A whole-school approach

What is a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing?
A whole-school approach involves the members of the school community – school staff, parents and carers, students and the broader community – building and refining a thriving positive culture where everyone feels a sense of belonging. This means the school is committed to addressing the needs of the school community. It involves looking at what the school teaches in relation to social and emotional learning, ensuring that teaching is interactive and inclusive, building partnerships with families and the broader community that are inclusive and respectful, and reflecting the diversity of the school community in the development of policies and procedures. It is widely recognised that effective and sustainable interventions in schools occur when a whole-school approach is implemented.

Why is a whole-school approach important?
A whole-school approach is particularly important when it comes to addressing children’s mental health and wellbeing because of the significant influences of the family, community, staff and peers on children’s mental health wellbeing. Children’s mental health and wellbeing is promoted and supported when the key people in their lives come together to work in partnership in the best interests of students. A whole-school approach is a useful way to facilitate this process.

Research shows that initiatives like KidsMatter Primary are most effective and sustainable in schools when the following occurs:

- all of the members of a school community work together for a common outcome
- the initiative aligns with school values and creates a sense of purpose
- the initiative is embedded into school organisational processes
- professional learning is provided to build common understanding, purpose and skills to support implementation and sustainability
- the initiative creates links to existing priorities in the school
- every member of the school community has the opportunity to contribute to the planning, decision making and roll-out of the initiative.

“A whole-school approach is vital for developing and implementing programs for the mental health of students. One of the problems in schools and in school systems is we tend often to do things in isolation when in fact, everything’s connected.”

Professor Brian Caldwell, Educational Transformations
Component 1: Positive school community
Helps schools to focus on building a sense of belonging and a community that promotes children’s mental health and wellbeing. It emphasises the importance of involving the whole school community in the planning and development of policies and procedures.

Component 2: Social and emotional learning for students
Helps schools to build a whole-school approach to teaching students skills to get along with others and understand their emotions and those of others. This component also emphasises the importance of positive relationships among all members of the school community when it comes to developing children’s mental health and wellbeing.

Component 3: Working with parents and carers
Helps schools to develop partnerships with parents and carers. Developing partnerships with parents and carers by helping them feel welcome and included at the school can help parents and carers feel comfortable about being involved in activities like school planning and decision making.

Component 4: Helping children with mental health difficulties
Focuses on developing a whole-school approach to responding to children who may need extra support. Part of this response involves ensuring supportive and inclusive policies and procedures are in place so that everyone knows what to do if there are concerns about a child. This component also ensures there are effective relationships with health and community services in the local area to ensure easier access to support services for children and families.

How does KidsMatter Primary help schools to develop a whole-school approach to supporting children’s mental health?

A whole-school approach underlies the entire KidsMatter framework. The framework helps the whole school community to systematically review practice, policies and procedures across the school to identify strengths and challenges and develop a strategic mental health and wellbeing plan. This plan sits within the school’s broader strategic plan as part of the ongoing review and improvement processes. Each of the four KidsMatter components also help schools to develop a whole-school approach to supporting mental health and wellbeing. The KidsMatter Primary Guiding Principles form the basis of all KidsMatter whole-school practices and reflect school values and beliefs that foster inclusion and participation within the school community.

Read more about the four components of KidsMatter Primary and the KidsMatter Primary Guiding Principles:

www.kidsmatter.edu.au/primary/about-kidsmatter-primary/theory

“Anyone and everyone who’s involved in our St Mark’s school community is involved in the whole-school approach, ranging from the staff, the children, families, extended families, the lollipop lady, the tuck-shop lady, anyone in the parish, anyone involved in our school.”

Maria, Teacher, St Mark’s Fawkner Catholic School, Victoria
What are you doing at your school?
These questions can help you reflect on what you need to do to develop a whole-school approach to supporting children’s mental health and wellbeing at your school.

• Is implementing a whole-school approach realistic or achievable for our school community? Why or why not?
• How do leadership and school governance bodies promote mental health and wellbeing as a priority in our school community?
• How does our school work with new staff members, families and students to share the values and ethics of the school community and include them in plans and programs?
• How do we ensure the words and ideas in our school vision are applied to everyday practice, teaching and relationships in our school?
• How have we collected information in the past about whether practices in our school community are effective? How is this information conveyed and to whom?
• What type of support can health and community services contribute to our school?
• How are the students in our school given opportunities to contribute?
• How well are we including families in planning and activities?

What else should you consider when implementing a whole-school approach?

• How your school defines a whole-school approach matters. While many schools believe they are already implementing whole-school practices, it’s easy to make assumptions about what school community members need, consider input only from certain members or view some members’ opinions as representative of everyone in the community.
• Implementing a whole-school approach takes time. KidsMatter Primary recognises this and supports schools by providing relevant tools and resources for the KidsMatter Primary journey.
• It’s vital to create opportunities for everyone to be involved. Examining why some people aren’t involved in the school community and looking at how to involve them is a key aspect of whole-school practice.
• Relationships with community members are important. Look at the history and current state of relationships with community members. How comfortable are school staff in approaching families and local support services? How comfortable will families and services feel being approached?
• Sustaining relationships is a must. The school population changes every year. Consider what you are putting in place to involve new members of the school community.

Other resources
Achieving Health Promoting Schools: Guidelines for promoting health in schools, International Union for Health Promotion and Education: