

Promoting mental health in early childhood

What are risk and protective factors?

One way to understand mental health in early childhood is through risk and protective factors. The relationship between risk and protective factors is complex; however, it is known that reducing risk factors and building protective factors in children has a positive effect on their mental health and wellbeing.

Risk factors for children's mental health increase the chance of mental health difficulties developing. These may be events that challenge children's social and emotional wellbeing, such as family conflict or separation, parents or carers experiencing mental health difficulties, being affected by natural disasters, experiencing stressful events, experiencing trauma or abuse, or lacking friends or supportive relationships with adults.

Addressing risk and protective factors in the early years can improve children's wellbeing and reduce their risk of developing mental health difficulties.

Children who have protective factors in their lives can have improved mental health.

Protective factors for children's mental health decrease the likelihood of experiencing mental health difficulties. They help to balance out the risk of developing mental health difficulties and build resilience—the ability to cope with life's difficulties. Examples of children's mental health protective factors include: a stable and warm home environment; having supportive parents or carers and early childhood services; achieving developmental milestones; having an ambition to overcome challenges; routines and consistency in life; and having support from a wide circle of family, friends and community members. KidsMatter Early Childhood works to strengthen children's protective factors in the early years to improve their mental health and wellbeing.

The importance of promoting mental health in early childhood

Knowing what kinds of factors put children at risk of developing mental health difficulties helps adults to plan, develop, support and identify resources needed to improve children's mental health. This also helps to guide efforts to prevent mental health difficulties from developing. Specific areas of support that address children's risk and protective factors include building a sense of belonging and connection for children, assisting with the development of children's social and emotional skills, and strengthening relationships with important people in their lives.



Suggestions for supporting children's mental health

- ▶ Build and maintain supportive relationships between family, friends and early childhood staff. Talk together about how to best support you and your child.
 - ▶ Help children understand and manage their feelings, as this can help them develop coping skills.
 - ▶ Help children learn to cope with challenges by providing support and reassurance.
 - ▶ Help children to understand that stress, loss and grief are a normal part of life.
 - ▶ Try to maintain routines as much as possible. Routines and consistency in life help children feel secure.
 - ▶ Acknowledge children's feelings and try to understand and respect them, especially when they are going through a difficult time.
 - ▶ Help children feel connected with the early childhood service by taking an interest in their wellbeing, and by relating to them in ways that are consistently respectful and caring.
 - ▶ Help families who are experiencing difficulties by providing them with support, relevant information or the details of services or health professionals (e.g., a child and family support service).
 - ▶ Listen to the concerns of children, parents and carers without judgement and help them work through their problems. Listen and show empathy when parents and carers talk about things affecting them and their children.
 - ▶ Support children's skills, such as their ability to manage their emotions, relate to others or solve problems, for example by acknowledging their feelings when guiding their behaviour.
- ▶ Build partnerships with parents and carers to support children.
 - ▶ Observe and note children's behaviour to identify any concerns about their mental health and wellbeing.
 - ▶ Provide help for families early to prevent mental health difficulties developing or reduce their impact. When concerns are identified, provide support and suggestions for families to seek support from health professionals.



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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