Critical friends: Supporting ECEC service and school change

What is a 'critical friend'?

There are many ways of supporting early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and primary schools, and being a critical friend is one method. A 'critical friend' is most commonly defined as "a trusted person who asks provocative questions and provides data to be examined through another lens and offers critique of a person's work as a friend" (Costa & Kallick, 1993 p. 50).

Other definitions of a critical friend include...

- a person who will take the time to understand the context of the work presented, the outcomes desired, and who will advocate for the work of that group (Costa & Kallick, 1993)

- "a detached outsider who assists through questioning, reflecting back, and providing another viewpoint" (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009)

- "a capable reflective practitioner who establishes safe ways of working and negotiates shared understandings" (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009 p. 206).

The process of being a critical friend is based on cooperative adult learning principles, where everyone's expertise is recognised and valued. The critical friend uses their skills and knowledge to support others to examine and constructively critique their practices (Knowles, 1973). This is achieved through inquiry-based discussions, where questions are raised to promote deeper thinking and investigation.

Why might critical friends be helpful in early childhood and educational settings?

Over the last 20 years, new initiatives - the Early Years Learning Framework, National Quality Standards, and National Curriculum, among others - have led to changes in policies and procedures in ECEC services and primary schools. Change can be difficult though, due to the inherently complex systems, policies, and procedures involved in organisations (Ainscow & Southworth, 1996; Bower, 2006; Greenberg, 2004; Greenberg & Kusché, 2006; Hopkins & Ainscow, 1993).

Despite these challenges, a number of factors have been demonstrated as helpful in reaching successful outcomes. Among these are developing shared understandings and goals, having a sense of ownership, the free sharing of information, paying significant attention to implementation, nurturing those involved, and the provision of a structured space for communication (Ainscow & Southworth, 1996; Bambino, 2002; Bower, 2006; Greenberg, 2004; Greenberg & Kusché, 2006). Having external support to promote these factors can be very beneficial (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005).

A critical friend as part of KidsMatter

KidsMatter provides a framework for improving children's mental health and wellbeing. This involves a whole setting, namely, an ECEC service or primary school. Each setting adopts a coordinated approach driven by a Leadership Team (ECEC services) or an Action Team (primary schools), where team members assess their setting's strengths and identify areas of development for each of the four components. The continuous process of service or school development includes celebrating and sharing achievements, relationship building, professional learning, and the development, implementation, monitoring and review of plans. Engaging a critical friend can help ECEC services and primary schools with organisational change.

A critical friend can work with KidsMatter ECEC services and primary schools to develop shared understandings and goals around the four components, to encourage the sharing of information, and to promote different insights into supporting children's mental health. Further, they can work in partnership with ECEC services and primary schools to increase engagement, belonging and connectedness, not only for children, but also between schools, families, and communities (Butler, Drew, Krelle, Seal, & Trafford, 2011).

The critical friend process in KidsMatter focuses on supportive relationships and reflective practice. It is a collaborative approach where everyone's thoughts and ideas are expressed and heard. The critical friend can offer an alternative perspective, informed by their knowledge of children's mental health. This process will look different in each setting depending on their needs and preferences, as well as the capacity of the critical friend – for example, in one setting, the critical friend may become part of the Leadership Team or Action Team, whilst, in another, they may provide one off support during the initial stages of implementation.

Who can be a critical friend?

A critical friend is someone who can complement the skills of the KidsMatter Leadership Team or Action Team. It can be someone from a range of sources or professional backgrounds with skills in supporting change management. This can include, for example, local health or community personnel, mental health professionals (including from child and adolescent mental health services), private practitioners (such as psychologists), professionals from non-government agencies or support services, and more. A critical friend is someone who is able to build a positive relationship, understand the context of the ECEC service or school, provide an alternative perspective, and promote deeper thinking about supporting children's mental health.

Are critical friends effective in creating organisational change?

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of the critical friend process in organisational change and the acceptance and support of change. Evidence comes from a number of fields including early childhood to tertiary education settings and education-related fields. In early education settings and schools, the process has resulted in increased self-awareness and self-monitoring of practice, increased ability to critically evaluate, and improved connections between student learning, practices, and wellbeing (Ainscow & Southworth, 1996; Bond, Glover, Godfrey, Butler, & Patton, 2001; Earl, Torrance, Sutherland, Fullan, & Ali, 2003; Fleet & Patterson, 2001; Johanson & Kuh, 2013; MacBeath & Jardine, 1998; Patton et al., 2000). Additionally, when services and schools have a critical friend, they can find it easier to gain momentum for change and to implement and sustain change (Butler, et al., 2011).

What does a critical friend do?

