

Mental health information sheets

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Introducing KidsMatter Primary

Good mental health is vital for life. Children who are mentally healthy are better able to meet life's challenges and have stronger relationships with the people around them. They are also better learners who are more likely to succeed at school. Good mental health in childhood provides a solid basis for managing changes as they grow.

On the other hand, children who are exposed to multiple stressors – such as a family breakdown, poverty, abuse, racism, bullying, or the mental illness of a parent – are at a higher risk of developing emotional or behavioural problems that can continue into adulthood.

It's not always possible to tell which children will develop difficulties, so it's important to consider the wellbeing of all children.

The good news is that KidsMatter Primary is all about growing healthy minds. KidsMatter is a mental health and wellbeing framework that helps schools focus on the development of all their students in partnership with families. It was developed by mental health and education experts and has already made a big difference to the lives of Australian children.

Does KidsMatter Primary work?

KidsMatter Primary works because it unites all the people that influence children's mental health most – families, school staff and the wider community.

KidsMatter Primary can help improve:

- the mental health and wellbeing of students¹
- the quality of their school work¹
- the ability of parents, carers and teaching staff to help children deal with problems¹
- NAPLAN results² – when schools implement KidsMatter Primary well.

KidsMatter Primary was developed in collaboration with *beyondblue*, the Australian Psychological Society, and the Principals Australia Institute, with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing and *beyondblue*.

How does KidsMatter Primary work?

When schools take on KidsMatter Primary, they build on the work they are already doing to support students' mental health and wellbeing. Firstly, they form an Action Team to represent the whole-school community and to coordinate and lead the implementation of the initiative. The Action Team reviews the schools' current efforts across four focus areas (or 'components'). They look for ways they can strengthen these efforts, and then take action using a step-by-step planning process.

Every school is different, with different needs for their students and families. The KidsMatter Primary framework covers four components that have shown to be highly successful in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children.



Positive school community

1

Positive and respectful relationships at school help children and families feel that they belong and that their contributions are valued. A positive school community also gives children a sense of security that their needs will be met. Research shows that when children and families feel connected to school, children are less likely to develop mental health difficulties and are more likely to succeed academically.

Social and emotional learning for students

2

Learning how to manage feelings and get on with others is an important part of children's development. It helps them become better learners and feel good about themselves. Teaching children social and emotional skills as part of the school curriculum gives them tools for coping with emotions, solving problems and learning more effectively.

Working with parents and carers

3

In order to promote children's mental health and wellbeing, it makes sense for families and schools to work closely together. Schools can support parents and carers by providing useful parenting information and resources, and by connecting them with further assistance if required.

Helping children with mental health difficulties

4

It can make a significant difference when children and families are able to access mental health intervention early. KidsMatter primary schools learn to respond more effectively to children's mental health difficulties by recognising and responding to concerns that may need following-up. They can provide information to families and develop links with health and community agencies in their local area.

How can families help?

Families are the biggest influence on children's mental health and play a very important role in KidsMatter. Children benefit when the important people in their lives work together and have a shared understanding of their development and their needs.

KidsMatter Primary has developed a range of information sheets with parenting tips and strategies to help all Australian families support the wellbeing of their children. View them online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au

If your child's school is participating in KidsMatter Primary, there are many things you can do to help make it a success:

- Read the KidsMatter Primary information sheets to further your understanding about children's mental health.
- Develop relationships with staff, so you can share knowledge and information about how they can support your child.
- Get involved in the Action Team.
- Ask staff how KidsMatter Primary is being implemented.
- Participate in school activities to build a sense of community.
- Respond to any school requests for ideas or information.
- Talk to other parents and carers about ways the school can support your needs.
- Let the school know what skills or talents you are happy to share.

¹ Slee, P. T., Lawson, M. J., Russell, A., Askell-Williams, H., Dix, K. L., Owens, L., Skrzypiec, G. & Spears, B. (2009). KidsMatter Primary Evaluation Final Report. Adelaide SA: Centre for Analysis of Educational Futures, Flinders University of South Australia.

² Dix, K.L., Slee, P.T., Lawson, M.J. & Keeves, J.P. (2011). Implementation quality of whole-school mental health promotion and students' academic performance. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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Why connect at school?

Peter held his daughter Rachel's hand tightly. It was a first for him to be taking Rachel to school. His heart was pounding as they made their way to the classroom. There was the teacher, Ms Lim. She smiled at them, "Welcome Rachel, hello Peter." Another child waved at Rachel. She seemed happy to have a friend to play with. So why was Peter still nervous?

"We're having a morning tea for parents next week. Will you come?" Ms Lim asked. "I'll try," Peter said. "It all seems different from when I went to school," he thought as he headed out the door. "They seem to want parents to be involved. I wonder what else has changed?"

