



Australian Early Childhood
Mental Health Initiative



Connections with the National Quality Framework

Helping children who are
experiencing mental
health difficulties



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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.

Contents



2	Helping children who are experiencing mental health difficulties
3	About KidsMatter Early Childhood
3	Connections between national initiatives
5	Using this resource
6	Risk and protective factors
7	Stress and young children
10	Strategies to reduce and manage stress in children
10	Managing feelings
13	Coping with the stress of parenting
14	Practical ideas to share with parents
15	Early signs of difficulties
16	Anger and aggression
17	Self-regulation helps us cope
19	About anxiety
20	Different types of anxiety
25	Supporting children's mental health and wellbeing
25	Building self-esteem
26	Emotional wellbeing: How to help
26	Growing friendships
27	Working with families
28	Working with communities
29	Summary
30	Read more

Helping children who are experiencing mental health difficulties

The early childhood years are a critical period for children's wellbeing and mental health. Early childhood mental health is about young children's social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing. This includes children's developing capacity to experience, regulate and express emotion; to form close, secure, satisfying relationships; and to explore and discover the environment and the world around them.

By providing ECEC services with the skills, knowledge and resources to assist children who are having difficulties, children and families can get the help they need early ...

In these early years, [behavioural and emotional difficulties](#) can emerge. Early intervention and treatment can make a significant difference to reducing children's mental health difficulties and sustaining substantial, practical benefits over time. However, while there is much evidence to support the effectiveness of early intervention, currently only one-third of children with mental health difficulties receive professional support.

KidsMatter Early Childhood [Component 4: Helping Children who are experiencing mental health difficulties](#) focuses on promoting early intervention for children with early signs of mental health difficulties. It also aims to reduce stigma around mental health and support early childhood education and care (ECEC) services to feel confident in developing strategies for addressing the needs of these children. By providing ECEC services with the skills, knowledge and resources to assist children who are having difficulties, children and families can get the help they need early, before problems become entrenched or more resistant to intervention.



About KidsMatter Early Childhood

KidsMatter Early Childhood is a continuous improvement framework that supports ECEC services to promote children's mental health and wellbeing, through:

- professional development and implementation support that informs planning and daily practice
- assisting educators to recognise when children may be at risk of experiencing mental health difficulties
- creating a greater understanding of pathways that for accessing professional intervention for children showing early signs of difficulties.

The initiative provides vital information to educators and families about parenting, child development and children's mental health, and facilitates access to appropriate expert advice.

Effective implementation of KidsMatter Early Childhood involves a shared vision and coordinated approach by management, staff and families and recognising families as key members of a collaborative early childhood community.

Connections between national initiatives

The National Quality Standard (NQS) and *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF) are part of the *National Quality Framework* (NQF), an Australian Government initiative to improve outcomes for young children in ECEC services.

This is the fourth in a series of KidsMatter Early Childhood resources that highlight connections between the KidsMatter Framework, the NQS and the EYLF.

KidsMatter Early Childhood aims to provide an effective platform for supporting children, families and ECEC services in strengthening children's mental health and wellbeing.

The three initiatives, KidsMatter Early Childhood, the EYLF and the NQS all recognise that children thrive best when all of those who care for them work together to maximise their mental health, wellbeing, learning and potential.

Component 4's two Target Areas—Understanding children's mental health and wellbeing, and Responding to children who may be experiencing mental health difficulties—relate specifically to four Quality Areas of the NQS:

- Quality Area 2: Children's health and safety
- Quality Area 4: Staffing arrangements
- Quality Area 5: Relationships with children
- Quality Area 6: Collaborative partnerships with families and communities.





As [NQS PLP e-Newsletter No. 29 \(2012\)](#) reminds us, 'children's health and safety' involves more than just their physical wellbeing. It includes recognising and responding to the differing emotional support needs of individual children.

Supporting early intervention and treatment involves understanding the pathways to support services and assisting children and families to access them.

KidsMatter Early Childhood [Component 4: Helping children who are experiencing mental health difficulties](#) connects with the [EYLF Principles](#) of secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships and partnerships. These refer to educators' nurturing relationships with children and educators' genuine partnerships with families respectively. Additionally three of the EYLF Practices—Holistic approaches, Continuity of learning and transitions and Assessment for learning—particularly support the goals of Component 4.

Having close relationships with children and their families well situates early childhood educators to notice when children show early signs of difficulties. Supporting early intervention and treatment involves understanding the pathways to support services and assisting children and families to access them. By remaining engaged with families and closely liaising with parents, carers and support services, educators can make a positive contribution to children's mental health and their future development.

... children thrive best when all of those who care for them work together to maximise their mental health, wellbeing, learning and potential.

Using this resource

This is the fourth in a series of KidsMatter Early Childhood resources that highlight connections between the KidsMatter Framework, the NQS and the EYLF.

KidsMatter Early Childhood has four components:

- Creating a sense of community
- Developing children's social and emotional skills
- Working with parents and carers
- Helping children who are experiencing mental health difficulties.

This resource will focus on connections with Component 4: Helping children who are experiencing mental health difficulties.

Previous resources in this series focused on Component 1: Creating a sense of community; Component 2: Developing children's social and emotional skills; and Component 3: Working with parents and carers.

Another earlier resource, KidsMatter Early Childhood: Connecting with the Early Childhood Education and Care National Quality Framework, provides a detailed overview of how all of the KidsMatter Early Childhood components relate to the EYLF and facilitate the achievement of the NQS.



Risk and protective factors



KidsMatter Early Childhood: An Overview describes a number of risk and protective factors that may influence young children's mental health. **Risk and protective factors (pp. 10–11)** occur at different levels and include:

- the individual child: their abilities and needs
- family: their circumstances and relationships
- events and situations: the opportunities and stressors
- community: its capacity for access to support and social inclusion
- the early childhood setting: relationships, practices and environment.

How risk and protective factors work together is complex. In isolation, risk factors may not necessarily have any long-term effects on children's mental health. Should educators recognise a number of risk factors are present in a child's life, they are able to work with children and families through strengthening protective factors. Creating opportunities for a family to feel connected to their ECEC service, supporting children to develop their social and emotional learning and having a focus on positive relationships are all protective factors educators can promote.

Young children learn skills for sustaining mental health through positive and responsive interactions with significant people.

The integral role of positive relationships as a protective factor within ECEC settings that support children's mental health is emphasised within each of the four KidsMatter Components. ECEC settings can develop these relationships through their ongoing contact with children and families. This in turn promotes **resilience** and helps to reduce the impact of risk factors and stressful life events on children as they learn to **manage life's ups and downs**. Young children learn skills for sustaining mental health through positive and responsive interactions with significant people. **Standards 2.1:** Each child's health is promoted; **4.3:** Educators, coordinators and staff are respectful and ethical; and **Element: 5.1.1:** Interactions with each child are warm, responsive and build trusting relationships; highlight the importance of positive relationships.

Stress and young children

In our busy adult lives as parents, community members and educators, we feel stressed and burnt-out from time to time. We would like to believe that childhood is a time when children are carefree, with no worries or responsibilities. Yet, studies tell us that many children experience extreme stress similar to adults and display emotions and behaviours that indicate they are [feeling overwhelmed](#).

Both negative and positive events can cause stress. Like adults, children often have strong or challenging feelings and struggle to deal with feelings of stress. However, unlike adults, children often do not have the skills to understand or manage their stress in appropriate ways. Families and educators can recognise when children are feeling stressed and help them to feel less anxious and [develop coping strategies](#). We can also help by decreasing the discomfort for the child and, in some instances, by assisting a child or family in navigating the situation that caused the stress. Young children depend upon trusted adults to help them manage their feelings and emotions. Stress becomes a mental health issue when the ordinary stresses of daily life become overwhelming, interrupt day-to-day experiences and/or continue for a significant period.

When under stress, there is an increase in heart rate, breathing is faster and muscles tense up. When there are several stressors, the level and duration of the stress can be greater and the impact more lasting.

... [developing the ability to manage stress is a prerequisite for effective learning](#).

Sources of stress

Stress is a function of the relationship between the demands placed on us—by ourselves and others—and our ability to meet these demands. A degree of pressure and stress is inevitable, and in many ways desirable. It can motivate both children and adults to achieve more in all aspects of their lives. However, when stress becomes excessive it can move us to a state whereby we have a fight, flight or freeze response. For both young children and adults this is not a good position for engaging with new knowledge or skills, so developing the ability to manage stress is a prerequisite for effective learning.

Negative events in a child or family's life that may be a [source of stress](#) for children include the break-up of a family, the death of a parent, grandparent or sibling, physical abuse, separation, rejection and domestic violence. Other events such as a parent losing a job, or moving house can also create significant stress. If a family is too busy with everyday family obligations, activities and routines, the tension created might lead to the family overlooking a young child's needs. Even positive events such as birthday parties, new pets, and the birth of new siblings can cause stress in young children





Identifying signs of stress in young children

For children, stress can manifest itself through changes in behaviour. Common behavioural changes can include:

- being irritable or moody
- withdrawing from activities that used to give them pleasure
- routinely expressing worries
- complaining more than usual
- crying
- displaying fearful reactions/clinging to a parent or educator
- sleeping too much or too little
- eating too much or too little.

Stress can also appear in physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches. Parents and other caregivers must observe children's behaviour and pay attention to changes in the child's normal behaviour and habits. When relationships are strong, educators are able to observe these changes, discuss them with each family and find ways to **respond and support children**.

Young children may find it difficult to recognise and verbalise when they are experiencing stress, because their language skills are still developing or they don't have a way to describe their experiences. 'Tuning in' to emotional or behavioural changes and cues is important in identifying potential problems and recognising possible signs of stress.

Parents and caregivers can support young children through these times when they are aware of what is happening in a child's life and how this might relate to a sudden change in a child's behaviour. Educators and staff are much more likely to discuss these **changes with families**, even when they are of a personal nature, when they have already established a strong and respectful relationship.

'Tuning in' to emotional or behavioural changes and cues is important in identifying potential problems and recognising possible signs of stress.

Listening to young children

Whilst young children may not be familiar with the word stress they may express feelings of distress through words such as ‘I hate kindy/preschool’, ‘nobody likes me’ ‘everything is boring’. Families and educators can support young children by trying to understand why children are making these statements and [find ways to help](#). Younger pre-verbal children tell us how they are feeling through their actions and behaviours—crying, clinging, eating or sleeping less, for example.

Individual children do react differently to stressful events and situations and have different coping strategies. Some children learn to cope through tears and crying, tantrums, or by retreating from unpleasant situations. The three-year-old who is [crying](#) and having a tantrum is alerting adults that something is not okay and that they need help and support.

Children who are around supportive adults and caregivers usually develop a variety of [coping strategies](#) and learn positive management strategies. Having a trusted and reliable adult present and available often eases a child’s anxiety and enables them to learn self-soothing techniques.

[Having a trusted and reliable adult present and available often eases a child’s anxiety and enables them to learn self-soothing techniques.](#)

Reflection

Think about the children in your setting.
Can you identify any children who may be suffering from stress? What might you do about this?



Strategies

to reduce and manage stress in children

Relationships are the key. Making time for all children, whether at home or in an ECEC setting, can support children in [managing their worries](#).

We can do this by being available to them, acknowledging their emotions, offering support, responding to their conversations, without pressuring them to talk as well as spending time with them in activities and experiences they enjoy. Proper rest and good nutrition can also boost coping skills, and help young children deal with stress.

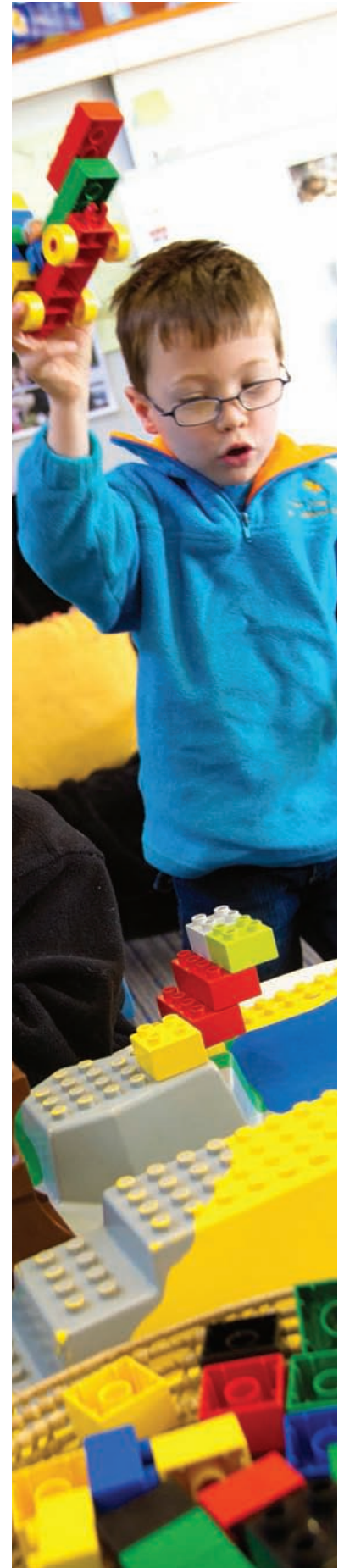
Managing feelings

Children need help in learning to [manage and live](#) with the stress they feel. One way to achieve this is to assist children to recognise, acknowledge and manage their [feelings](#).

It is important that children understand what they are feeling, and we give them words for 'stress' such as feeling 'butterflies in your tummy' or 'your heart is beating fast'. Through teaching children the language to describe what they feel, we can let them know it is normal sometimes to feel angry, alone, scared, or lonely and show them ways to express these feelings.

Adults can sometimes feel reluctant to label children's feelings with words, for fear of getting it wrong. A foundation of a positive relationship, time and space will allow families and educators to have the kinds of conversations with children about their feelings that develop their social and emotional understanding.

Feelings affect children's lives in everything they do, so learning to manage emotions will support them to be safe, optimistic and enthusiastic about life and learning.



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Sometimes a reassuring hug and words such as 'I know you are worried about your mum going off to work but I will stay close by you' is all a child needs to take that next step.

Promoting a positive environment

Stress can affect how children see themselves in the world. Notice and encourage children as they share their world with you. Support them to feel comfortable to discuss their feelings and acknowledge the effort they make, no matter how small. As you assist them to clarify their feelings, you have opportunity to correct any misgivings they may have about themselves. 'Thank you for telling me the baby was crying. He must need feeding—you are such a thoughtful big brother'.



Setting a good example

Young children are great imitators and may copy the ways adults handle stress. Children learn lessons from us, whether these lessons are positive or negative. For older children it may be appropriate to explain why we have reacted in a particular way. This explanation can often ease the child's reaction. 'I'm sorry I was cross in the car but I realised I forgot to get the bread and milk and now we have none for breakfast'. For younger children, a hug and 'Mummy's tired' may be sufficient.

Helping children through stories

Stories are a great way to talk with children about their fears or problems. Reading or telling children stories about other children with similar feelings helps them realise others have also been through these kinds of situations. Identifying with a character in a story and finding out how they coped and resolved things can be very reassuring to children. It also communicates that you understand their feelings. Many picture books can support children to better understand their feelings about events such as a death in the family, best friends moving away, going to hospital, the trauma of floods and much more. If no picture books are available, a simple told story can also be supportive and helpful. For young children there is safety in a story; they are free to listen and learn without risk of embarrassment or discomfort. Asking one or two questions about the story also bring out a 'feeling' response. Storytelling also supports a close physical relationship between the adult and child that is a valuable comfort in stressful times.

Identifying with a character in a story and finding out how they coped and resolved things can be very reassuring to children.



Seeking support

Parents, young children and educators need to [seek support](#) rather than cope with overwhelming stress on their own. Physical, social and emotional risk exists if a child or an adult remains in a state of anxiety. When significant symptoms occur and remain, or recur over time, it is necessary to [consult a registered health professional](#), to work with the child, family and ECEC service.

Reflection

How many of the above strategies are you using with young children who are showing signs of stress?

Is there more you can do?



Coping with the stress of parenting

Being a parent brings with it a roller coaster of emotions and experiences. Children learn from the examples set by adults around them, so the type of relationship parents build with their child will guide them through their lives.

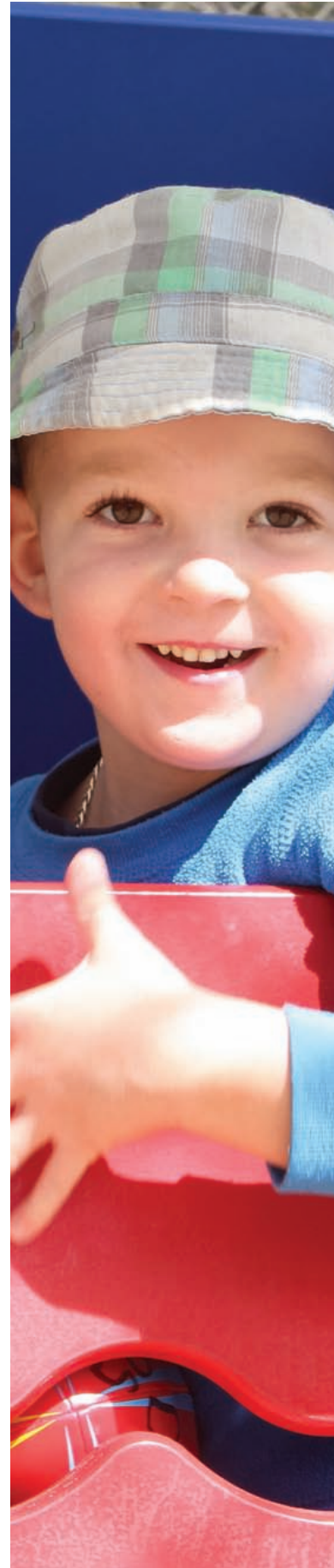
Parents need to find ways to **manage** their own very natural feelings of anger and frustration so they can enjoy parenting and maintain a safe and happy home for their child. To become people who are able to control themselves, manage any negative feelings, trust and respect others and behave with care, empathy and compassion, children will have to experience and see these behaviours firsthand.

When parents feel under pressure from events in their lives, it is more difficult for them to 'read' the signals their child is trying to convey; instead, they may just react to the behaviour. Most children have trouble in their adjustment and behaviour at some stage; 'off times' are normal and generally pass.

An ECEC service can often **support parents** by:

- offering parenting advice and resource materials
- talking about expected patterns of development and behaviour
- giving parents a break
- linking parents to other parents with children of a similar age and interests
- offering them a cup of coffee and real time to talk away from the busy playroom
- offering to hold a baby while they settle an older child for the day
- researching and advising on other neighbourhood networks and supports.

Children learn from the examples
set by adults around them ...



Practical ideas to share with parents

Short-term strategies for dealing with frustration and anger

- Put your child in a safe place and leave the room briefly.
- Walk around the house or go outside.
- Inhale deeply and exhale slowly and steadily.
- Count your breaths to focus your concentration.
- Be aware of your body language and try to change it so that you appear more relaxed.
- Recognise how to reduce your frustration and anger and take action.
- Play your favourite music—sing loudly and dance.
- Make yourself a comforting warm drink.
- Engage in physical activity—try sprinting from one end of your backyard to the other or punch a pillow.
- Call a friend, relative or your early childhood service and ask for help.

Managing in the long term

It is important to **nourish and care** for your own feelings and needs in order for you to continue to give to your children.

- Make the time to maintain your relationship with your partner (if you have one) or close friends.
- Reward yourself by scheduling something just for you several times a week—such as sitting down in a quiet room to read a book or magazine, having a bath or meeting a friend for coffee.
- Seek support from family members and friends who are prepared to listen with empathy.
- Spend time with other families willing to share stories and discuss parenting ideas.
- Learn about how children grow to help you better understand and anticipate your child's behaviour.
- Recognise and try to address underlying problems such as financial stresses, relationship difficulties and work demands.
- Investigate stress management solutions such as meditation, mindfulness, or exercise.
- Seek professional help as many problems are complex and need additional support.

Reflection

How well do you know your families?

Think about your conversations. What words or phrases might they say to you that demonstrate they are under pressure and need extra support?

How might you respond most usefully?



Early signs of difficulties

KidsMatter Early Childhood provides a **continuous improvement framework** designed to enable educators to plan and implement evidence-based mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention strategies that aim to:

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

The Framework will support educators who may require training and additional resources to develop an understanding of **mental health** in early childhood, including common signs and symptoms of problems, understanding the impact on children and families, factors that put children at risk and ways to achieve better mental health outcomes.

Recognising **mental health difficulties** in young children is not easy. It is very important to recognise that it is normal for children to exhibit some of these signs at some times in their lives. Adults need to be alert to when a child is showing a cluster of these signs or symptoms simultaneously or when there is no apparent cause to explain why a child's behaviour or emotions have changed. In either of these cases, it is a signal that the adults who are involved in the care of children need to intervene.

Recognising mental health difficulties in young children is not easy. It is very important to recognise that it is normal for children to exhibit some of these signs at some times in their lives.



Anger and aggression

Angry feelings are a normal reaction for most people when [feeling overwhelmed](#), upset or hurt by others or when things go wrong and life feels unfair. Infants, toddlers and young children show these feelings in different ways.

Toddlers and young children often have tantrums when they don't get their own way or feel frustrated. They can scream, lash out and damage things, and this is often their way of saying they don't like what they are feeling. If they cannot tell us in words, they use their behaviour.

They can show their anger by shouting, refusing to follow instructions, saying hurtful things and trying to upset others. They can break or smash things, and hit or hurt other children, their parents, family members and others.

External displays of emotion are relatively easy to recognise and usually quickly noticeable. This is because these behaviours can be disruptive and are likely to demand attention from families and educators.

Young children can feel angry for many reasons. These may include:

- being jealous of a new sibling
- feeling as though they have no friends
- being bullied or hurt
- struggling with pressures such as toileting, feeding oneself or dressing
- being very anxious or stressed about something in particular
- having to wait for a turn or a favoured toy
- not having their needs met and being unable to be understood
- having to finish something before they were ready
- having no control over their day.

Experiencing some angry feelings is normal at all ages, but some children struggle more to control these feelings and sort the problems out. Both parents and ECEC services can find it very hard to deal with a child's angry feelings and aggressive behaviour.



Self-regulation helps us cope

Learning to **self-regulate** is a crucial element in the way that a child learns to cope with the world and has a lasting impact on their mental health and wellbeing. When children learn to self-regulate they have stronger friendships and relationships with others, are more able to pay attention and learn new things and they manage the normal stresses and disappointments of daily life more effectively. When educators understand the significance of **self-regulation difficulties**, they are better able to support children and families.

Glenn was almost four when his father died after a long illness. He became very aggressive and hurt anyone who came close. His mother was also coping with her own grief and Glenn's siblings. She really needed Glenn to remain in the service. The service dedicated an educator to Glenn who would make close physical contact with him when he arrived. This usually meant him sitting on her knee for about 20 minutes while they enjoyed a story or two together. The educator then supported Glenn to plan what he might do next, this included who he may like to play with and what experiences he wanted to have. The educator returned to Glenn regularly throughout the day to see if he was okay. This didn't stop all of his aggressive behaviours, but over time with the additional support from family support counsellors, Glenn was able to make sense of what had happened and become a constructive member of the group.

Learning to self-regulate is a crucial element in the way that a child learns to cope with the world and has a lasting impact on their mental health and wellbeing.



Bullying

Bullying is generally when one person intimidates, upsets or excludes another person. In young children, we see the kinds of behaviours that may initially not be intentionally hurtful but, in the interests of all children, might need careful monitoring by adults.

In young children the beginnings of bullying can be:

- physical acts like pushing, hitting, biting or kicking
- name-calling and teasing
- excluding a particular child from play.

When educators observe and monitor these behaviours they are able to support all children—those who are being bullied and those who are beginning to bully. In young children bullying can be a stage in learning to get along with others, but if a particular child always ‘plays’ one role it is time to intervene.

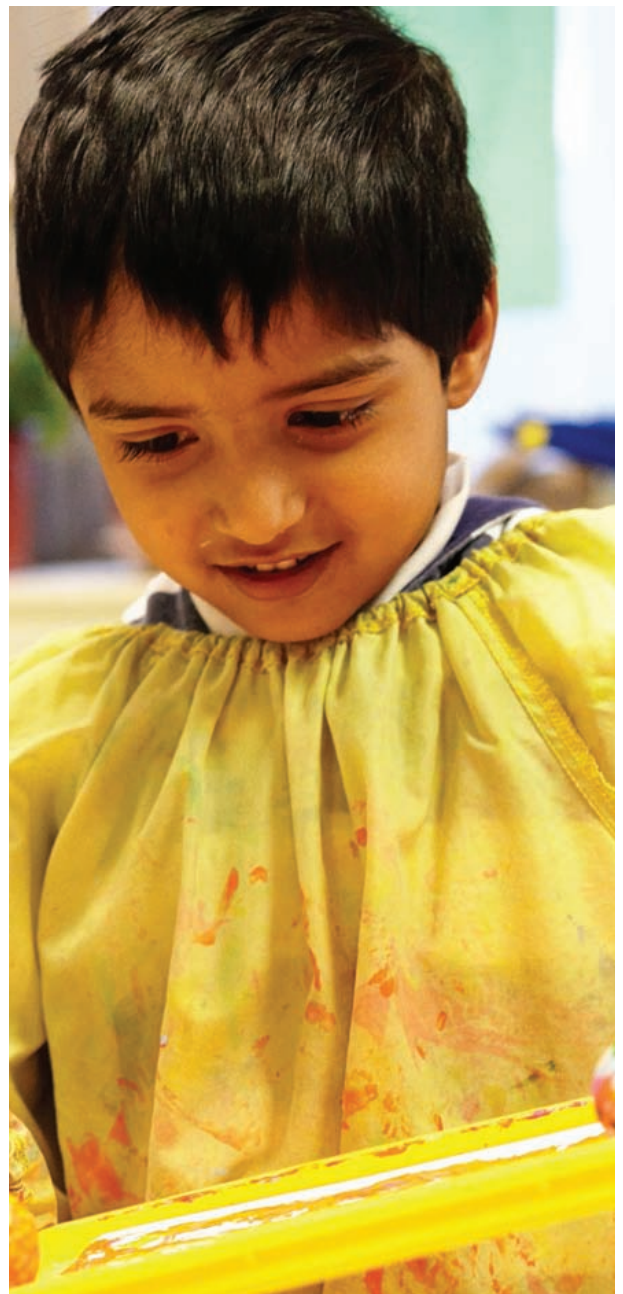
When young children are bullied regularly this can lead to low self-esteem, depression, worry and anger—mental health concerns that impact on a child’s future.

Some young children are more likely to be bullied. These include:

- children with physical disabilities or differences
- children with speech and language difficulties, learning difficulties, social or behavioural issues
- children who are very shy or have low self-esteem
- children from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.

Educators have a responsibility to work with families to try to understand the reasons for bullying. There may be a variety of underlying causes and understanding these can support working together to change behaviour. Intervening early is always important as bullying can have long-lasting effects on children’s mental health and future prospects

When educators observe and monitor these behaviours they are able to support all children ...



About anxiety

Anxiety is a natural, normal feeling everyone experiences from time to time. It is the body's way of preparing for a challenge when faced with stress. By releasing a hormone called adrenaline it causes a 'fight, flight or freeze' response and makes us alert and ready to react to the challenge. Anxiety can be useful and helpful when facing new or stressful situations. Being anxious is a normal part of growing up and most young children learn the skills and develop the resilience that will help them manage and face challenges in the future. Although, like adults, some young children have a disposition to be naturally more **fearful and anxious** than others and become nervous or worried more quickly.

Anxiety can cause a number of unpleasant physical reactions in the body, such as feeling sick, stomach cramps, dizziness and breathing difficulties. These are designed to make us alert and ready to manage any impending dangers. However, when anxiety happens more frequently and during familiar routines, it can affect the behaviour and thoughts of the anxious person in negative ways.

