

Supporting children's mental health and wellbeing in the early years

What do we mean by mental health and wellbeing?

Wellbeing is about how we are doing as individuals, communities, and as a nation.¹ Focusing on wellbeing supports children's development and emotional state. This also lays the foundation for their long-term mental health. Broadly, being mentally healthy enables young children to understand and begin to manage emotions; to experience nurturing, meaningful relationships; and to explore, play and learn. This may be experienced differently from one child to the next.

Factors in society can affect young children's mental health and wellbeing. Persistent poverty, unsafe neighbourhood environments, and other adverse childhood experiences can elevate the risk of poor mental health for young children.² Paying attention to children's mental health and wellbeing can help to identify concerns about their relationships, wider health, development and safety. Educators are not trained mental health experts. However, they play an important role in noticing opportunities when engaging families, or making referrals to other professionals, might be appropriate.

'Being' and 'becoming' mentally healthier

Mental health and wellbeing for young children involve two connected stages: 'being' mentally healthy and 'becoming' mentally healthier.³ Both stages are nurtured by consistent and responsive caregiver relationships, physical wellbeing and opportunities to engage in meaningful early learning.

'Being' refers to children's current state of wellbeing, which includes social, emotional and behavioural elements. Educators play a role in supporting children's wellbeing, for example, by developing secure, supportive relationships with them. This helps children to feel content, safe and able to express themselves. Educators may also support children's interactions with their peers as they form early relationships. They can engage children in meaningful and stimulating play and learning opportunities.



'Becoming' mentally healthier involves children developing social, emotional and behavioural capacities to grow towards better mental health in the future. Educators can play a role in supporting children to develop these capacities, for example, by helping children to understand different feelings and to form trusting and secure relationships. Educators can also support children's developing independence and cooperation with others.

By building warm, trusting and supportive relationships with children, educators can engage them in interactions and activities that support their Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) and Self-Regulation and Executive Function (SREF). Children from lower-income families may experience more difficulties developing self-regulation and executive function. They are also at greater risk of not reaching expected levels of PSED by the end of Reception than their more affluent peers.⁴ Integrating PSED and SREF strategies into daily practice can promote children's mental health and wellbeing. Young children with more developed self-regulation skills are more likely to have better health outcomes in later life, including a lower risk of anxiety and depression.⁵

What does the evidence say?

The following is based on a systematic review of research evidence.

Developing a secure and supportive climate

A secure and supportive climate focuses on strong relationships between educators, children and their peers, as well as developing a safe, consistent and welcoming environment for children. Educators respond to children with sensitivity and empathy. They develop opportunities for children to connect and communicate through play. Educators support children in recognising the emotions of others and demonstrating helpful behaviour.

Supporting children's PSED contributes to their mental health and wellbeing. Educators can create a secure and supportive climate using approaches and practices found in the [PSED theme](#) of the Evidence Store, particularly the approaches of 'Teaching relationship skills' and 'Teaching how to sustain positive relationships'.

What can educators do?

Evidence shows certain strategies can promote positive mental health and wellbeing outcomes:

Promote Positive Relationships and Interactions

Focusing on relationships and interactions can positively impact many mental health and wellbeing outcomes, including social skills and attachments.

Here, educators build strong relationships and attachments with children. They promote positive interactions between children and their peers. In research, educators sometimes did this with the support of trained specialists. They also received training to help them build consistency and routines into the day.

Examples from typical early years practice include key group times, where educators talk with children about their interests and activities, or encourage children to communicate with and listen to each other.

Develop Emotional skills

Children's emotional skills include how they understand and express emotion and empathy. Programmes that promote emotional skills can have a positive impact on some mental health and wellbeing outcomes. In studies, children were sometimes taught emotional skills as part of a range of activities which aimed to support additional skills, such as problem-solving or self-regulation. In these studies, children's knowledge and expression of emotions improved. Their helpful behaviour and cooperation also improved.

To promote children's emotional skills, educators introduced different emotions through role-play, stories, or puppets. They also used games and discussion. These programmes were more effective with regular and sustained delivery.



Caring for bodies and minds

Supporting children's self-regulation and executive function (SREF) contributes to their mental health and wellbeing. Physical and relaxation activities, such as yoga and mindfulness, can also support the development of children's SREF. In the long term, this promotes their mental health and wellbeing. Educators can support children in caring for their bodies and minds using approaches and practices found in the [SREF theme](#) on the Early Years Evidence Store (particularly 'Teaching self-monitoring and self-awareness' and 'Promoting physical activity' approaches).

Educators can support children in caring for their bodies and minds by helping them to manage big feelings and difficult situations. For example, they may also engage children in physical activity and relaxation techniques, and prompt children to think about how they feel.

Overall, this approach can benefit children's mental health and wellbeing, but the results are mixed. More research is needed to better understand the impact of this approach. Evidence does suggest the approach may be more effective when embedded as part of regular, high-quality practice.



What can educators do?

Evidence shows certain activities can promote positive mental health and wellbeing outcomes:

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| Physical activities | <p>Promoting physical activity can improve children's mental health and wellbeing, particularly their social and emotional skills. Some studies showed a positive impact on some outcomes but not others.</p> <p>Here, educators encouraged movement and physical activity through games, fitness and gymnastics.</p> |
| Yoga and mindfulness | <p>Evidence shows that yoga and mindfulness can have a positive impact on children's mental health and wellbeing. Some studies showed a positive impact on some outcomes, but not others.</p> <p>In these studies, educators used movement, breathing exercises and storytelling to bring their attention to the present moment and develop children's awareness of their physical sensations, thoughts, and feelings.</p> |
| Sustained mental health and wellbeing activities | <p>There is a small evidence base which shows that incorporating mental health and wellbeing activities over an extended period can improve children's social-emotional skills.</p> <p>In these studies, educators delivered a series of sessions to increase children's self-awareness and self-regulation. This included breathing and movement exercises, games, music and reading activities.</p> |

Developing self-knowledge and autonomy

Developing self-knowledge and autonomy

Supporting children's SREF can contribute to their mental health and wellbeing outcomes. Educators can help to develop children's self-knowledge and autonomy using approaches and practices from the [SREF theme](#) of the Evidence Store (in particular, elements of the approaches 'Creating and Navigating Challenge' and 'Promoting Talk about Learning').

Developing children's self-knowledge and autonomy includes how educators support children's growing independence and sense of self. Educators encourage children to make choices and value their decisions, as appropriate. They also enable children to engage in meaningful, motivational play and learning opportunities. Educators show a genuine interest in children's ideas and interests. They help children to understand their strengths and what makes them unique.

There is some evidence that developing children's self-knowledge and autonomy can improve their mental health and wellbeing; however, some studies only found an effect on some outcomes and not others.

What can educators do?

Evidence shows certain activities can promote positive mental health and wellbeing outcomes:

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| Provide outdoor learning in natural settings | <p>Evidence shows that outdoor learning in nature can improve social skills and resilience when compared to traditional indoor activities. However, studies often found positive impacts on some measures but not others.</p> <p>In these studies, children experienced outdoor learning in natural settings. Educators used these activities to help children become aware of and reflect on their bodily experiences.</p> <p>Examples from typical early years practice could include den building using natural materials, such as tree branches, or a natural 'obstacle course' of branches, stumps, puddles and hills.</p> |
| Child-initiated creative play | <p>Findings were mixed. The evidence showed improvements in psychological outcomes such as happiness, but not other aspects of mental health and wellbeing.</p> <p>Here, educators supported children to explore, experiment and create using "loose parts" (such as cardboard boxes, sticks, bottles and string). They also encouraged children to choose how to express themselves through their voice, movement or artwork.</p> |
| Build confidence | <p>Research also explored developing self-knowledge and autonomy as part of programmes that emphasise children's strengths and achievements within a wider set of activities aimed at developing broader skills. Evidence shows that these programmes can positively impact social and emotional outcomes, though it is difficult to know whether positive effects are solely due to teaching self-knowledge and autonomy.</p> <p>In these programmes, educators supported children to think about what makes them unique and recognise their strengths and achievements.</p> |

A list of the research studies used for this evidence summary is available [here](#).