Schools can be scary places, and not just for children

Parents and carers also need to feel welcome and at ease to get the most out of being involved with their children's school.

When parents and carers are involved and connected with school, children are better learners and have better mental health and wellbeing. This is an important emphasis in schools nowadays that may be very different from what parents or carers remember, or what they may have experienced in another country.

Connecting at school

Being connected at school is not about having mobile phones and computers. It's about knowing you can get support, that you will be listened to, and that you can work together with school staff to help your child learn and develop. Working together to care for children is the best way for schools and parents and carers to support children's mental health and wellbeing.

- When schools and parents and carers work together, children find it easier to understand what is expected from them and are better able to manage. They have fewer behaviour problems and do better at school.
- When parents and carers are connected to school it helps them get support when they need it. Support may come from talking with teachers or other school staff, or from making connections with other parents and carers. Schools help families to connect through having lots of different activities that parents and carers can get involved in.
- Being connected to the school helps keep parents and carers informed. Parents and carers who are informed about what their children are learning at school and about opportunities to get involved are able to support them better at home.



School is a place for adults to make new friends too!

Having opportunities to get to know other parents and carers, to find out how to support children's learning, or to get involved in class activities can help parents and carers feel connected to the school.

Working together is the best way to support children's mental health and wellbeing.

How parents and carers can get connected to the school

- Make contact with your child's teacher and keep in touch. Ask for help if you don't understand something.
- Check for notices that are sent home and keep informed about school activities through the school newsletter.
- Attend information sessions and social activities at the school whenever you can.
- Make contact with other parents and carers at your school: perhaps meet up informally with parents or carers of other children in your child's class, find out about parent social groups that meet at or near the school, or join a parent committee.
- Take an interest in the school council and consider joining it if you have the time and skills.



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Belonging at school makes a difference

Tommy's Aunt Sue had just arrived for a visit. "Hi Tommy. You're a big school boy now! How is school?" "Good," Tommy said. "What do you like about it?" asked Aunt Sue. "Friends – Allan and Georgio." "Great! You've made some friends already." "I like my teacher too."

Aunt Sue also talked to Tommy's friend, Lulu, who had come over to play. "What about you, Lulu? How do you like school?" "It's good. If I need the teacher then I have to put up my hand. But if I need help at playtime I can ask Jackie," said Lulu. "Is Jackie your friend?" "Jackie's my buddy. She's a big girl." "What does a buddy do?" "She helps me if I don't know where to go or other stuff. She helps to look after me 'cos she's big and I'm new."

Starting school is a big change for children

Not only do they have to cope with schoolwork and teachers, but they also have to get used to being part of a class and a whole school. A lot more is expected of children when they start school and there are lots more people to get on with. It helps children to know that there are people at school who will look after them and care about their needs.

Belonging improves mental health, wellbeing and learning

All children need to feel that school is a safe place where people will care about them, where their needs for support, respect and friendship will be met, and where they will be able to get help to work out problems. When these needs are met children develop a sense of belonging at school. Belonging is very important for children's mental health and wellbeing.

Children who feel that they belong at school are happier, more relaxed and have fewer behavioural problems than other students. They are also more motivated to learn and be more successful with their school work. Research into children's mental health has found that a sense of belonging and connectedness at school helps to protect children against mental health difficulties and improves their learning.

Making friends and having positive relationships with teachers helps children develop a sense of belonging at school. Having older 'buddies' to turn to helps younger children feel that school is a place where they can get help if they need it. Looking after younger children encourages caring and helping in older children and helps to reduce conflicts and bullying. These are some of the ways that children's sense of belonging at school can be supported.



More ways schools can help create a sense of belonging

As part of KidsMatter Primary, schools look closely at ways they can continue to build strong positive respectful relationships with all students and families. This includes things like:

- making the school environment welcoming for all students and families
- encouraging teachers to get to know all their students and their families
- identifying ways of improving communication with families
- focusing on child and family strengths
- making sure that school policies on safety, welfare and discipline are clearly communicated and support a sense of belonging for children and families.

All children need to feel that school is a safe place.

How parents and carers can help

Parents and carers can work with school staff to help create a bridge between home and school. When the adults responsible for children take a positive interest in what happens at school it helps children feel at home. It also makes it easier to pick up any problems early when they are easiest to resolve.

- Find out about the school and what your child is learning; participate in information sessions.
- Make time to listen to your child tell you about what he or she is doing at school.
- Let your child's teacher know if he/she is having difficulties and discuss what kinds of things you can do at home and school to help.



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What makes a positive school community?

"Mum, Miss Collins told me to be sure you go to the school for the meeting tonight. She says it's very important." "You're not in trouble, are you Omar? Teachers only ask parents to come to school when there is a problem, don't they?" "No Mum. She says she is looking forward to meeting you."

When Rasheeda got to the meeting it wasn't as she had expected. Lots of other parents were there and they were talking with each other and with the teacher. It seemed quite friendly. The teacher explained what the children would be learning in school this term and then asked the parents to talk to two different people they didn't know.

Rasheeda felt a bit shy about this. Luckily, the other parents at her table started talking to her. They asked her what school was like in her home country. "Oh, very different!" she told them. "Over there the teacher talks and the children listen. They don't learn in groups. They start early and they go home at lunchtime." The other parents seemed interested.

Miss Collins also spoke with her: "Rasheeda, I wonder if there's anything more you would like to know about how Omar is going or what we are doing at school? We want to be sure you feel welcome, so if there is anything the school can do to help you or Omar settle in, please let us know."

Positive school communities
create opportunities for
families, children and staff
to feel included.



What feeling included is all about

Children come from an endless range of different families, backgrounds, cultures and religions. They also have a variety of interests, learning styles and abilities. Despite all of these differences, everyone should feel included and welcome within their school community.

Positive school communities create opportunities for children, families and staff to feel included. They make help and support accessible and find lots of ways to invite people to take up the support being offered. They help everyone benefit from understanding experiences and cultures that may be different to their own.

When children feel included, when they are part of a community that promotes inclusion and respect for everybody, they show more caring and compassion towards others, and they feel safer and more secure. They are also better learners and have better mental health and wellbeing. In a positive school community *every face has a place*, every voice is valued, and everyone has something to contribute.

School communities from around Australia chose care, compassion, respect, understanding and inclusion as important values for children to understand. These are things that children can learn about. The best learning happens when children see the adults around them putting values like these into practice. Feeling included is important for mental health, and is supported best when diversity is respected and valued.



Some ways of showing people they are welcomed and included at school

- Display information, posters, and artwork that reflect the diversity in the school community.
- Provide information in appropriate languages, verbally, where possible, as well as in written form.
- Cater to specific needs where possible (eg dietary needs, access needs).
- Publicly celebrate diversity (eg diverse families, cultures, languages and values).

Being included and learning to include and respect others are very important for children's social development.

Being included promotes belonging and connectedness, which are also key factors for supporting children's mental health and wellbeing.

How parents and carers can help

- Get to know other families, take an interest in others' different backgrounds as well as what you have in common.
- Set up a 'buddy' system where families who have been at the school for a while buddy up with new families to provide welcome and support.
- Encourage children to include and appreciate others' cultural and individual differences.

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Disability and children's mental health

In Australia, most school-aged children with a disability (89%) attend a mainstream school. Yet, 63% of these students have been found to experience difficulties at school, while only some receive additional support¹. Meeting the needs of children with disabilities can be challenging for schools and families. However, effective support for children's mental health and wellbeing involves efforts to meet the social, emotional and learning needs of all children.

Children with disabilities

Children with disabilities can sometimes be seen as 'different' by other children. In some settings, this may lead to being excluded from play or peer relationships and experiences of social isolation. Such experiences of isolation and exclusion are common contributors to children's mental health difficulties.

However, children with additional needs can experience good mental health and wellbeing in respectful and supportive environments that promote their strengths. All children benefit from having positive relationships and feeling a sense of belonging at school. These positive experiences are especially important for children with additional needs.

In this overview, we look at how disability affects children and their families, why children with additional needs are at a greater risk of mental health difficulties, and how schools can promote mental health and wellbeing in children who have additional needs. With careful attention and planning, and well coordinated efforts between parents, carers and schools, children with disabilities can be supported to participate and be included at school and have their needs met.

How disability affects children

The term 'disability' refers to a wide range of conditions that in some way limit people's ability to manage everyday living. Different disabilities are often grouped in categories such as intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, sensory and speech disabilities, acquired brain injury or physical disabilities.

Having a disability places limits on the things that children can do. It may restrict them from participating in some activities that their classmates do. It is vital to see the whole child, not just the disability or illness. It is also important to offer support for what children with additional needs can do, so as to reduce restrictions on their participation and maximise their opportunities for success. This approach helps to build self-confidence and motivation for trying new things. It promotes ways of valuing and including all children.

It is vital to see the whole child, not just the disability or illness.

Families and children with disabilities

A family who cares for a child with a disability is faced with many challenges. These challenges can affect the whole family or particular individuals within it. For example, social isolation often affects families who have a child with a disability. Friends and extended family may find it difficult to understand and support the family's situation. Time for catching up with friends or going on outings may be severely reduced as family members strive to meet the child's additional needs.

