Early childhood mental health has been described as the “capacity of a young child – within the context of their development, family, environment and culture – to:
• participate in the physical and social environment;
• form healthy and secure relationships;
• experience, regulate, understand and express emotions;
• understand and regulate their behaviour;
• interact appropriately with others, including peers; and
• develop a secure sense of self” (HIMHCS & HISC, 2012:13).

This definition reflects the significance of healthy social and emotional learning and development in the early years. As ECEC services see many children for extended periods of time, they are well placed to support children's social and emotional development.

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Meeting children - for who they are and where they come from
Children come from a range of contexts and they all develop at different rates and stages. KidsMatter asks ECEC services to reflect on the children who are a part of their communities. Do they know them well? Knowing children well is the basis of supporting children's social and emotional development. When we know who children are, what they're like, where they come from, and what their family is like, we are more equipped to relate to them in a way that suits their style of social and emotional learning.
The significance of relationships
Children are born with the capacity to form relationships. It is through their relationships that children learn about who they are, how to interact with others, and how to manage their emotions (Stonehouse, 2012). By getting to know children and their families well, educators support this ability to develop and form relationships. KidsMatter focuses on the role of relationships between children and educators. These relationships provide a model for how children should treat and expect to be treated by others. They also instil a sense of safety and security, allowing them to explore and interact with their world. The experience of supportive relationships assists children in their ongoing relationship formation and in developing positive mental health.

Being confident to explore
Warm, responsive and trusting relationships provide a secure base from which children can explore. It gives children a sense that they have the capacity to influence their surroundings (Kostelnik, Whiren, Soderman & Gregory, 2009). This sense of agency develops through a child’s repeated experiences of having their needs met, using and extending their abilities, and having opportunities to take risks. KidsMatter encourages ECEC services to think about the range of opportunities, interactions and experiences they provide for children, and to consider how these influence children’s social and emotional learning and development.

Managing feelings and behaviour
The foundations for managing emotions and behaviour are set up in early childhood. Positive relationships provide the safety for children to experience, express, understand and manage their emotions and their behaviour. Knowing when to step in, and when to stand back to support children in their social and emotional learning, can be challenging (Nolan, Kilderry & O’Grady, 2006). Regularly taking the opportunity to reflect when working with children, perhaps with colleagues or a mentor, can support such decision making in challenging situations.

Making friends
Being able to form positive relationships with peers and adults is an important life skill. Children who have had many opportunities to support their social and emotional learning are better prepared to form relationships with others. Friendships also represent unique experiences for interaction and time alone, can have a great influence on children’s social and emotional learning.

How children see themselves
A child’s sense of self is how they see themselves as an individual. It is also the guide for how they interact with others now and as adults (Kostelnik, Whiren, Soderman & Gregory, 2009). When children see themselves as being able to make an impact on their world, they feel confident and capable of taking on challenges. Children develop an understanding of who they are from how significant people in their lives respond to them. When adults are mindful of how their behaviours are interpreted by children, they can interact in ways that support children’s development of a positive sense of self.

Social and emotional learning in practice
Children’s developing sense of self and social and emotional learning all have a direct influence on how well they can navigate their social worlds. Their growing understanding of who they are, and how their behaviours and emotions affect themselves allows them to make decisions about how to respond to others (Kostelnik et al, 2009). As more and more children attend ECEC services for longer periods of time (DEEWR, 2012), educators play a significant role in children’s social and emotional development. KidsMatter highlights the value of this role and provides a framework to guide practice with mental health in mind.

Want to know more about KidsMatter Early Childhood?
KidsMatter provides expert knowledge, tools and support to help grow happy and healthy young minds. It is funded by the Australian Government and backed by the expertise of the Australian Psychological Society, beyondblue and Early Childhood Australia.

The KidsMatter resources are valuable for families and for those working in ECEC settings. Along with general information about the initiative, all of KidsMatter’s resources can be accessed on our website, www.kidsmatter.edu.au. These resources are grouped under four themes, which reflect the Components of the Kidsmatter framework:

• Creating a sense of community;
• Developing children’s social and emotional skills;
• Working with parents and carers;
• Helping children who are experiencing mental health difficulties.

Also available online is the KidsMatter Early Childhood Programs Guide, which enables ECEC services to make informed decisions when selecting evidence-based mental health and wellbeing programs for their ECEC service community.

References:


