more encouragement than discouragement, more positive than negative feedback
- have clear expectations on behaviour in ways that don’t result in feelings of unworthiness
- welcome families and children and make every effort to make them feel ‘at home’
- provide opportunities for children to collaborate and cooperate
- maximise families as a valued source of information about the child, and in turn share information with families, so that both know the child better
- make an effort to learn from families and other trusted sources about the diversity of families represented in the service.

These closely align with Component 2 of the Kidsmatter Framework: Developing children’s social and emotional skills, and with many of the Standards and Elements of the NQS, namely:

- **Element 1.1.1**: ‘Curriculum decision-making contributes to each child’s learning and development outcomes in relation to their identity, connection with community, wellbeing, and confidence as learners and effectiveness as communicators.’

- **Standard 3.2**: ‘The environment is inclusive, promotes competence, independent exploration and learning through play.’

- **Standard 4.2**: ‘Educators, coordinators and educators members are respectful and ethical.’

- **Element 5.2.2**: ‘Each child is supported to manage their own behaviour, respond appropriately to the behaviour of others and communicate effectively to resolve conflicts.’
Summary: Educators’ roles in developing social and emotional skills and wellbeing

Children in an ECEC setting will demonstrate their developing social and emotional skills and wellbeing when they:

- know their educators well
- are relaxed
- explore and use familiar, trusted educators as a base for exploring
- seek comfort and support from educators
- initiate interactions and conversations (through gesture when children can’t yet communicate in words)
- engage with other children in positive ways
- are empowered and demonstrate a sense of agency.

ECEC services have a responsibility to help children to know themselves and live constructively in relationships with others. When educators empower children, they are helping them to learn about the impact they can have on others.

The early childhood period is a crucial time for developing young children’s social and emotional skills and capacities. Teaching social and emotional learning has both short- and long-term advantages for young children in relation to wellbeing, participation and success in life. KidsMatter Early Childhood supports ECEC services in valuing children’s social and emotional learning as being the foundation and basis for all children’s learning.
Read more

KidsMatter Early Childhood Component 2 Online Professional Learning Module 2, Social and emotional learning.


