Connections with the National Quality Framework

Working with parents and carers
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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.
Contents

2 The family and mental health
   2 About KidsMatter Early Childhood
   3 Connections between national initiatives
   4 About this resource

5 Partnerships
   6 Partnerships with parents
   7 The family’s perspective
   8 The benefits of partnerships
   10 The challenge of partnerships
   11 Partnerships: What might they look like?

12 Responding to family circumstances
   14 The role of the father
   14 Connecting with and between families

15 Communication
   15 Talking with parents about children’s learning
   17 Meeting family needs through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

19 Having difficult conversations
   21 Building educator confidence and skills
   23 Accessing further support

25 Summary
   26 Read more
Families are central to children’s mental health. By working closely with parents and carers, early childhood education and care (ECEC) services can make a substantial difference to the mental health and wellbeing of children (KidsMatter Early Childhood: An overview, p. 11).

About KidsMatter Early Childhood

KidsMatter Early Childhood is a continuous improvement framework that supports 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 provides vital information to educators and families about parenting, child development and children’s mental health, and facilitates access to appropriate expert advice.

By working closely with parents and carers, early childhood education and care (ECEC) services can make a substantial difference to the mental health and wellbeing of children.
Connections between national initiatives

The National Quality Standard (NQS) and Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) are part of the National Quality Framework, an Australian government initiative to improve outcomes for young children in ECEC services.

KidsMatter Early Childhood, the EYLF and the NQS all recognise that children thrive best when all of those who care for them work together to maximise their mental health, wellbeing, learning and potential.

KidsMatter Early Childhood Component 3: Working with parents and carers has three Target Areas:

- Collaborative partnerships with families
- Connecting families
- Support for parenting.

These target areas relate specifically to two Quality Areas of the National Quality Standard: ‘Educational program and practice’ and ‘Collaborative partnerships with families and communities’.

Component 3 connects with Principle 2 in the EYLF: Partnerships, with the EYLF Practice of Cultural competence, and with EYLF Learning outcome 2.

Implementing the KidsMatter Early Childhood Framework will support the achievement of the broad and specific goals of these national initiatives.

Ethical relationships with families

Alongside these national initiatives, Early Childhood Australia discusses the theme of ‘partnerships’ in its Code of Ethics, Part II. It offers statements for educators and staff to reflect on and enact in their daily work.

‘In relation to families, I will:

1. Listen to and learn from families, in order to acknowledge and build upon their strengths and competencies, and support them in their role of nurturing children.
2. Assist each family to develop a sense of belonging and inclusion.
3. Develop positive relationships based on mutual trust and open communication.
4. Develop partnerships with families and engage in shared decision making where appropriate.
5. Acknowledge the rights of families to make decisions about their children.
6. Respect the uniqueness of each family and strive to learn about their culture, structure, lifestyle, customs, language, beliefs and kinship systems.
7. Develop shared planning, monitoring and assessment practices for children’s learning and communicate this in ways that families understand.
8. Acknowledge that each family is affected by the community contexts in which they engage.
9. Be sensitive to the vulnerabilities of children and families and respond in ways that empower and maintain the dignity of all children and families.
10. Maintain confidentiality and respect the right of the family to privacy.’
About this resource

This is the third in a series of KidsMatter Early Childhood resources that highlight connections between the KidsMatter Framework, the NQS and the EYLF.

KidsMatter Early Childhood has four components:

▪ Creating a sense of community
▪ Developing children’s social and emotional skills
▪ Working with parents and carers
▪ Helping children who are experiencing mental health difficulties.

This resource will focus on connections with Component 3: Working with parents and carers.

Another earlier resource, KidsMatter Early Childhood: Connecting with the Early Childhood Education and Care National Quality Framework provides a detailed overview of how all of the KidsMatter Early Childhood components relate to the EYLF and facilitate the achievement of the NQS.
Partnerships feature strongly in the EYLF, in the NQS and in KidsMatter Early Childhood, Component 3: Working with parents and carers.

Component 3 relates particularly to the EYLF Principle of Partnerships, to its Practice of Cultural competence and to Learning Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world.

