



**Professional learning: Helping children who are  
experiencing mental health difficulties**

Topic 1: Understanding mental health

# Leadership team guide



### **Acknowledgement:**

KidsMatter Australian Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative has been developed in collaboration with *beyondblue*, the Australian Psychological Society and Early Childhood Australia, with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health and *beyondblue*.

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While the resources are available freely for these purposes, to realise the full potential of KidsMatter Early Childhood, it is recommended that the resources be used with the appropriate training and support under the KidsMatter Initiative.

# Understanding mental health

## What will participants learn from this topic?

When you have completed this topic, participants will:

- gain an understanding of mental health in early childhood, and how this impacts on children's development and social and emotional wellbeing
- gain an understanding of mental health difficulties in early childhood, including common signs and symptoms.

## Preparation for this session

### Resources

- Component 4 Topic 1: Professional learning *Participant Workbook*
- Video 1.1: Mental health in early childhood
- Video 1.2: What are mental health difficulties?

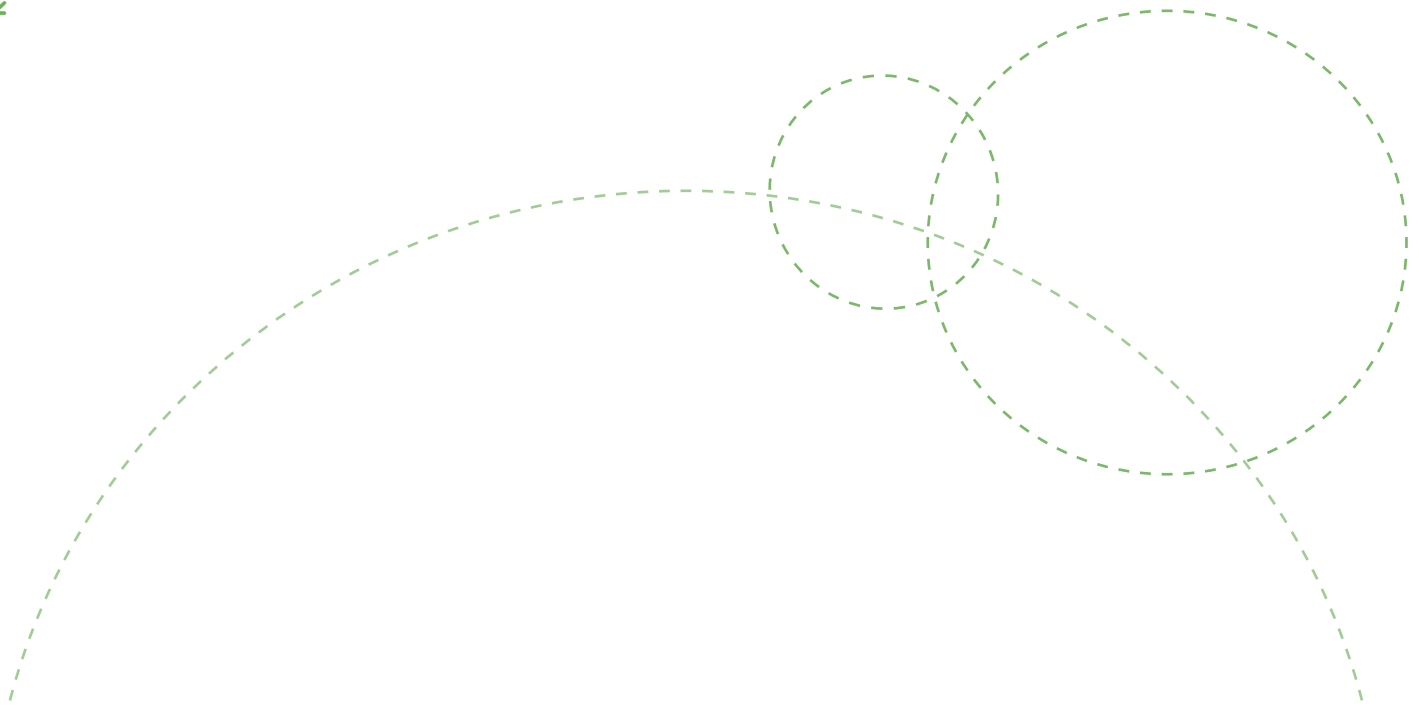
# Suggestions for how to run this topic

## 1 Introduce the topic to the group

**Topic 1 focuses on understanding mental health in early childhood, including signs and symptoms of mental health difficulties.**

