Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Social and emotional wellbeing is an essential part of human health and happiness. Promoting positive social and emotional development and wellbeing in children and young people may impact on their behaviour, learning and health outcomes. Potential benefits for individuals and communities include:

- improved school engagement and learning
- improved social and emotional competence
- fewer emotional and behavioural problems
- greater capacity for problem-solving and resilience

- lower risk of some types of mental illness
- delayed uptake or lower levels of substance use
- lower risk of anti-social and criminal behaviour
- better socio-economic outcomes in adulthood.

Social and emotional wellbeing may also be called mental health, which is different from mental illness. Mental health is our capacity to manage our thoughts, feelings and behaviour positively so we can enjoy life, maintain positive relationships and work toward our goals.

There are a number of developmental disorders and mental illnesses that can affect a person's thoughts, feelings, relationships or behaviour. Examples include autism, attention deficit disorder, depression and schizophrenia. Children and young people who experience a developmental disorder or a mental illness will need additional support to help them manage their health needs and meet their educational goals.

To promote social and emotional wellbeing and positive development, teachers need to:

Create safe and supportive environments that promote wellbeing and personal development as well as learning.

Help children and young people develop effective social and emotional skills and manage their own behaviour.

Identify children, young people and families who may need additional support for their mental health and wellbeing.

Link children, young people and families with support and information services for mental health and wellbeing.

Develop broader organisational, school and community strategies that support wellbeing.

These recommendations are drawn from publications in several areas, including: social and emotional development, resilience, mental health promotion, and illness prevention.

The way you apply these in your own school or early childhood service will vary, depending on the needs and developmental stage of the children or young people you work with.

Create safe and supportive environments that promote wellbeing and personal development as well as learning.

- Address children, young people and family members by name and foster a climate of care and respect.
- Set clear guidelines for behaviour and relationships in your classroom or organisation and implement them consistently.
- When guidance or discipline is needed, focus on changing behaviour rather than blaming or labelling the individual.
- Set high but achievable expectations that are tailored to a person's development and abilities and help them identify how they can work toward these.
- Develop an awareness of children's and young people's interests and achievements beyond the formal curriculum.
- Acknowledge each person's strengths and abilities and support their capacity to improve and achieve.
- Develop honest and respectful partnerships with other staff members and with parents and families.

Help children and young people develop effective social and emotional skills and manage their own behaviour.

- Invite children and young people to contribute to rules about treating each other with respect and dealing with aggression or bullying.
- Model effective social and emotional skills and respect for others in your own behaviour and relationships.
- Set practical tasks and cooperative activities that promote problem-solving, social skills, negotiation and communication.
- Help children and young people to develop an understanding of their own emotions and a sense of care and empathy for the feelings of other people.
- Teach children or young people skills for managing difficult emotions, such as going to a safe quiet place, relaxation, breathing, physical activity, talking about feelings.
- When guidance or discipline is needed, help children and young people to reflect on their own emotions and behaviour and the feelings of others.
- Help children and young people to identify, plan and work toward their goals, both individually and in group activities.

Develop broader organisational, school and community strategies that support wellbeing.

- Support the adoption of practices and policies in your organisation that foster wellbeing, *eg* positive behaviour support, diversity and inclusion.
- Contribute to team discussions about promoting social and emotional wellbeing and development in your school or service.
- Participate in any programs adopted by your school or service that are designed to support the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and staff.
- Participate in professional development on social and emotional wellbeing, resilience, mental illness, suicide prevention, *etc.*
- Work in partnership with parents, families and other people to promote social and emotional wellbeing in your organisation and community.
- Encourage children and young people to participate in and contribute positively to the community and to special events.
- Advocate for the social and emotional needs of children, young people, families and communities.

What Should I Look For?

Identify children, young people and families who may need additional support for their mental health and wellbeing.

Some children or young people need additional support in relation to their development or wellbeing. You might see a difference in a child's capacity when compared with their peers, or you might notice changes in feelings or behaviour.

A minor or short-term change, or an isolated incident, may not be a problem. A teacher should be more concerned if the behaviour or issue seems to be severe, persists over time, or if there are several problems occurring together.

Early Childhood

• Attachment problems with parents or caregivers

• Persistent difficulty in separating from parent or family

• Not reaching developmental milestones

• Repetitive activities and limited play

• Being anxious and withdrawn

• Persistent temper tantrums

• Harming themselves or others

• Not talking or communicating appropriately (consider culture and language at home)

• Difficulty with social interactions

Primary and Middle Years

• Difficulty interacting with peers, such as shyness or awkwardness

• Being anxious, sad or withdrawn much of the time

• Avoiding new situations or missing lots of school

• Being overly compliant and obedient, seeming fearful

• Being frequently irritable, defiant or argumentative

• Displaying aggressive behaviour

• Not avoiding risks or harmful situations

• Difficulty anticipating the consequences of behaviour

Adolescence

• Decline in academic performance

• Neglecting responsibilities or personal appearance

• Changes in behaviour and school attendance

• Change in sleeping or eating patterns

• Being frequently lethargic or irritable

• Abuse of drugs or alcohol

• Losing touch with reality *eg* fear or paranoia, delusions, hallucinations

• Stealing, vandalism, aggression and risk-taking behaviour

• Thinking about death or suicide

• Self-harm or suicidal behaviour

Family and Community Context

• Parenting styles that are overly controlling, harsh or critical

• Parenting styles or family situations involving inconsistent supervision

• Lack of involvement in children's health, activities or development

• Experiences of physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect

• Experiences of, or participation in, bullying and harassment

• Experiences of trauma, or unresolved loss and grief

• Mental illness in a parent or caregiver

• Substance abuse by a parent or caregiver

• Serious physical illness or disability in a parent or caregiver

• Conflict or violence in the family or community

• Criminal behaviour in the family or community

• Unemployment and socioeconomic disadvantage

Link children, young people and families with support and information services for mental health and wellbeing.

