

Building protective factors: Suggestions for school staff

A sense of belonging to school is an important protective factor for children's mental health and wellbeing. It helps to reduce the impacts of risks that children may be exposed to. School staff can help children gain a sense of belonging to school by taking an interest in their wellbeing, and by relating to them in ways that are consistently respectful and caring. This can provide children with a sense of stability and security through periods of stress and challenge. School staff can also help families who are experiencing difficulties by providing them with support and relevant information.

How school staff can help

Develop supportive and caring relationships with children

Get to know the children in your class and take an interest in their lives. Show you respect and care for your students by listening to their concerns non-judgementally and helping them think through problems. Respect their privacy when they share concerns with you.

Provide safety and stability

When children are experiencing disruptions to their home life, a stable and nurturing environment at school can provide a sense of reassurance and safety. A reliable daily routine and a welcoming environment can provide children with dependability and a chance to relax and be themselves. It is also important for school staff to be aware of mental health risk factors associated with school settings and to take steps to address safety issues such as bullying.

Support children's social and emotional development

Teaching children social and emotional skills helps them learn about managing emotions, relating to others, solving problems and managing conflict. A number of curriculum-based social and emotional learning programs are available for use in the classroom. Many of these have been reviewed in the KidsMatter Primary Programs Guide. The Guide also includes information about targeted co-curricular programs designed to assist children who may be facing difficulties associated with grief and loss, family breakdown, parental mental illness, and more.

How school staff can help – *continued*

Build relationships with parents and carers

Working together with parents and carers enables school staff to provide more effective support for children who have difficulties. However, it is not always easy for parents and carers to approach school staff, especially if they are going through difficulties themselves. Listening, respectfully and with empathy, when parents and carers talk about the things affecting them and their children can be very supportive in itself. You may also be able, where appropriate, to provide information about services that can assist them. Being open, empathic and non-judgemental is very important for establishing trust and building a cooperative approach to meeting children's developmental, mental health and wellbeing needs.

Monitor children's mental health and wellbeing

Getting help early is important for preventing mental health difficulties and reducing their impact. School staff can assist by observing children's behaviour and identifying when they have concerns about the wellbeing of children in their care. As much as possible, this kind of monitoring should involve school staff working together with parents and carers in supporting the child. When significant concerns about a particular child are identified, the support and advice of the school welfare team, school psychologist or school counsellor should be sought.

For more, please refer to the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on recognising and getting help for children with mental health difficulties.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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