### Content includes:

- an **introductory activity** for participants to explore their attitudes and beliefs about mental health in early childhood
- a **video** about mental health and wellbeing in early childhood
- a **discussion** about mental health in early childhood
- an **activity** about considering mental health difficulties in early childhood
- a **video** about mental health difficulties.



## 2 Introductory activity: Exploring our attitudes and beliefs



**The aim of this activity is to help participants identify and reflect on their attitudes and beliefs about mental health and wellbeing in early childhood, and to set the scene for discussions to come. The activity also provides participants with an opportunity to explore their own ideas about what mental health is, and what it means to be mentally healthy.**

### Instructions

1. Ask participants to position themselves in a line facing forward. Explain that one end of the line is 'agree' and the other, 'disagree'. If the group is small, ask participants to instead use the 1–10 scale on page 3 of their *Participant Workbook*.
2. Ask participants to position themselves along the line in accordance with whether they agree or disagree with the below statements about mental health and wellbeing in early childhood. Emphasise that there are no right or wrong answers, and people will have differences of opinion. Also emphasise that the discussion to follow should not identify individual families or children at the service.
3. Read out the following statements:
  - » There are more challenges for children these days than when I was a child.
  - » Educators can support children through any social, emotional or behavioural problems they're having.
  - » If needed, all families should accept help for their child when it's available.
  - » People are comfortable to seek help in our community because everyone is accepting of mental health problems.
4. If time permits, ask volunteers to share their thoughts and reasons for standing where they are/choosing their position on the 1–10 scale. You may like to choose to discuss the statements which generated the most interest or difference.
5. The following questions aim to both further the discussion as well as to prepare the participants for the video that they are about to watch. Ask them to think about these questions on their own before coming together to discuss them as a group.
  - » When you hear the term 'mental health', what does it mean to you?
  - » What do children who are mentally healthy look like? How might they behave?
  - » What about children who may be experiencing mental health difficulties. What might they look like, and how might they behave?
  - » What do you think impacts on a child's mental health? (Consider factors like a child's temperament, their relationships, experiences and environment.)

### 3 Video 1.1: Mental health in early childhood



#### Tips for this activity

- Explain that we all have different attitudes and beliefs about mental health and wellbeing in the early years and these can impact on our interactions with children and families.
- Draw on themes in participants' responses that allow you to introduce the content of this professional learning—mental health and wellbeing in early childhood.
- Ensure participants only share information if they feel comfortable doing so. Remind participants about the self-care information available under the professional learning resources for each component on the website.
- There is space for participants to make notes about their ideas on pages 3–4 of their *Participant Workbook*.

#### The video covers:

- defining mental health and wellbeing in the early years
- how to know when children are experiencing good mental health and wellbeing and what you might notice
- the importance of supporting children's social and emotional development in early childhood to promote good mental health and wellbeing.

#### Tips for watching this video

- There is space for participants to make notes about this video on page 5 of their *Participant Workbook*.

## 4 Discussion: Mental health in early childhood



The aim of this discussion is to further build on participants' ideas about mental health, bringing together the ideas and thoughts shared by early childhood experts in the video as well as those shared by participants in the introductory activity.

### Instructions

1. Lead a group discussion around the following questions, noting whether any ideas have changed or shifted since the earlier discussion:
  - » What is mental health and wellbeing in the early years?
  - » How does promoting children's social and emotional development impact on their mental health and wellbeing?
  - » How do we know that children, families and staff are experiencing good mental health and wellbeing?
  - » Why is it that some children are at greater risk of mental health difficulties?
  - » What are some things that educators and services do that promote mental health and wellbeing?
2. Participants may like to write down their ideas on pages 6–7 of their *Participant Workbook*.