There is no set way to be a critical friend. The critical friend process can involve different things depending on the needs and preferences of the ECEC service or the primary school, and the capacity of the person playing this role. Once a relationship is established and the critical friend has familiarised themselves with the context in which the service or school operates, they might:

- build supportive relationships within the service or school and with the broader community
- provide knowledge, support, and expertise to challenge beliefs and practices
- act as a 'sounding board' for the Leadership Team or Action Team
- provide an alternative perspective and ask provocative questions to encourage reflection and critical-thinking
- encourage consultation with the whole ECEC or school community
- support group processes and problem-solving
- provide encouragement, inspiration and motivation
- recognise achievements, strengths and skills.

Butler et al. (2011) has developed the following framework for the range of roles that can be involved in being a critical friend and the need to tailor these to meet the needs of the service or school.

Getting in	A critical friend might...
Involves building relationships, understanding the service or school culture and identity, establishing the 'ground rules' of the relationship, setting boundaries and responsibilities, and setting goals for change.	• find out about the ECEC service or school context • ask the ECEC service or school about their preferences and expectations of the role • develop positive relationships • clarify roles and boundaries • gather information about where the ECEC service or school is up to with KidsMatter implementation.
Getting on with it	**A critical friend might...**
Involves cultivating respect and shared understandings, exploring evidence-based practice, challenging assumptions, recognising strengths, sharing knowledge and expertise, fostering critical inquiry, and developing a strategic plan.	• support the ECEC service or school to stay firm to the conceptual framework and underpinning principles of KidsMatter • assist the Leadership Team or Action Team managing group processes • promote and model reflective practice, asking questions to prompt critical-thinking about children's mental health • facilitate problem-solving • support ECEC services or schools to gather and interpret data in relation to the four components • support a collaborative learning community.
Getting out	**A critical friend might...**
Involves promoting the ongoing nature of change, celebrating achievements, planning for departure, developing methods of maintaining momentum, and embedding changes in policies, structures, practices, and processes.	• review and evaluate progress in relation to the ECEC service or school's goals around the four components • support the Leadership Team or Action team to embed changes into policies, practices and processes • assist in the identification of next steps and updating component plans • highlight strengths and celebrate successes • support and plan for transition if the role is ending.

Modified from Butler et al. (2011).
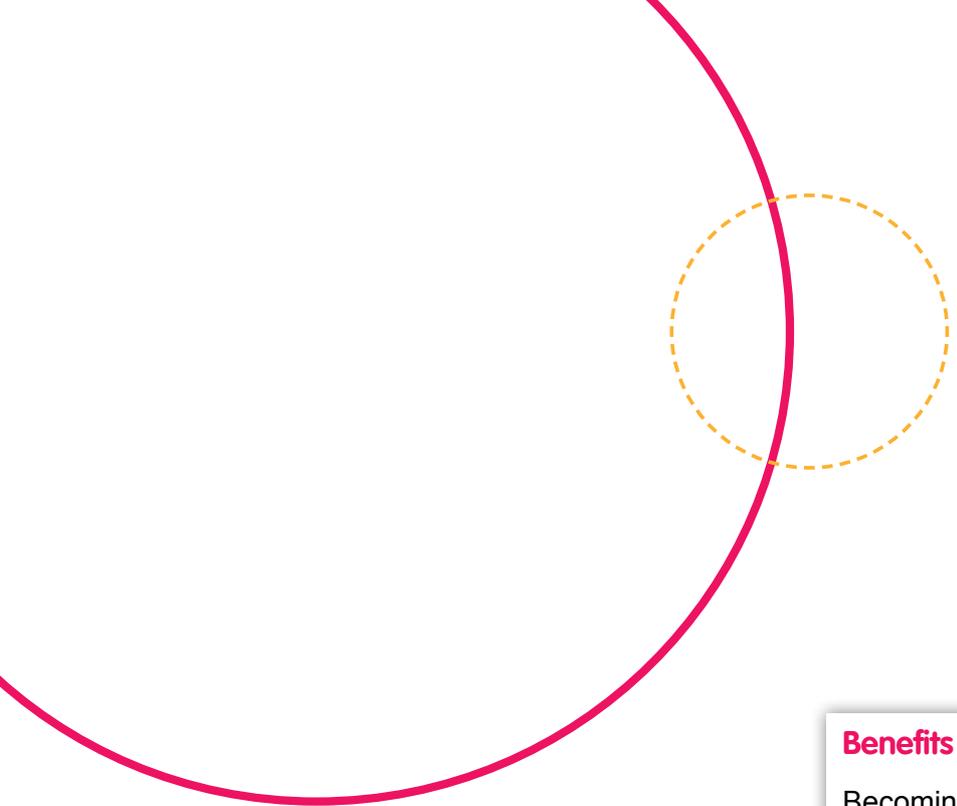
Personal characteristics that can be helpful as a critical friend

Playing the role of a critical friend involves a range of skills and qualities needed to build positive, trusting relationships and enable the ECEC service or school to maintain ownership of KidsMatter implementation whilst supporting their engagement. Swaffield (2004, p. 5) suggests that a critical friend may have the following characteristics:

- Has strong skills in building and maintaining relationships of trust.

- Their breadth and depth of relevant knowledge and experience is well developed.

- Is well focused and able to establish and adhere to clear boundaries.

- Balances support and professional challenge.

- Motivates and reassures.

- Is facilitative, rather than directive, operating particularly through asking questions and providing feedback.

- Has a well developed understanding of the complexities of change processes.

- Has an understanding of group development theory.

- Is an advocate and is concerned about the outcomes and effectiveness of the work, and its effect on a whole range of people.

- Seeks to enable those he or she works with to become more self-sufficient.

Benefits to the community

Becoming a critical friend has great benefits in supporting processes of change that can be daunting for services and schools. The effects reach beyond the service or school, however, with benefits for all through the strong partnerships forged. Strong partnerships lead to shared knowledge and clarity of roles and the services available, with this knowledge resulting in improved responses to prevention and early intervention in children's mental health.

Reflection on what you can bring to this role

- How is the role of a critical friend similar and different from your usual professional role?

- What level and type of support do you think you can provide as a critical friend?

- What strengths and skills can you bring to the role?

- What do you need to consider before deciding to support an ECEC service or school implementing KidsMatter?

- Have you played a similar role previously? What worked well and what could have worked better?

- What information about the ECEC service or school do you need to work effectively with them? What do they need to know about you and your role?

- How will you and the ECEC service or school review progress? What steps will be put in place if difficulties arise? What regular communication processes could you put in place from the outset?
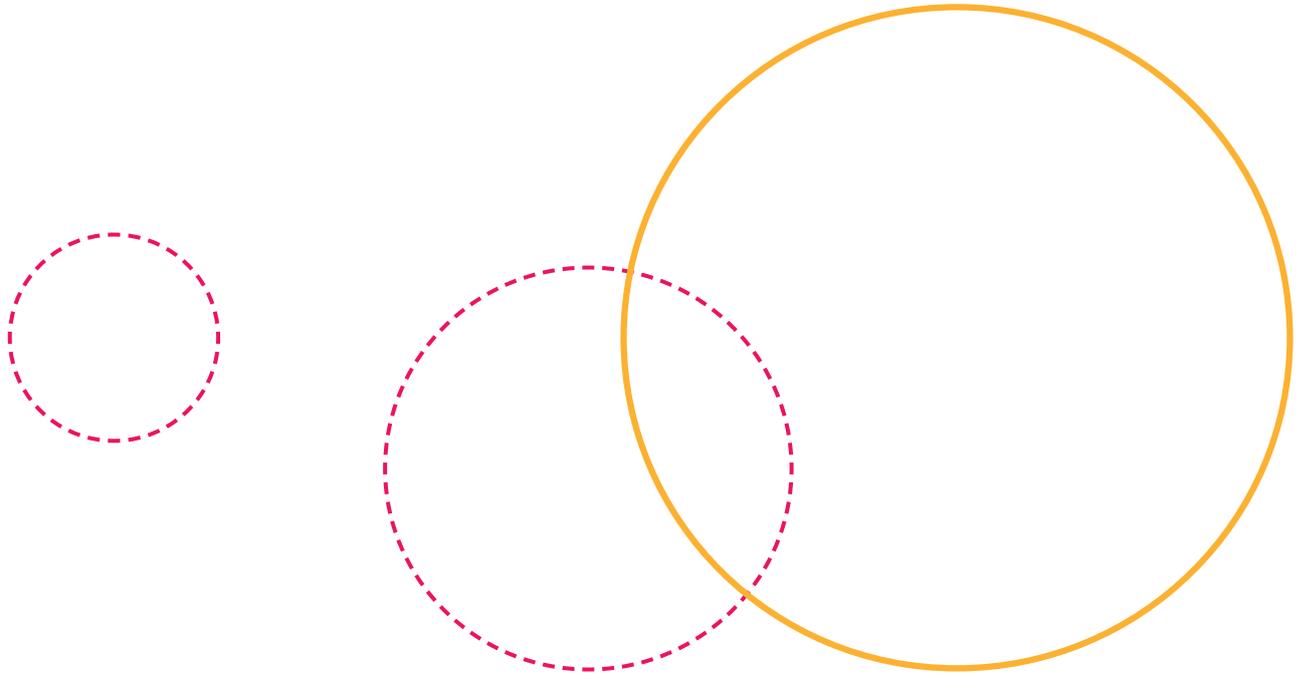
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