

Supporting family relationships: Suggestions for families and staff

Care and commitment are at the basis of strong family relationships. Some families seem to pull together easily, while for others it takes a greater effort. To build strong family relationships, start by identifying the strengths and appreciating them. Paying attention to the things that work well and building on them will help to strengthen your relationships.



The following suggestions may be useful reminders:

- ▶ **Make the wellbeing of family members a priority:** by spending regular time together, showing warmth, celebrating even the little achievements and separating work time from family time.
- ▶ **Tune in:** one way to show you care is by listening to what other family members have to say with interest and enthusiasm.
- ▶ **Acknowledge how family members feel:** this shows that you are able to accept others' feelings even if you may not agree with them.
- ▶ **Show respect:** for what is being said and in the way you talk about your own feelings and needs.
- ▶ **Appreciate differences:** family togetherness does not mean everybody has to be the same or always do the same things. Everyone is different so it helps to value and respect each family member's unique needs, wants and talents. Try to avoid negative comparisons. Affirm what each individual has to offer as this helps to build strong family bonds.
- ▶ **Share values:** having common values strengthens the sense of belonging and helps families work together. Discuss beliefs and values, tell stories about your own family and cultural history, and demonstrate values such as respect, care, compassion and responsibility.
- ▶ **Set an example:** children are influenced by what you do even more than by what you say. For example, if you want children to speak in an 'inside' voice (or soft voice) with their siblings, then it helps for them to hear you also speaking in an inside voice with them and others. Let them know what you expect of them and establish clear boundaries.
- ▶ **Send clear messages:** match what you do with what you say to avoid giving mixed messages. For example, if you set a bedtime but then allow children to extend their bedtime when they ask for it, then children may become confused about family rules.
- ▶ **Make time to talk:** regular time for talking to one another helps families to plan and set priorities, strengthen relationships and build mutual understanding. Spend time talking to children about things that interest them. Follow their lead and give them space to talk or be silent. Taking a few minutes to talk with children after school or before bedtime, and making time for adults to 'check in' with each other, is important for building connections and cooperation.
- ▶ **Talk about the good things:** spend time talking about shared family memories, what is good about your family and what you like about each other.
- ▶ **Have family discussions:** these are often very helpful ways of resolving conflicts and maintaining positive relationships. Make sure everyone gets a turn to share feelings and thoughts and contributes to finding solutions that can work for the whole family.

- ▶ **Have fun together:** spend time doing things you enjoy as a family. Doing simple things that allow you to relax and play together is very important for building positive feelings and connections among family members. Playing games or sports, going to the park or on picnics, visiting friends or finding ways to relax together are examples of family activities that help to build relationships.
- ▶ **Family rituals:** can help to build a sense of connection and belonging. These may include family celebrations that happen once a year, as well as everyday activities like bedtime stories, morning cuddles or cooking a special meal together once a week. Having family rituals that you enjoy together helps to create strong family bonds.
- ▶ **Include children in decisions:** when people have a say in the decisions that affect them, it helps them feel that what they think and want are important. Offer choices to younger children to help them begin to develop their decision-making and problem-solving skills.
- ▶ **Problem solve:** teaching problem-solving skills helps children learn to manage conflicts with siblings and other family members or friends. In a sibling conflict, this is more helpful than a parent or carer getting involved as children may feel that the adult is taking sides and have a sense of things not being fair.



- ▶ **Be present:** by providing comfort, love and care. Do things for one another without being asked. Check in with family members to see how they are going.
- ▶ **Share the load:** family life can get out of balance when one person feels that they have all the burden of responsibilities. Support each other by sharing the responsibilities (e.g., chores).
- ▶ **Take care of yourself:** before trying to look after others. When you are feeling good about yourself, rested and calm, then you are more likely to be able to attend to the needs of other family members. For more information on taking care of yourself, refer to *Component 3: Working with parents and carers 'Positive mental health for parents and carers'*.
- ▶ **Check in with others:** by being observant to what may be happening for other parents and carers and checking what they might need. Being thoughtful about the relationships and families of people around you can alert you to whether they may need additional help or support.
- ▶ **Get support:** when you need it from extended family, friends, or professionals as it can be important for managing challenges. Professional counselling can be a valuable strategy for helping many families who experience relationship challenges. Early childhood staff may be able to provide links to external support services, if needed.

This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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