If you become concerned about a possible emotional, behavioural or mental health problem in a child or young person, use the **GRIP** framework.

GATHER INFORMATION

Write down your observations about the behaviour or situation. Consider the potential impact on development, wellbeing or learning. Many difficulties are transient, so see whether your observations persist over time.

EXCEPTION - If you suspect abuse or neglect inform your Supervisor, Manager or Principal without delay.

Is further support needed? → **NO** or I need more information → **MONITOR**

YES - the situation impacts on development, wellbeing or learning

RESPOND

Talk with the child or young person and/or with their parents or caregivers, depending on the age and stage of development of the group you work with. Discuss your observations sensitively and explain your concerns in regard to the person's development, wellbeing or learning. Ask about any contextual factors that may be affecting the child or young person.

Is further support needed? → **NO** or I need more information → **MONITOR**

YES - the situation impacts on development, wellbeing or learning

INVOLVE OTHERS

Talk with colleagues to develop a plan for assisting the child or young person within your school or service – *eg* discuss with your Director, Principal, School Counsellor. Arrange referral for specialist intervention and support if needed, *eg* Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service or Psychologist, Inclusion Support Agency. Alternatively, a young person or a child and family could visit their GP.

Is further support needed? → **YES** - additional or alternative support needed

NO

PROMOTE WELLBEING

Continue to promote wellbeing throughout your service or school. For example: adopt new ways of working with children or young people who need support, review ongoing care and education practices, update policies, foster optimal social and emotional development, build community connections, collaborate with other agencies, provide staff training, *etc.*

Health professionals and early intervention services can assist with the assessment and management of emotional, behavioural or mental health difficulties in children or young people.

Some professionals and agencies also provide information and support for schools and early childhood services, about working with those who have additional needs.

When you join a new service or school, find out about support options and referral pathways in your area.

Looking After Myself and Others

Promoting mental health and wellbeing in your school or early childhood service means not only caring for children, young people and families, but also looking after yourself and your colleagues.

Mental health problems and difficult life events can affect anyone, including children, young people, parents, teachers, children's services staff, principals and administrators, or community members.

Working with children and young people is a complex task with many important responsibilities. It is very rewarding but it can also be challenging.

You need to maintain your own wellbeing in order to work effectively with children or young people and to provide support for your colleagues.

Here are some tips to help maintain wellbeing:

- Look after yourself physically, through a healthy diet, regular exercise and getting enough sleep.

- Foster and maintain your close personal relationships, such as your connections with friends and family.

- Develop some interests and friendships outside of your work environment.

- Make time for some positive activities for yourself, that will help you to relax and have fun.

- Strive for balance between your professional role and your personal life; try to leave work issues at work.

- Limit the use of alcohol and other substances; don't rely on these for relaxation.

- Learn how to monitor and manage your stress in positive ways, *eg* through exercise, relaxation, breathing, yoga, *etc.*

- Find a mentor through your workplace or professional networks and use that person's support to help you grow professionally and personally.

- Provide support and encouragement for colleagues, give constructive feedback and be a role model for others.

- If you have spiritual beliefs, make time for regular spiritual practice, or relationships with others who share your philosophy.

- Reach out for support when you need it – from colleagues, friends, family, your GP, a psychologist, or an employee assistance program through your workplace.

"Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

~ Constitution of the World Health Organisation

"The art of living lies less in eliminating our troubles than in growing with them."

~ Bernard M. Baruch

Help Lines

Lifeline – 24 hour telephone counselling	13 11 14
Kids Help Line - support for ages 5 to 25	1800 55 1800
Mensline Australia - support for men	1300 789 978
Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Helpline	1800 200 526
SANE Australia Helpline – about mental illness	1800 187 263
beyondblue info line – information and referral	1300 224 636
Suicide Callback Service – support and referral	1300 659 467

Web Links

www.responseability.org	For pre-service teachers and children's services trainees
www.beyondblue.org.au	Information and referral in regard to depression and anxiety
www.bullyingnoway.com.au	Information and activities to address bullying in schools
www.copmi.net.au	Information about children of parents with mental illness
www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au	Information resources for early childhood professionals
www.headspace.org.au	Australia's National Youth Mental Health Foundation
www.kidshelpline.com.au	Support for children and young people aged 5 to 25
www.kidsmatter.edu.au/primary/	KidsMatter program and resources for primary schools
www.kidsmatter.edu.au/ec/	KidsMatter program and resources for early childhood
www.lifeline.com.au	Information about support and counselling services
www.mindmatters.edu.au	MindMatters program and resources for secondary schools
http://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/	National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre
www.racismnoway.com.au	Information and activities to address racism in schools
http://raisingchildren.net.au/	Raising Children Network - information and resources
http://au.reachout.com/	Information and support for young people
www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au	Information about Trauma, Loss and Grief

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