Creating a sense of community

KidsMatter Early Childhood (KMEC) is a national mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention initiative developed for early childhood services. The four components of the KMEC framework (KMEC, 2009) are creating a sense of community; developing children’s social and emotional skills; working with parents and carers; and helping children who are experiencing mental health difficulties.

BELONGING AND CONNECTEDNESS

Early childhood pilot services are supported in implementing the framework by identifying their strengths, before working together to develop goals as part of their planning around creating a sense of community. Target areas include belonging and connectedness, inclusion, positive relationships and collaboration.

When there is a feeling of **belonging and connectedness**, children are more likely to feel valued and accepted, cope better with life’s challenges, be involved, and benefit from feeling part of a positive early childhood community. A sense of belonging establishes strong foundations for building meaningful, enjoyable relationships with others.

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| Continue to build strong relationships with families | • encourage families to spend time at preschool  
• hold informal parent-staff meetings, using personal invitations  
• hold a pancake cooking evening with children, their families and staff |

Courtesy of Cooma North Preschool, NSW

**INCLUSION**

**Inclusion** involves understanding and respecting the diversity of children, families and staff. An inclusive service has a positive impact on children’s mental health and wellbeing by helping them to affirm their own identity, build positive self-esteem and feel confident to express themselves.

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| Provide staff with an understanding of the diversity in the community and the resources available | • show staff resources available within the centre  
• give staff teams tasks to explore different facilities in town to collect information, for example, town library, museum, etc.  
• collate collected information to make a resource booklet |

Courtesy of Annette’s Place, NSW

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Early **positive relationships** allow for the development of a sense of trust, for children to learn and grow as individuals and to gain skills for future responsive, warm and trusting relationships. When children have at least one positive adult relationship outside of the home, and experience mutually enjoyable and respectful relationships, it can have a positive impact on children’s mental health and wellbeing.

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| Creating a wonderful environment that is a collaborative project | • creating a community garden worked on by all  
• inviting all to attend the opening of the community garden  
• opening the community garden to Transition, Year 1 and Year 2 |

Courtesy of Holy Spirit Community of Learners, NT

COLLABORATION

Children, families and staff work together in **collaboration** by having opportunities to be involved in planning, decision making and contributing to a range of experiences in the service.

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| To support families to feel more connected and to enhance collaboration | • review the way in which the program is developed in consultation with families  
• develop photo boards of the experiences the children have been engaged in, to promote conversations with families |

Courtesy of Play Mates Day Care, QLD

A positive sense of community is strengthened when people feel they belong, are connected to the service and have opportunities to contribute in meaningful ways. A positive sense of community is a key protective factor for the mental health and wellbeing of children, families and staff.

KidsMatter Australian Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative has been developed in collaboration with beyondblue: the national depression initiative, Early Childhood Australia, with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing and beyondblue: the national depression initiative.

**Reference**