Long-term anxiety can have a very negative effect on the child in both the short and long term. When a child's anxiety is getting in the way of their day-to-day life, slowing down their development or interfering with their learning experiences, they need support to change this.

Young children might be experiencing anxiety when they:

- feel scared, panicky, embarrassed or ashamed a lot of the time
- do not have confidence to try new things, face challenges or even carry on as normal
- find it hard to concentrate
- have problems with sleeping and/or eating
- have angry outbursts and become 'out of control' very quickly
- worry or have negative thoughts about themselves or others
- find it difficult to make and maintain friendships.



Some conditions such as autism, Asperger's Syndrome and ADHD can have increased anxiety as part of the symptoms. This may be due to neurological differences in the way the brain functions. Young children with these conditions can benefit from help to recognise and manage their anxiety, although the underlying condition will remain and require expert help.

Anxiety is a natural, normal feeling everyone experiences from time to time. It is the body's way of preparing for a challenge when faced with stress.

Different types of anxiety

Separation anxiety

Many children go through stages of 'separation anxiety' and this is normal between six months and five years. As children become more aware of their surroundings, they begin to fear separation and may cling to family members, cry a lot and get upset in new situations or with new people. This is a part of normal development but it can be difficult for both the child and family, especially if the child is starting in an ECEC service.

This becomes a problem if the:

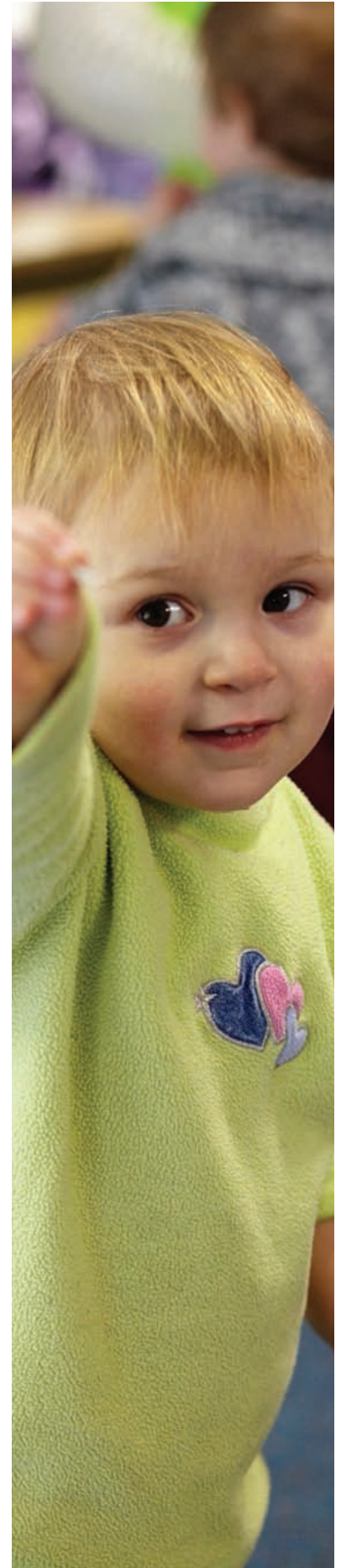
- anxiety does not improve over time
- child remains in a highly distressed state for a long period of time and cannot be comforted
- parent feels unable to leave because of the child's distress
- children who were previously settled unexpectedly display separation distress.

Educators and families will need to work together to [understand and manage separation distress](#).

Fear and phobias

A fear is a reaction when an individual perceives something as dangerous. It can be expected that most young children will go through stages of being scared of particular things; dogs, monsters under the bed, the bathwater going down the plug hole and the dark. There is often no obvious reason for children to be scared of that particular thing, though they can become very upset when faced with the thing they fear. Most children gradually grow out of these fears as they get older and when comforted by a trusted adult.

If a child does not grow out of their fear, the fear becomes out of proportion to the actual threat and starts to affect their daily life and general ability to cope, it may have become a phobia. Common phobias in older children include insects and spiders, germs, dogs and social situations. The child may go to great lengths to avoid the thing worrying them.



Fear is very real to a child. It is important to **support children to cope** as early as possible to avoid the fear becoming entrenched, as fears are something all children (and adults) will face and learn to manage.

Anxiety about joining a non-home setting (early childhood service/school anxiety)

Many children become anxious about attending an early childhood service or school. The **environment** might feel overwhelming and it could be difficult understanding the expectations. There could also be difficulties **making friends** or troubles with being teased or bullied.

Some might become anxious when making a transition from the toddler room to the preschool room or from preschool to school. Children will often display this anxiety through emotion-driven symptoms and behaviours, such as headaches and tummy aches, failing to 'get ready' for school, withdrawing or crying.



Educators can work together with families in the early stages to avoid these anxieties **escalating**. This situation involved a child refusing to get out of the car when he arrived at the service.

Jack (four years old) would start worrying about his childcare day as soon as he woke. His mum had to work so had no options but to persevere with the enrolment. The educators worked with Jack and his mum to create a strong relationship. This included making a book of photographs of Jack's preferred playthings at the centre, his preferred friends and his educators. The educators also created a visual routine so Jack knew exactly what time his mum would return. They also made sure that Jack knew he could access the 'quiet area' inside whenever he needed time alone. Jack's mum negotiated with her work so Jack could phone her if he needed to. These strategies worked well for Jack and, after three months, he no longer needed the additional supports.

Social anxiety

Young children often experience anxiety about social situations. This can relate to new social situations, such as being in groups, and finding it hard to talk to other children and adults they do not know. They might feel very self-conscious and think people are looking at them or judging them negatively.



