There is growing awareness and a large body of brain development research that suggest the foundations of mental health are shaped in the early years. However, it is thought that fewer than half of the children who need professional help for mental health problems access the mental health system and get the help they need. (Starr, Campbell & Herrick, 2002.)

In a recent Australian study, it was reported that between 4 and 14 per cent of children aged from one and a half to three years had externalising problems, (e.g. aggression and other acting out behaviours) or internalising problems (anxious, withdrawn and depressed). (Bayer, et al., 2008)

Parents, families, teachers and community groups all have a shared responsibility in enhancing children’s mental health and well-being. Given the increasing number of children attending long day care (46 per cent of all three to four year olds) and preschools (85 per cent of all four year olds) in Australia, early childhood educators and care professionals in particular have an important role to play. (Bureau of Statistics, 2008.)

When you are concerned about a child in your care, how do you know if there is a potential mental health issue? Traditionally, early childhood educators have had little training in understanding mental health... until now.

Children’s services staff can foster children’s social and emotional learning and help to identify problems before they become entrenched. They are also a vital point of contact for providing information and support to families in need.

Heard of KidsMatter?

The KidsMatter Australian Early Childhood (KMEC) mental health initiative is a national promotion, prevention and early intervention program designed specifically for the early childhood sector. A pilot of the KidsMatter initiative is presently being trialed in over 100 preschools and long day care centres across Australia.

The roll out and implementation of KidsMatter is a collaborative process between staff, families, managing councils and/or management com-
‘Families report they feel closer to the staff and this strengthens children’s feelings of security, belonging and wellbeing.’

mittees. Participating services are provided with a guiding framework, supporting resources and implementation tools, as well as suggested strategies and fact sheets for staff. Importantly, pilot services are also allocated a KMEC facilitator who works directly with the children’s service to support implementation.

KidsMatter has been developed in collaboration with beyondblue: the national depression initiative, the Australian Psychological Society, Early Childhood Australia, with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. For more information, visit www.kidsmatter.edu.au.

CASE STUDY: Reflections on KidsMatter

As the end of the pilot’s first year nears, KidsMatter participants have reported many successes in their services. NSW KidsMatter early childhood facilitator, Rita Johnston, shares her experience.

WHAT IS KIDSMATTER?

The four components of the KidsMatter Early Childhood (KMEC) framework are:

1. Creating a sense of community within the service, which promotes feelings of belonging, connection and inclusion for all children and their 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 these 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 and carers 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. The earlier that effective support can be provided for a child experiencing difficulties (and their family), the better the outcomes. Services are in an effective position to identify problems early, implement strategies to assist the child, and support families to seek additional help, which helps to improve their quality of life.

The KMEC Framework also assists and supports services in their implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standard.
staff in a safe and non-judgemental environment.

‘Staff engagement in KidsMatter, and particularly within “Component One: Creating a Sense of Community” has led to varying outcomes. As one of our services reported: ‘We knew we were already doing a good job with the children and families but KidsMatter has helped us to notice things that might have slipped by, and has helped us to take things more deeply. For example, the children initiated a project to sponsor eight orphan orangutan babies. The children raised over $400, which was enough to sponsor all eight babies. The project brought children, families and the wider community together. I don’t think we would have been able to support the project in the way we did, or be aware of the deeper benefits it resulted in for everyone, without the understandings we gained from KidsMatter.

As well being immensely rewarding, being a part of KidsMatter is “no bed of roses” either. Being a pilot, it is still being developed and reviewed as we learn along the way. There always seems to be a little more to do than time allows—this goes for everyone involved in the initiative. KMEC can also challenge some of our personal positions and understandings about children, best practice and mental health. It can reveal some self-reflection that we might need to do as individuals, to become more effective in supporting the children in our care.’

CASE STUDY: Franklin Road Centre

Franklin Road Child Care Centre is a not-for-profit 45-place centre in the southern Sydney suburb of Woolooware. The centre participated in the KMEC pilot in 2010. Director Amanda Ritchie shares the experience.

‘The main change in the centre’s daily practices has been to the relationships between families, staff and children. The centre has always promoted strong relationships and interactions and found that the KidsMatter framework helped to strengthen these even more.

‘Using the tools provided by KidsMatter, the team has been able to ascertain the exact aspects of the service that were well received and appreciated by families and the elements that may have been overlooked.

‘Staff have also been able to fully appreciate the impact their own behaviour and interactions have on the children in their care, bringing a new understanding of how staff work with children.’

The impact on staff, children and families

‘Through the implementation of “Component One: Creating a Sense of Community” and then “Component Two: Developing Children’s Social and Emotional Skills’, staff at the centre could see the amazing influence they have as educators on the lifelong development of the children in care.

‘Staff now fully understand the importance of working with families and respecting the choices [parents] make for their children. This mutual respect has blossomed into something really magical for everyone involved. The staff feel appreciated, the families feel respected and, most importantly, the children feel more secure and happy to develop in their own individual ways.

‘The centre was provided with many different ways to promote and educate the families and community on its role in KidsMatter including posters, emails, surveys, notices, literature and face-to-face discussions. Everything implemented as a result of KidsMatter or the families’ input, has been recorded and made available to all people and groups involved.

Dealing with the unexpected

‘The unexpected bonus has been the amazing sense of achievement and power the staff gained from becoming so educated in this area. Now, staff feel they can achieve anything with the children in their care and they are able to pass this knowledge onto families.’

Franklin Road Child Care Centre is run by Sutherland Shire Council. There are ten sister centres located across the Sutherland shire. The centre has been operating since 1990.

References