This connection to Outcome 2 recognises that children learn about trust, empathy and compassion through seeing the adults around them model, demonstrate and live those ways of being together.

It acknowledges that collaborative partnerships between families, educators and related professionals are essential for children’s wellbeing and learning achievement.

The key target area of KidsMatter Early Childhood Component 3: Collaborative partnerships with families has a close connection to Quality Area 6: ‘Collaborative partnerships with families and communities’. 
Partnerships with parents

Developing a culture of partnerships between ECEC staff and parents and carers begins from the very first enquiry to the service.

As the EYLF explains (p. 12), 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.

Families are not only welcomed but invited to be collaborators with educators in selecting the experiences provided for children.

To capture this family perspective, one service handed families a Post-it® note and pen on arrival and asked them to jot down three things they wanted for their child that day. The comments ranged from broad ideas such as the child being happy and safe, having fun with friends and being read to, through to the child learning specific skills and developing particular attributes, such as persistence, patience and kindness. When educators repeated this process regularly, parents became more expansive in their feedback. These insights were then used by the educators to plan for children’s learning.

Another service asks families on enrolment to think about and describe the sorts of learning they want for their child. Another sends home ‘learning summaries’ and families are invited to give feedback on their child’s ‘progress to date’ and future directions for learning.

Families working together with educators benefits children’s mental health and wellbeing and is linked to Standard 6.1: ‘Respectful, supportive relationships with families are developed and maintained.’

For ideas on building and maintaining relationships with families, refer to the National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program’s (NQS PLP) e-Newsletter no. 35, ‘Collaborative Partnerships with families’ and KidsMatter’s blog post about working in the early years of school.

Developing a culture of partnerships between ECEC staff and parents and carers begins from the very first enquiry to the service.
The family’s perspective

It is crucial that the child’s experience within the family and the community to which they belong is reflected in the learning program.

The EYLF practice of cultural competence is described as ‘the ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures’ (EYLF p. 16). The EYLF asks educators to view culture and the family context as central to children’s sense of being and belonging and their success in lifelong learning.

Similarly, Standard 6.2 requires educators to support families in their parenting role and respect their values and belief’s about child rearing.

To do this, educators need to develop an understanding of the various cultural backgrounds and parenting practices of families within the ECEC service, as well as take into account the different ways individuals approach child-rearing within any family or cultural group. What’s important is that families are able to tell staff and educators what matters most for them and their child.

This happens through all kinds of daily communication and practices that demonstrate that educators and staff genuinely value each family’s perspective. It is the ongoing communication with families that provides insights into the child’s unique characteristics, strengths, needs and interests. Parents and carers are the best resource from which to learn about the child.

How parents construct their roles

The extent to which parents become engaged in ECEC, and later in schools, and the maintenance of that engagement over time, depends partly on how they see their role in their child’s education. Some parents and carers will automatically decide to be part of the learning process whilst others may want to ‘leave it to the experts’ or wait to be invited to participate.

Several factors and beliefs affect parents’ expectations and behaviour in relation to partnerships:

- their own experience of education—positive or negative
- their own beliefs about appropriate and desirable outcomes for children and about who is responsible for achieving these outcomes
- perceptions of what others, such as family, other parents, or educators expect from them as parents.

When educators understand these factors they are better able to put in place strategies that work.

It is crucial that the child’s experience within the family and the community to which they belong is reflected in the learning program.
The benefits of partnerships

The benefits of the family and educator partnership are four-fold. It offers benefits for:
- children
- family
- the staff and educator team
- the broader community.

For children, strong partnerships lead to a more meaningful and appropriate experience in the early learning setting. Feelings of security and acceptance are enhanced as children observe warm relationships between their family and the educators. This supports children’s developing social skills and strengthens connections to their culture and sense of identity. The research is also clear that academic achievement is enhanced when parents and carers are active participants in ECEC services and schools.

For families, partnerships with educators can lead to a stronger relationship with their child, as they understand how vital early educators are in their child’s life and develop increased confidence in their role at this vital phase of learning. Active participation in the early childhood setting can also sustain parenting as family members learn new and different ways support the child’s development. A positive relationship with staff and educators enables parents and carers to address concerns about their child’s learning and development more quickly.

For staff and educators, a partnership with each family provides a more complete picture of each child and the satisfaction of working alongside families to support children. Over time, staff develop their capacity to communicate and collaborate with families from diverse backgrounds. When parents understand the role of the educator and staff team they often have higher appreciation of the significance of the role of ECEC education, and value and respect educators themselves.

For communities there are both short- and long-term gains as families with children participate actively in community life.

Families, ECEC services, schools and communities contribute in different and complementary ways to a child’s learning process and strategies must reflect an awareness of the interdependence of these groups and individuals and the wider context in which children learn.

An ECA resource Everyday Learning in Families may support families to see the potential for learning across all parts of family lives.

Feelings of security and acceptance are enhanced as children observe warm relationships between their family and the educators.
A partnership is more than involvement

Many ECEC services have a long history of parent involvement with parents happily taking on roles such as parent helper, fundraising, preparing the morning tea, washing the hand towels, joining management committees, etc. While involving parents in such activities may support the formation of relationships and offer a valuable community, social and governance function, there is an important distinction between involving parents and engaging parents in learning. Engaging parents in learning has proven to have the greatest positive impact in a child’s academic attainment as this leads to parents contributing to learning outcomes in the home as well as at the service. Families may start with ‘involvement’ as this is where they are most comfortable and ECEC services find many and varied ways for them to connect; involvement can lead to partnerships later. However, ways of ‘being involved’ have traditionally been determined by the service and usually means the staff and educators retain the power rather than develop an equal partnership around the child’s everyday experiences both inside and outside the service.

Reflection

Think of the ways your service defines ‘partnership’—is it different to or more than involvement?

Engaging parents in learning has proven to have the greatest positive impact in a child’s academic attainment as this leads to parents contributing to learning outcomes in the home as well as at the service.
When planning for families to become partners in their child’s learning journey, educators need to be aware of different parenting styles and to emphasise the benefits of adult–child interaction for children’s developing emotional and social skills as well as cognitive learning. The goal is not to turn parents into teachers, but for all adults to support the child sensitively and appropriately. Working with families in partnership requires a genuine commitment from ECEC services. When this commitment is based on deeper understanding of the significance of partnerships all barriers can be addressed.

When a Vietnamese child with no English began at a service, an inclusion support facilitator was able to work with the staff. She gave the staff confidence to use and pronounce key words and offered insights into the family’s child-rearing practices.

Another service employed a part-time worker for additional hours each week to give educators time for conversations at arrival and departure times.

The KidsMatter Component 3 professional learning saw a whole of staff/educator team reflect more deeply about the differences between relationships, friendships and partnership with families and to develop new strategies based on this shared knowledge.

Working with families in partnership requires a genuine commitment from ECEC services.
Partnerships: what might they look like?

- Parents and carers are greeted by name.
- Conversations with families are individualised about each child.
- Educators empathise with families when things are difficult.
- The notice board is kept updated and relevant.
- Resources are readily available.
- There is an efficient system for regularly communicating about the program and the child’s learning.
- Information is provided to enable families to build on the child’s learning further at home.
- Family members are supported to share skills, interests and knowledge.
- Meetings are held for parents to learn about the program and support parenting skills.
- Parent conferences to discuss learning and set further goals for learning are regularly convened.
- Family events are organised to foster relationships and have fun with other families and staff.
- Families are supported to access other services if needed.
- Time given by family members is acknowledged in a number of ways.

Reflection

What strategies does your service have in place to build and maintain partnerships?
Do you specifically ask families how they may like to develop relationships/be involved?
Responding to family circumstances

Working with parents and carers and building relationships does take time but is essential to improve learning outcomes for all children. Young children who are enrolled in ECEC services reflect their prior and sometimes changing experiences.

When staff and educators understand the back grounds of families, and families feel able to talk about changed circumstances, aspirations for their children and struggles, staff and educators are able to empathise with them, support them in their parenting role and understand and support the children.

Noticing changes in both children and families and asking a simple ‘are you okay?’ question can lead to families seeking support for things that are worrying them.
One service offers ‘home visits’ as a way to connect more deeply with families. As part of the orientation process new families are offered the opportunity to have home visits prior to commencing. The decision to offer these was made to help address the problem new families often face when they walk into a children’s service—being overwhelmed by everything they are told and what they see. The questions they want to ask are often forgotten in this new and unfamiliar space. The educator team reflected on this and wondered if families really had an opportunity to ask or say what they wanted, and if there was a better way to begin a partnership with the family.

The educator team wanted families to be in control, rather than the educators who naturally ‘held the power’ when they were in the place that was comfortable for them. The option of home visits was offered. The process allows parents to ask their questions, allay their fears, share information about their child and more importantly transfers the power back to the parent, they are in control and that’s what we want.

‘The visit really benefits us as educators as well, as we can observe the child in their setting and have learned so much more about them than we can ever glean in an initial interview. Their transition into the service is much smoother as they have met two staff members already and together with the child they can talk about what the child has at home, the name of the pet dog and ask after grandma, who lives with them.’

In addition, we offer home visits to existing families on their request or at other times as required. The visit is usually the director and the lead educator and arranged at times to suit the family. The result is that the team have a stronger picture of what the parent would like to happen, and also the relationships that are built between staff and families is much stronger. The home visits are part of the culture of the centre and up to 95 per cent of parents support them.’
The role of the father

Traditional roles of parenting have shifted and more dads are playing a hands on role with raising their children. Component 3: Working with parents and carers places particular importance on the role of fathers as a strong influence on young children’s mental health and wellbeing, for the child and the whole family.

A ‘father figure’ may not be biologically related to his child or live with his child all the time. He might be a grandfather, step father, foster father or adoptive father. Children can have more than one father, or have relationships with other males who parent and care for them.

There is no one right way to be a father. Each father brings unique ideas and experiences to being a parent or carer and will find different ways to be involved with the child’s ECEC service. Dads involved, a KidsMatter resource describes different ways that the service might relate to and engage with fathers.

Connecting with and between families

Supporting families to connect with each other and with the service is a target area of KidsMatter Component 3: Working with parents and carers. The ECEC service provides opportunities for families to meet each other and develop support networks.

Educators can actively encourage families to become involved in the ECEC service and address barriers to involvement. Making connections in KidsMatter Early Childhood offers ideas and examples to support connections between families.

At parent meetings name badges have the parent’s name, the names and ages of the child/children and the suburb that they live in. This provides ‘conversation starters’ for parents who may see each other regularly at drop off and pick up but have forgotten names etc. ‘So you’re Michael’s dad—James talks about him all the time’ ‘Oh we live at Banora Point as well—I think I have seen you at the pool’.

One service has social/family functions several times a year that are ‘free’ so that cost is not a barrier to attend. All family members are welcome to alleviate babysitting for older or younger siblings, and personal and individual invitations are sent to families. Staff and educators are paid to attend family functions with a clear expectation that they will support families to connect with other families. This is especially important as some families have a long history with the ECEC service and others are relatively new.
Communications

Talking with parents about children’s learning

Educators can help families to feel more involved in their child’s day-to-day ECEC experiences by providing information to the parents or carers. This may include communicating about routine things such as eating, sleeping, health and nutrition issues, which may be especially important with babies and toddlers as well providing insights into the child’s learning. **Element 1.1.1** states that the documentation about each child’s program and progress is available to families. Meaningful conversations are a key to making this information available. Supporting parents with information is one way to achieve this as is sharing information about each child’s day.
As part on their Quality Improvement Plan (QIP), a requirement of the NQF, one service made the decision to talk more with each family about the child’s learning so conversations moved from ‘they have had a great day’ to more revealing and in depth conversations.

‘Joshua remained focused at the carpentry table today for most of the morning. He has good skills and was able to show the other children how to hold the nail and tap it to begin. He was very helpful’. ‘I’m not surprised’ says mum—’he’s been helping me repair the front fence.’