Lily (three years old) displayed her social anxiety by refusing to speak at her ECEC service. This puzzled her family as she chatted a lot with family and friends. The ECEC service developed a strategy where her parent would spend some time in the service during arrival and departure time engaging with Lily in playful experiences. After a while, an educator would join in with the experience or involve another child. Over many months of providing a supportive environment, Lily began to speak—initially with one educator and a select group of children.

When anxiety leads to obsessions

Obsessions are thoughts or ideas that come and remain in people's minds when they do not want them to. Many children have mild obsessions at some stage, for example having to organise their toys in a special way, washing hands repeatedly or saying good night a certain number of times.

It is relatively common for young children to want to have very fixed and repeated routines, such as wanting to play the same game repeatedly, if they are feeling anxious. They might use these 'rituals' for comfort or to help process something they are going through. This might be the result of an understandable anxiety such as a new sibling, moving house or changing ECEC services.

However, obsessions can sometimes mask more deep-seated worries and anxieties. When obsessions start disrupting a child's life or interfering in family life, it is best to seek professional help. These repetitive behaviours can lead to an anxiety-related disorder, which can persist and have long-term consequences.

Sleep problems

Many young children have difficulties with sleeping at some point. Well into the primary school years, many children continue to wake in the night or need lots of help going to sleep. This might be due to worries about the dark, being alone or imaginary things such as monsters and ghosts. Many children have trouble with self-soothing and feel they need someone else to help them fall asleep at bedtime or if they wake in the night.

Young children's sleep patterns can change from being able to sleep all night to suddenly waking from dreams. Reasons for the change could include physical or developmental issues like illness and teething or changes in routine, such as starting an early childhood service or the arrival of a new sibling. These shifts in patterns are usually short lived and nothing to worry about.

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Bed-wetting is another reason for children to wake up in the night. This might relate to worries or anxieties. It is especially notable if a child begins bedwetting when they have previously been 'dry'.

Trauma

People often think that trauma is an unexpected, horrific event that is relatively rare, affecting only a few unlucky individuals. However, trauma affects many people to some degree, at one time or another during their life.

A traumatic event is an incident that is so frightening it overwhelms a person's ability to cope. The experience weakens any coping skills they had and leaves them feeling utterly helpless and hopeless.

Early childhood trauma generally refers to the traumatic experiences that occur to children from birth to the age of six. Because infants' and young children's reactions can be different from older children's, and they cannot always verbalise their reactions to threatening or dangerous events, many people mistakenly assume that young children have protection from the impact of traumatic experiences. When young children experience or witness a traumatic event, many adults

try to protect children 'by not talking about the event'. However, traumatic events do affect young children. Even though they may not understand what happened they need support to manage and recover from trauma. Educators play an important role in [understanding trauma](#) and [working with families to support young children to recover](#).

For young children traumas can be the result of violence—including domestic violence and physical or sexual abuse—or the result of natural disaster, accidents or war. Young children might also experience traumatic stress in response to medical procedures or the sudden loss of a parent or caregiver.

... traumatic events do affect young children.

Trauma affects children differently depending on their age, personality and past experiences. When [times get tough](#), trauma affects the whole child—their mind, body, spirit and relationships with others. When children experience trauma their first response is usually to seek reassurance from a parent or trusted family member or educator. These adults can support children to feel safe and secure again.

When times get tough, trauma affects the whole child—their mind, body, spirit and relationships with others.



The [National Child Traumatic Support Network \(United States\)](#) suggests families and educators can support children to feel safe and secure by:

- answering children's questions in language they can understand; this helps them develop an understanding of the events and changes in their life
- developing family safety plans
- engaging in age-appropriate activities that stimulate the mind and body
- finding ways to have fun and relax together
- helping children expand their 'feelings' vocabulary
- honouring family traditions that bring them close to the people they love
- looking for changes in behaviours
- setting and adhering to routines and schedules
- setting boundaries and limits with consistency and patience
- showing love and affection.

Reflection

How well does your educator team understand and respond to early signs of a child having difficulty?

What procedures do you have in place to monitor, document and act on children's behaviours?

Do we ask ourselves 'why might the child be behaving this way', before jumping to conclusions?



Supporting children's mental health and wellbeing

Building self-esteem

How someone feels about themselves and what they do is self-esteem. ECEC educators understand the significance of building self-esteem in young children. They strive to give young children **confidence and coping skills**.

Young children with high self-esteem:

- are confident
- can make friends easily and are not anxious with new people
- can play in groups or on their own
- will try to solve problems on their own, but if not able to will ask for help
- can be proud of their achievements
- able to cope with challenges or things not going as planned
- will try new things and adapt to change.

Children with low self-esteem:

- lack confidence
- find it hard to make and keep friendships
- tend to avoid new things and find change hard
- don't deal well when things don't go the way they expect
- say 'I can't do that' before they have tried
- experience a higher level of worry or anxiety.

Most young children experience changes in their level of self-esteem over time but, with early support from both families and an ECEC service, most young children usually get through troubled times.

Some children may have low self-esteem from an early age due simply to their temperament. Others may have had health difficulties as a baby or toddler or a family life that was changing and uncertain, including, for example, a mother suffering postnatal depression. Young children can also develop low self-esteem due to changing life circumstances such as parental separation, bereavement, family complexities and experiencing bullying and may need additional help to bounce back.

Most young children experience changes in their level of self-esteem over time but, with early support from both families and an ECEC service, most young children usually get through troubled times.

