

# Responding to children who may be experiencing mental health difficulties

## Learning about children through observations

Parents, carers and early childhood staff can support children's mental health by being aware of possible signs of emotional and behavioural difficulties. Some of the difficulties which might be cause for concern can fall under the following five areas related to mental health. These are the key things to observe when you are concerned about a child's mental health:

	<b>Behaviours</b>
	<b>Emotions</b>
	<b>Thoughts</b>
	<b>Learning</b>
	<b>Social Relationships</b>

Many children you may be concerned about will have difficulties in more than one area as they all link and influence one another. For example, a child who is showing signs of difficulties in their behaviour may also have difficulties in managing their emotions and forming relationships. It is common for children to show difficulties in these areas during early childhood as they are developing new skills. Many behaviours that would be of concern in an older child are natural for infants and very young children. If early childhood service staff have a concern about a child, they may choose to observe them in a range of situations to get as much information as possible. It is important that some observation, discussion and reflection takes place before deciding whether there is a significant concern requiring further investigation.

Parents and carers are usually the first to recognise that their children are experiencing difficulties with behaviour, emotions or thoughts. Sometimes, though, the difficulties may be more noticeable at a child's early childhood service where staff regularly observe the behaviours of a range of children every day.

Observations are an excellent way of identifying children's strengths and needs. Through observations parents, carers and staff can see what children are coping with, enjoying, finding easy, and where children might need more support. When early childhood staff observe children they are concerned about, it is important they focus on particular behaviours and get as much detail about these behaviours as possible. By observing children you can start to learn what is part of everyday child development and what could be a mental health difficulty.



**Taking time to observe children doing everyday things can help us understand the meaning behind their behaviour.**

## **How to gather good observations:**

- ▶ Focus only on what you actually see and hear, rather than what you think about a child's behaviours, emotions and thoughts.
- ▶ Take note of when, where and how often a child is showing a particular behaviour or emotion.
- ▶ Notice what makes the child's experience worse and what makes it better.
- ▶ Record how long the behaviour or emotion occurs. For example, if you are concerned about your child's tantrums, take note of how long they last.
- ▶ Notice what happens before and after the behaviour that is a concern.

**Remember, taking the time to see how a child responds to a range of experiences, environments and people can provide a good picture of what is going on for them.**



## **Knowing when to get help for children**

One of the major challenges of recognising the signs of emotional and behavioural difficulties in early childhood is deciding you are concerned enough to take further action. All children have times of difficulties managing their emotions and behaviour, especially if they are tired, hungry or dealing with unfamiliar experiences. Some children may have emotional and behavioural difficulties that are mild, short-lived and can be resolved with minimum help and support. Others may have difficulties that seem more serious, and interfere with everyday life. Their emotions and behaviours may seem to be different to other children their age. When difficulties occur for more than a few weeks and interfere with child care, home, friendships and daily life, it is probably time to seek assistance.

Concerning behaviours can sometimes be related to specific events in a child's life (for example, moving house or the birth of a new sibling). Other concerning reactions can be associated with a particular situation (for example, a child biting another child who has snatched their toy). Examining how often, how long, how severe and the number of settings in which a child is showing particular difficulties can help parents, carers and staff recognise the level of concern present. When difficulties in emotions and behaviours become frequent, across a number of settings and over long periods of time, these are warning signs that mental health difficulties may be present.



### What parents and carers can do:

- ▶ Share discussions with early childhood staff when you have a concern about your child.
- ▶ If you are concerned about your child, take time to observe them in a range of settings and talk to your early childhood service about what they have observed.
- ▶ Discuss any strategies that you have found useful in responding to your child's needs with your early childhood service. Early childhood staff may also have suggestions about what strategies they have found helpful to support your child.
- ▶ Get to know what mental health services are available for children and families in your area.

### What early childhood services might be doing:

- ▶ Developing policies and procedures for responding to children who may be experiencing mental health difficulties.
- ▶ Taking time to observe children's behaviours, emotions, thoughts, learning and social relationships during a variety of activities at the service and discussing these with parents and carers.
- ▶ Working in partnership with families by having regular meetings and following up with them to support a child who may be experiencing emotional and/or behavioural difficulties.
- ▶ Developing relationships with local mental health services to support their work with children and families.
- ▶ Displaying contact details of mental health services in the local area for all members of the early childhood service community.
- ▶ Providing an appropriate space for families to meet with staff and other health professionals.
- ▶ Helping children to learn new skills that support their development.

## Getting help for your child

If you are concerned that your child may be experiencing emotional and/or behavioural difficulties and are not sure how to go about getting help, try the following steps.

### Find out more

- ▶ Talk to staff or others who have regular contact with your child and find out if they have concerns about your child.
- ▶ Talk to the local psychologist/counsellor.
- ▶ Some early childhood services (particularly preschools) may have a psychologist/counsellor available who families can see. They can listen to your concerns and discuss options for helping your child at home and at the early childhood service.

### See your General Practitioner

- ▶ Your doctor can help you decide about the need for further mental health assessment and treatment and refer you to a children's mental health specialist if required.



### Where can I learn more?



Articles on a range of issues relevant to responding to children who may be experiencing mental health difficulties are available at:

**Australian Psychological Society:** [http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip\\_sheets/](http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip_sheets/)

**Child and Youth Health:** <http://www.cyh.com> – see 'Parenting and child health' tab

**Raising Children Network:** <http://raisingchildren.net.au/myneighbourhood/>

**Early Childhood Australia:** [http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/feelings\\_and\\_behaviours/feelings\\_and\\_behaviours.html](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/feelings_and_behaviours/feelings_and_behaviours.html)

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



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