Seeking help for children’s mental health difficulties

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Making the decision to seek help

Making the decision to seek help can be a long and difficult one. Support and encouragement of others can help families to take the first steps in the help-seeking process. Early childhood staff can support families with making the decision to seek help.

Some suggestions about how families and/or staff can tackle the decision to get support for a child include:

- open communication of concerns with a friend, partner or other staff
- try to discover the strengths of the child and the strengths within the family
- refer to other professionals for support (e.g., counsellors, GPs, colleagues)
- list the positives and negatives associated with seeking help (e.g., further support or possible stigma).

Maddie’s story

Max and Naomi are parents of three-year-old Maddie and one-year-old Oscar. They are a small family that live in a country town after moving from a major city. Max had recently noticed changes in Maddie’s behaviour. At home she would withdraw from her family and sit quietly in her room for hours, complain to her dad about stomach-aches and feeling unwell, and never play with her toys anymore. As Max and Naomi had recently moved, much of their support remained in the city. Max was concerned and started to discuss the changes in Maddie’s behaviour with Naomi. Naomi was hesitant to talk about Maddie with anyone besides her partner. She felt uncomfortable with the preschool as a new mum and was unsure who to talk to. Max noticed the preschool had some help-seeking strategies on their website and options about who might be able to help. The GP was first on the list so Naomi and Max took Maddie to a doctor the next week. Although the GP was a new face to the family and taking Maddie there was still a difficult step for them, Naomi and Max felt this was someone who had knowledge and could provide a safe, non-judgemental environment for them to share their thoughts and concerns. They hoped that this would be the beginning of helping Maddie.
Where to begin seeking help for children

It is often hard for families and staff to work out where to start when seeking help for children. Some of the things to consider when thinking about seeking help for a child include the sources of support already available to them, as well as their strengths. For example, involved family members such as a grandparent may be one source of support and encouragement for a child. A lot of families also have doubts about seeking support outside the family. Some families may try a few times before they find the right type of support for their child. For example, they might access a few different services before they find one that will be able to help, or may not feel confident in one service and try another. The first steps of seeking help sometimes cause some worry and stress for families, but there are ways to get through this.

Some tips for finding a pathway to seeking help include:

- write down your questions
- identify individuals you can trust
- recognise your strengths as a family
- gather information on the services and agencies available to you (e.g., your GP, community health services, child and adolescent mental health services).

Seeking help together

Families and early childhood staff might initially find it difficult to raise the topic with each other if they believe a child is experiencing mental health difficulties. It is helpful to share the information and knowledge that both have about a child and any possible avenues for help and support. By having caring and understanding people around them, families can feel encouraged and more hopeful. When a family is accessing the support (e.g., through a health professional), the early childhood service may be able to further assist by providing more information and by helping to implement any strategies that have been suggested to support the child.

When seeking help in a partnership, the following ideas might be helpful:

- Clearly communicate concerns to each other.
- Work together to develop a plan for seeking help and support each other in having realistic and achievable goals.
- Talk to each other about the options available (e.g., a friend, counsellor, maternal and child health nurse).
- Help each other think about what could be different and how they can work towards change together.
- Share information about how things are progressing at home and in the service. This should include things that are going well.

For more information on forming partnerships, refer to Component 3: Working with parents and carers ‘Building partnerships between families and early childhood staff’.

It can be difficult to know where to start when seeking help for a child; however, it is important to take the first step and allow the questions that follow to guide the path to further support.
Understanding risk and protective factors and the importance of social support

One way to understand mental health in early childhood is through risk and protective factors. The relationship between risk and protective factors is complicated; however, it is known that reducing risk factors (e.g., parental stress, disappointment with previous help and lack of knowledge about children’s mental health difficulties) and building protective factors (e.g., relationships, partnerships and self-esteem) in children and families has a positive effect on their mental health and wellbeing.

Protective factors for children’s mental health decrease the likelihood of them 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. An example of a mental health protective factor for children includes a positive social support network for parents and carers.

Support networks are groups of people that provide emotional and practical help to each other in good times and also in times of need. Support networks come in many different shapes and sizes and can be formal or informal. Formal support networks can be things like parents’ groups and community health professionals. Informal support networks can include family, friends, work colleagues, neighbours, sporting clubs, and other parents and carers at the early childhood service. Early childhood services are accessed by most families and are a good place for parents and carers to make friendships and build support networks.

Why is social support important for the help-seeking process?

Social support is an important part of help-seeking for families. Not having enough social support can make this difficult for families. A social support network can help a family both through difficult times (e.g., identifying concerns they have about their children) and to celebrate good times (e.g., children’s birthdays and achievements). A support network helps parents and carers build relationships and friendships that give families the confidence to seek help and feel positive about it. These networks provide reassurance and can be a great source of strength for a family. The group may often share experiences and tips to help others move through difficult periods of their life. Making the decision to seek help is often very hard for families, so having a social support network can help them to deal with the worry and the stress that comes with it. Support networks are an important protective factor for mental health in parents, carers and children, because they give families the emotional and practical assistance they need when seeking help.

Social support is a protective factor that can have positive effects on parenting, family wellbeing and children’s resilience. Help-seeking is made easier when a family has social support.

Seeking help for children’s mental health difficulties
When parents and carers feel like they have tried everything

Sometimes it can feel as though the answers are not easy to find. It may be necessary to try many different things when looking for help. This can lead to feelings of confusion, worry, anger, disappointment or even the feeling of wanting to give up.

Where to next?

There are things that families and staff can try when they feel like they have hit a roadblock. For example, it is often very helpful to sit down and create a plan for moving forward again. This plan can include things like the priorities to focus on, clear and achievable goals for trying again and ways to deal with the emotions and the stress that can come about when seeking help does not go according to plan. Once everybody is on the same page it is easier to try to seek help again.

Mateo and Nicola are the parents of four-year-old Ava. They had been having some concerns about Ava continually crying and throwing items around when she arrived at preschool. When Nicola picked Ava up from preschool her crying would start again and she would run to the car. Mateo had tried to calm her and talk to her about her emotions but this hadn't helped. Nicola asked their GP 'What's wrong with my daughter?', but he wasn't sure what to suggest. Mateo called the preschool to find out more about Ava's behaviour but the staff who knew Ava were busy and it was hard to find a time to talk. Mateo and Nicola felt like nothing they tried was working. They decided to sit together and talk about how they felt and what was happening. After this, they became aware that differences between home and preschool might be stressful for Ava. They wanted to work as a team to support Ava and began to think about what might help. Mateo and Nicola wrote a list of questions to help them approach their preschool and GP again.