Emotional wellbeing: How to help

Social and emotional wellbeing comes from children feeling safe, secure and valued. NQS PLP e-Newsletter No. 62 gives a rich insight into the [emotional and social wellbeing of babies and young children](#). A sense of wellbeing frees them to explore and learn. When educators [build strong relationships](#) with individual children and their families that focus on [belonging, being and becoming](#) this lays a firm foundation for life and mental health now and into the future. Social and emotional wellbeing are core aspects of the EYLF and the NQS.

‘Tuning in’ to young children’s feelings and behaviours is a first step to supporting children’s mental health. A complete picture of the child develops through [noticing and recording learning](#) in the early childhood service and conversations with families: this helps determine if additional help and supports are required.

[Everyday learning about responding to the emotional needs of children](#) illustrates how to understand young children’s experiences and ways to support their healthy [emotional](#) development.

Responding to the emotional needs of children lies at the very heart of parenting and [teaching young children](#). A focus on wellbeing in the early years is the foundation of children’s future wellbeing. Watching for the signs that show us how a child is feeling and responding promptly and sensitively are among parents’ and educators’ most important tasks. Learning to manage emotions is essential to children feeling confident and capable, and making progress in relation to the five Learning Outcomes in the EYLF.

Growing friendships

Friends are very important to children, young people and adults. Often the friendships in ECEC services are the first [friendships](#) young children develop outside of the family relationship circle. From their friendships and relationships, children develop a sense of who they are and their place in the world. Friendships and playing are how children have fun and learn to navigate the world. They share ideas and make each other laugh, but also learn that not everyone will do what you want all the time, that you have to take turns, share and [negotiate](#) and that people have different ways of thinking and doing things.

Some children are more confident and make and keep friends more easily. They can shrug off comments like ‘I don’t want to be your friend’ and cope when things don’t always go their way; others find it more difficult and will become upset or angry and seek an adult’s help or withdraw from other children so they can avoid further conflict or worry. Educators might need to use specific strategies to ensure children develop and maintain friendships and manage feelings when left out because [‘they won’t let me play’](#). Friendship problems affect young children differently and require addressing. They can have an impact on children’s self-esteem, general happiness, mental health, family life and physical wellbeing such as eating and sleeping.

[Friends are very important to children, young people and adults.](#)

The example of place cards with names in NQS PLP e-Newsletter No. 53 on '[social and emotional learning](#)' can be one simple way to develop friendships during meals and snacks.

Noticing that a child is alone and [spending time together](#) can support them to feel good about themselves because one-to-one conversations demonstrate that they matter.

Becoming actively involved in children's play can support friendships to develop. Educators can support children in the roles they play and take on various roles as a participant and observer.



Working with families

Most families have the skills to manage their child's everyday stresses and subsequent behaviours however there might be times that require [professional help](#). When changes in children's behaviours persist and cause problems at home and in the ECEC service, families can benefit from professional assistance and advice. This is a valuable role for educators and ECEC services. Conversations with families can sometimes feel daunting to educators. Building a positive relationship first with families is crucial. The KidsMatter '[Connecting with families eLearning](#)' provides useful insights for achieving relationships that enable help seeking, support children's mental health and development and encourage families, educators and children to participate in their ECEC community.

[Most families have the skills to manage their child's everyday stresses and subsequent behaviours however there might be times that require professional help.](#)

Reflection

How well as an educator team do we consult and respond to support children's mental health outcomes?

Who in this service is responsible for children's mental health outcomes? Discuss the different roles educators and families may play.

Working with communities

- KidsMatter Early Childhood acknowledges the **critical role** early childhood education and care services have in enhancing factors that promote children's mental health and wellbeing.
- It seeks to support the further development of early childhood services' capacity to foster children's mental health and wellbeing and to recognise and respond effectively to early signs of children's mental health difficulties.
- The initiative also emphasises shared community responsibility for children's wellbeing and aims to promote **partnerships with families**, early childhood professionals and **a range of community services and agencies** to improve children's mental health.

Reflection

How long do we wait to talk with families about behaviours that are worrying us?

Can we wait too long?

How do we approach families and suggest additional supports are required?



Summary

Research has demonstrated that mental health problems in early childhood exist and can be identified. A recent Australian study reported that between four and 14 per cent of children aged from one-and-a-half to three years had externalising problems such as aggression and other acting out behaviours, or internalising problems such as anxiety and being withdrawn or depressed.

The prevalence of mental health difficulties in early childhood is similar to that reported for later childhood. Further, children's mental health difficulties are generally associated with a range of poor immediate and future outcomes, including lower school performance.

These videos demonstrate that everything that happens within a service supports children's mental health when educators place a lens of **social and emotional learning** over all aspects of the curriculum. KidsMatter Early Childhood gives educators an understanding about mental health and ways to respond and work with each other, families and communities to improve young children's mental health outcomes.

Knowledge, understanding and early support can improve children's mental health and prevent difficulties from becoming entrenched.



The prevalence of mental health difficulties in early childhood is similar to that reported for later childhood.

The KidsMatter Framework is strongly linked to the EYLF practices and Learning Outcomes. In particular, it resonates with NQS Quality Areas and Elements:

- Standard 2.1: Each child's health is promoted.
- Element 4.2.2: Educators, coordinators and staff members work collaboratively and affirm, challenge, support and learn from each other to further develop their skills and to improve practice and relationships.
- Element 5.1.1: Interactions with each child are warm, responsive and build trusting relationships.
- Standard 6.3: The service collaborates with other organisations and service providers to enhance children's learning and wellbeing.

Knowledge, understanding and early support can improve children's mental health and prevent difficulties from becoming entrenched. As **studies show** the earlier in life difficulties are addressed, the better chance a child has at improving their long-term mental health and wellbeing and therefore their life chances.

Read more

[Executive function in the early years](#). Everyday Learning Series, ECA.

[KidsMatter Early Childhood—Component 4 Literature Review](#).





Australian Government
Department of Health

