The KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative aims to enable preschool and long day care services to implement evidence-based mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention strategies that will:

- improve the mental health and wellbeing of children from birth to school age
- reduce mental health problems in children
- achieve greater support for children experiencing mental health difficulties and their families.

KidsMatter Early Childhood acknowledges the critical role that long day care and preschool can play in enhancing factors that promote children’s mental health, wellbeing and resilience, such as a sense of belonging and connection. It emphasises a sense of shared community responsibility for children’s wellbeing, and promotes partnerships with parents, carers and a range of community services and agencies to improve children’s mental health and family relationships. It recognises that early childhood professionals can and do make a significant difference in the lives of children and seeks to enhance their capacity to foster children’s social and emotional learning and development, and to recognise and respond effectively to early signs of mental health difficulties in children.

KidsMatter Early Childhood uses a risk and protective framework to focus on four components where early childhood services can strengthen the protective factors for children’s mental health and minimise the risk factors. These four areas make up the core content of KidsMatter Early Childhood.

1. Creating a sense of community within the service, which promotes feelings of belonging, connection and inclusion for all children and families. This kind of environment within a day care centre, preschool or kindergarten has been shown to have a positive effect on children’s mental health.

2. Developing children’s social and emotional skills. Research shows that the development of social and emotional skills is fundamental to children’s mental health, ability to learn, moral development and motivation to achieve. Children who develop social and emotional skills find it easier to manage themselves, relate to others, resolve conflict, and feel positive about themselves and the world around them.

3. Working with parents to improve children’s social and emotional wellbeing and mental health. By engaging with parents and carers, early childhood services can share important information about the child’s life, experiences, preferences and activities. In addition, early childhood services are an excellent access point to link parents with appropriate information and education about parenting, child development and children’s mental health.

4. Helping children who are experiencing mental health difficulties. Effective support during the early stages of a child’s difficulty can mean that mental health issues are resolved before they become worse or entrenched, improving the quality of life for children and their families. Due to the significant contact early childhood services have with children and their families, services are in an effective position to identify problems early, implement strategies to assist children, and to support families to seek additional help.
In applying this framework, early childhood services participating in KidsMatter Early Childhood will be supported to implement a range of strategies, including:

- fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion
- providing young children with experiences to develop their social and emotional skills (as well as cognitive and behavioural skills)
- increasing parent and carer engagement and involvement in the early childhood service
- enhancing positive relationships with parents and carers
- providing opportunities for parents and carers to enhance their support networks
- providing parents and carers with information and strategies for supporting their children’s development
- identifying children who may be experiencing mental health difficulties
- implementing strategies within the service to assist children experiencing mental health difficulties
- helping parents and carers to access information and services that can assist children experiencing mental health difficulties.

**HOW DOES KIDSMATTER EARLY CHILDHOOD SUPPORT EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES?**

Early childhood services implementing the initiative are provided with:

- a guiding framework for the initiative
- supporting resources that provide detailed information on each component of the initiative and implementation tools, suggested strategies and factsheets/tip sheets for staff
- a KidsMatter Early Childhood Officer who works directly with the service to support implementation
- professional development for staff
- information and resources for parents and carers.

Implementing KidsMatter Early Childhood requires a coordinated approach from directors, staff, management and parents. Services will nominate a leadership team that will be assisted by state- and territory-based KidsMatter Early Childhood Officers to plan and coordinate implementation of the initiative. The implementation tools provided support the service to deliver the initiative, and enable services to assess their strengths and areas for improvement in each of the four components of KidsMatter Early Childhood.

**With the assistance of the provided tools and resources, services are supported to develop their capacity for promoting children’s mental health and wellbeing, and to respond effectively to the mental health concerns of the children in their care.**

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

**THE KIDSMATTER EARLY CHILDHOOD PILOT**

KidsMatter Early Childhood will be piloted in over 100 preschools and long day care centres across Australia in 2010 and 2011. Centres will be asked to submit an expression of interest to participate in the pilot. For further information and to register your interest in this initiative, please contact: enquiries@kidsmatter.edu.au.