‘Today we noticed how Chloe is now using lots more colour in her drawings and painting and describing what she is doing’. ‘Yes, she now talks about the colours as she gets dressed and as we walk to preschool. I might buy her some new coloured pens so she can draw more at home’.

‘Has Tommy had contact with a new baby recently?’ ‘yes’ said mum—’my sister has a new baby and we visited him last night’ ‘Well …’ said the educator ‘Tommy must have been very observant, as today in home corner he was very kind and gentle as he fed, changed and rocked the baby to sleep’.

‘Ella and Jed were almost inseparable today. They collaborated on a huge building in block corner, worked with others to make roads and tunnels in the sandpit and concentrated hard to complete a large floor. Their friendship is really developing’.

‘Thanks for bringing in the shells you picked up on the beach. Koby was very proud as he talked all about them and showed the other children. We used the computer to look them up and enjoyed saying some of the names like periwinkle’. ‘Koby loves collecting so we will take a bag to collect things when we go out to the bush and river next week.’

This resulted in parents and carers contributing more about their child as well as enhancing the parents experience of the child outside of their family. This has supported families to feel more confident about the very complex and sometimes challenging role of raising children.

When educators and families exchange information readily there are benefits for children, families and educators and a more complete picture of the child is developed.

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 more ideas from ECEC services about communicating with families read NQSPLP e-Newsletter no. 68 ‘Talking with families about children’s learning’.

**Reflection**

*What types of conversations do you have with families each day?*

How do you ensure children’s family events and activities are reflected in the child’s ECEC experience?
Meeting family needs through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

The development of ICT has opened up new opportunities to connect with and share information with families in new and exciting ways.

Digital technologies do not take away from communicating face-to-face with families but rather complement these and offer another option for communication, especially when personal contact is limited. More families are now using electronic and social media to communicate. ECEC services will need to check families have and use these technologies and make alternate arrangements for those families who do not have access or who do not wish to communicate in this way.

Visual forms of recording experiences appeal to both children and families and for children who are too young to communicate, who are non verbal or who speak in a language other than English; images can support the child and the family to ‘talk about’ and understand the program.

Using technology allows families to access the information at a time and place that suits them and to respond when it is convenient.

Digital technologies also give parents a ‘window’ into what happens throughout the day as they often rarely see what happens beyond arrival and departure times. The technology enables the service to quickly send a reassuring photo to a parent who had to leave their child unsettled or was concerned that the child ‘had no friends’ or ‘played only in the sandpit all day’. In addition, this kind of communication really supports links with family members who have a strong connection with a child yet may be unable to physically attend the early childhood service, for example family who may live or work away, or a family members who is in hospital.

Digital technologies do not take away from communicating face-to-face with families but rather complement these and offer another option for communication ...
One service has moved to sending a daily review home to families each day the child attends. This includes photographs and information of a general nature. Families are positive about this as it enables them to view them sometimes before they collect the child and use the information to talk with the child and educators about their day. It also gives older sibling and other family insights into ‘everything that happens’ in a day and enables parents and family members who are working away an opportunity to share part of their child’s day. This system takes less time than writing up about the day that only the person who collected the child had access to.

**Reflection**

How do you ensure the ways of communication meet the needs of all parents and carers?

How can you ensure that the communication captures important things without becoming a burden that takes staff away from interacting with children?
Having difficult conversations

From time to time it may be necessary to have a conversation and raise matters of concern with a child’s family. This will be so much harder if the staff team have not built up a relationship with the family and have not been specific in their regular feedback about the child’s learning and development. Whilst most services operate on the strengths based approach to children and learning this does not absolve them from identifying issues of concern, communicating about them and finding ways to work collaboratively with the family to support the child.