### Tips for this discussion

- Services may be at different stages in terms of how they understand mental health and wellbeing. The questions above may act as a recap of previous discussions if they have worked through 'Creating a sense of community' (Component 1).
- Emphasise that the discussion should not identify families or children at the service.

## 5 Activity: Thinking about mental health difficulties



The aim of this activity is for participants to think about some of the signs in a child's behaviour and emotions that indicate additional support may be required.

### Instructions

1. Invite the group to think about all the behaviours and experiences of children along the mental health continuum. Explain that the continuum represents 'good mental health' at one end, and 'mental health difficulties' at the other end.
2. Ask participants to form small groups, or if your group is not too large, then work on the activity together.
3. Ask participants to think about children who they believe are on the 'good mental health' end of the continuum. Reflect on the following questions:
  - » What are these children like each day they are at your early childhood service?
  - » How would you describe their behaviours, emotions and social interactions?
  - » Are they happy and enjoying their time at your service all the time?

4. Now ask participants to think about children in the middle of the continuum:
  - » What are these children like at your service?
  - » How would you describe the experience for them in a typical day at your service?
  - » What ups and downs or characteristics do you notice in their emotions, social interactions and behaviours?
5. Finally, ask participants:
  - » What things would you consider to help decide whether a child in the middle of the continuum was showing signs of a possible mental health difficulty?
  - » What is one thing a service can do to help move a child along the continuum towards good mental health?
6. Ask participants to record their responses to the questions above on pages 8–10 of their *Participant Workbook*.

### Tips for this activity

- Remind participants to speak hypothetically rather than discuss specific children they have in mind or are working with.
- Emphasise that this topic is not designed to teach participants to make diagnoses or conclusions about a child's particular mental health difficulty but it does focus on recognising signs that children may need further support.



## 6 Video 1.2: What are mental health difficulties?



### The video covers:

- some of the signs educators might see in a child who may be experiencing a mental health difficulty
- some of the factors that might distinguish 'normal' behaviour from a child experiencing mental health difficulties
- how mental health difficulties present in the early years
- the difference between a mental health difficulty and a mental health disorder.

### Tips for watching this video

- There is space for participants to make notes about the video on page 11 of their *Participant Workbook*.

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## 7 Activity: Moving forward



The aim of this activity is for participants to set some short- and long-term goals for understanding mental health and wellbeing in early childhood at their service.

### Instructions

1. Ask participants to answer the following questions individually:
  - » What is one thing I could do to further my understanding of mental health and mental health difficulties over the next week?

- » What is one thing I could do to further my understanding of mental health and mental health difficulties over the next 12 months?
2. Ask participants to answer the following questions as a large group or in smaller groups if there are a lot of people:
  - » What is one thing we could do as a service to promote and develop our understanding of children's mental health and mental health difficulties over the next week?
  - » What is one thing we could do as a service to promote and develop our understanding of children's mental health and mental health difficulties over the next 12 months?

### Tips for this activity

- There is a worksheet for this activity in the *Participant Workbook* on page 12.

## 8 Reflective questions



**Reflecting on new content is a good way to wrap up each topic and summarise what has been covered. The following questions can support reflection, although you may wish to add your own questions to suit your team. Reflective questions can be considered during the topic, at the end of the topic or at a separate time. Reflective questions can be completed individually, in pairs or as a group.**

- How do we talk about mental health and wellbeing as a service? What words might educators and staff use on a day-to-day basis?
- How might we talk about children's mental health and wellbeing to parents and families? Do we use the words mental health with families? Why? Why not?
- Explore two policies or procedures that your service has regarding children's behaviour or social and emotional wellbeing. Are there any words that could be changed to directly link this to children's mental health?

### **Tips for this activity**

- Reflective questions can be found in the *Participant Workbook* on page 13.



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