Families may respond to this information in different ways, so the educator and staff team need to approach these matters sensitively and positively and with documented observations and facts. This documentation gives the family the opportunity to take home information and reflect further on it. It provides real evidence that the educator has been observant and has good reasons for raising the issue. Some matters are more worrying than others for families—talking about the articulation of a few speech sounds will be different from raising questions about serious behaviour problems or significant developmental delays. For some families there may be a real sense of grief, distress and disbelief whilst for others the conversation may help them address some of their own worries about their child. How staff and educators respond to these mixed feelings will impact on how the matter is dealt with and what happens next.

Whilst most services operate on the strengths based approach to children and learning this does not absolve them from identifying issues of concern, communicating about them and finding ways to work collaboratively with the family to support the child.
Maintaining a strong relationship with the family during this time is important. It is helpful for educators to understand the many stages that a family may move through before deciding on a course of action:

**The precontemplative stage**
Is not concerned about the child, denies there is a problem and is not interested in doing anything further.

**The contemplative stage**
Acknowledges there is a problem but is not ready to act.

**Preparation**
Being aware of the difficulties and is trying different things.

**Action**
Is engaged in doing things that support the child.

**Maintenance**
Continues with the strategies to support the child.

**Relapse**
Goes back to the old ways of doing things.

All of these stages require ongoing communication and a collaborative approach with the family, based on the understanding that the family will over time make the best decision for their child. The program for the child will be more successful when the parents’ perspectives are valued and taken into account.

**Reflection**
Think about the times you have had to have ‘hard’ discussions with families. How successful were they? What else might you do to improve these discussions to improve outcomes for children?
Working with parents and carers is complex and requires time and effort.

Building educator confidence and skills

The workplace must provide time, opportunities and support to implement partnerships.

Working with parents and carers is complex and requires time and effort. KidsMatter Early Childhood offers the support that educators need to develop their skills, confidence and commitment to building effective partnerships with parents and carers.

Engagement strategies are more likely to be successful when educators know how to communicate effectively with parents, and this requires active training and support from management. The Stop Reflect Act process as part of KidsMatter Early Childhood Component 3, p. 60 supports educators to do this.

Communication skills

The family partnership model as outlined in the ECA Research in Practice Series book Partnerships—Working together in early childhood settings describes communication skills that will support staff and educators to build and maintain partnerships. These include:

- Attending: focussing and concentrating on the parent without distractions.
- Active listening: showing them through body language that you’re really in tune with their story.
- Empathetic responding: trying to mirror what they might be saying or feeling.
- Prompting and exploring: encouraging the parent to talk.
- Reflecting back accurately: you say you were …
- Questioning: using open ended questions.
- Pausing: being comfortable with gaps in conversation.
- Summarising: statements that draw together the conversation.
- Enthusing and encouraging: being positive to motivate and expect success.
- Negotiating: perhaps suggesting an alternate view.

Building trust can be challenging and take time, it may require additional effort and strategies on the part of staff and educators. This is particularly the case for parents in traditionally ‘hard to reach’ or ‘under-served’ groups, including those from diverse cultural backgrounds and those who have had negative experiences with educational settings.
Cultural competence is a set of understandings and attitudes extremely relevant to effective communication with families. Cultural competence, one of the eight practices of the EYLF, is a term used broadly across the education and care sector. The definition of ‘cultural competence’ ‘sees’ a distinct but cumulative relationship between cultural awareness (knowing), cultural sensitivity (appreciating), cultural competence (practising, demonstrating) and cultural proficiency (embedding as organisational practice). It requires the ability to ‘see’ issues and experiences from another person’s perspective and to know oneself in a cultural context—that is to understand oneself as a cultural being. Cultural competence is part of a developmental process underpinned by relationships. It evolves over time.

**Reflection**

How confident is your whole of staff team in working in partnerships with parents? Do they require further professional learning?

Do they find working with some families and cultural contexts more difficult than others?

What professional learning would help them develop skills and confidence?

Cultural competence is a set of understandings and attitudes extremely relevant to effective communication with families.
Accessing further support

Early childhood services can assist young children and their families to access support and other services in a timely manner. Early recognition and intervention for children showing signs of mental health difficulties during this critical period can help to prevent difficulties worsening or interfering with children’s developmental progress, as well as to reduce stress and distress that is already present. This further supports the mental health and wellbeing of parents and carers.

The Standard 6.2 ‘families are supported in their parenting role and their values and beliefs about child rearing are respected’, requires educators to see their role more broadly and as part of a service network. This does not assume that educators ‘have all the answers’ but that they have networks and access to information that parents may need, including the ideas and examples to support parents and carers.

One service has moved from having shelves of brochures in the foyer to having a parent computer and a library where parents can access information and support with or without the support of the staff and educators. There is an updated list of frequently used telephone, email and website addresses. This really supports families to access to high-quality parenting resources with all staff having training in what supports are available both locally and more broadly. The service found this was necessary as families often ask for support from the educator they have built the strongest relationship with.

Early recognition and intervention for children showing signs of mental health difficulties during this critical period can help to prevent difficulties worsening or interfering with children’s developmental progress, as well as to reduce stress and distress that is already present.
Another service employs a family support worker who works with families individually and as part of a group. The family support workers position is funded through an Australian Government program and the role has broadened from one of building the capacity of families to parent children to the best of their ability, with counselling support, parenting programs, parenting information, workshops for educators and allied support agencies in one ECEC service to now working across many early childhood services, schools and the broader community. It develops partnership with other agencies to support programs for families, and in particular vulnerable families and communities. It supports an ante natal program for fathers, a playgroup for aboriginal families, an Art for Kids program, provides funding to local children’s services so that they can develop parenting programs for their settings and it continues to support individual families to access services, provides community parenting workshops and works in schools on programs for boys, girls and adolescents.

A collaborative approach, where parents, carers and ECEC services work together to promote social and emotional development, is more likely to yield substantial and sustained improvements for children.

Parenting support and education is crucial to the success of mental health programs for children. The KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative supports staff, educators and families with information about parenting, child development and children’s mental health. A collaborative approach, where parents, carers and ECEC services work together to promote social and emotional development, is more likely to yield substantial and sustained improvements for children.

Part of this approach is about supporting parents and carers in self care, because parents and carers who are experiencing difficulty themselves will struggle to support other family members.

Sometimes the ECEC service is the only familiar and regular community connection outside of the home and is often where lasting friendships with other families begin.
Working with parents and carers has to be a priority for staff and educators. Genuine partnerships are a key aspect of this collaboration.

Family partnerships do require educators to

- create opportunities for partnerships and learn ways to engage families.
- reinforce the idea that parents and carers are crucial to their children’s early learning and school success and are their children’s first and most influential teachers.
- select goals, purposes, and activities in collaboration with families.
- recognise variations in parents’ skills and understand that all families have strengths and abilities that can benefit children. Respond to parent needs with flexible and individual solutions.
- communicate expectations, roles and responsibilities clearly and realistically.
- value and respect the diversity of families and the community.
- involve parents in decision making about their child’s learning and encourage them to ask questions and seek information.
- invite families to express their ideas and work on solutions without blame, with processes in place to resolve problems.
- seek optimum rather than maximum participation so no one feels over extended but understand how they might contribute.
- pay attention to all family members including fathers and extended where relevant.
- collaborate with other agencies and connect families to supports when needed.
- realistically consider staff skills and available resources and support ongoing learning.
- be honest and open with all families.

Working with parents and carers is a collaborative approach, not one where staff and educators see themselves as taking the place of parents and family. Children’s services are a support to the parental and family role, not a replacement or substitute for them. KidsMatter Early Childhood recognises that families are the most important people in children’s lives and children’s first teachers.

When educators take the lead and demonstrate an understanding of and commitment to families, children’s mental health will be enhanced. They will have a much greater chance of living a life where their potential and aspirations are fulfilled.

Working with parents and carers has to be a priority for staff and educators. Genuine partnerships are a key aspect of this collaboration.
Read more

Building relationships between parents and carers in early childhood AIFS

Communicating with Parents—Raising Children’s Network

Component 3 Literature Review—KidsMatter Early Childhood

Partnerships—Working together in early childhood settings. Research in Practice Series. ECA

Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from pre-school to end of Key Stage 1 2004