For parents and carers, the challenges often include working out how to access the right services for their child, and dealing with the roller coaster ride of emotions that can accompany parenting a child with a disability. There may be a range of challenges associated with caring for your child's additional needs on a day-to-day basis. These may include managing the challenging behaviours of some children with disabilities, the need to administer daily treatments, helping children with self-care (eg bathing, dressing and eating), advocating for your child's needs, and making sure there are facilities that can accommodate your child's needs when you visit places outside the home (eg wheel chair access).

Having a brother or a sister with a disability can affect siblings in different ways. They may feel a range of emotions – jealousy for parents spending more time with the child with the disability, guilt for complaining about the strains that the child with the disability puts on the family, or joy when their brother or sister accomplishes something new for the first time. Siblings may sometimes get teased about their brother or sister with a disability. Having a break and spending time with friends can be really helpful for siblings. Being able to talk about their feelings and getting support from parents, school and/ or support services is also really important.

Disability and children's mental health

Research tells us that children with disabilities have a greater chance of developing mental health problems than children without disabilities². High rates of mental health difficulties have also been found in young people who are hearing impaired, have cerebral palsy, epilepsy or chronic illness.

The level of the child's impairment and support and attitudes from others are key factors that influence the mental health and wellbeing of children with disabilities. When those around them take effective steps to include children with disabilities and ensure their needs are met, they can help foster positive mental health and wellbeing. However, when this does not occur, mental health difficulties are more likely to develop in some children.

Some children with disabilities may have difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships because the impairments caused by the disability limit or restrict them from participating in everyday activities with their peers. Children with disabilities are also more likely to experience situations that negatively affect their mental health, such as bullying,

Some children with disabilities have difficulty in picking up social cues that allow them to participate cooperatively with others (eg following the rules of a game, taking turns). Children with physical disabilities may find it hard to participate in games that other children play. Some children may find it difficult to approach their peers to engage in social activities. As a result, children with disabilities may lose confidence in their ability to make friends or to participate in activities that other children their age enjoy.

The combination of these sorts of factors can lead children with a disability to be at risk of developing mental health difficulties, such as low self-esteem, and mental health disorders, such as depression. However, when families, schools and communities take steps to understand the child's individual needs, build on their strengths, and provide supportive and respectful environments, children with additional needs can experience good mental health and their potential for learning can be maximised.





Key principles for supporting children with disabilities

Build strengths step-by-step

Breaking tasks into small steps helps to ensure success and supports children's learning. Support children's confidence by emphasising what they can do.

Be an advocate for children with disabilities

Making sure that others understand the need to include and value all children benefits the individual child and promotes a caring community.

Focus on the child and their individual needs

Children's needs should be assessed individually and regularly. It's best not to assume that all children with a particular disability have the same problems and needs. An individual child's needs may also change over time.

Develop partnerships

Parents and carers cannot meet the complex needs of children with disabilities or chronic illness alone. Collaborative involvement between families, schools and health professionals helps to ensure the best outcomes for children's development and mental health.

Children with disabilities have a greater chance of developing mental health problems than those without disabilities.

Using the KidsMatter Primary framework to help children with disabilities

KidsMatter Primary was found to have a positive effect on students with a disability by strengthening their wellbeing and reducing mental health difficulties³. Below are some ways of using the KidsMatter Primary framework to help children with disabilities.

1 Creating a positive school community for children with disabilities

Developing a culture of belonging and inclusion at school is especially important for children with disabilities and their families. This involves finding out about the particular needs of children with disabilities, tailoring teaching practices accordingly and collaborating effectively with parents and carers. Schools can also support belonging and inclusion by promoting values of friendship, cooperation and respect, and by ensuring that the school's policies and practices address instances of bullying or harassment quickly and effectively when they occur.

2 Social and emotional learning (SEL) for children with disabilities

When planning a SEL curriculum, teachers of children with disabilities should be sure to take into account their particular learning needs. By assessing each child's social and emotional skills individually, a learning plan can be developed to build skills step-by-step. Breaking down complex skills into smaller concrete steps is important for ensuring success. Opportunities for students to practise should be provided for each step. Providing structured peer-to-peer learning activities, in which students learn social skills through direct interaction with one another, is often particularly helpful. Praise or rewards given for effort and achievement of each step help to consolidate new skills. Any materials used to teach social and emotional skills need to be considered in terms of their appropriateness for use with children with disabilities.

3 Supporting families of children with disabilities

Having good support is especially important for families of children with disabilities. Schools can provide support by listening to parents and carers, finding out about the particular needs of their children, and collaborate to meet those needs. Schools can also provide relevant information and links to services that can assist families. By facilitating access to support networks, disability advocacy groups, and professional services, schools can help families of children with disabilities get the range of support they require.

4 Helping children with mental health difficulties

Getting help early in the lifespan can make a significant difference to ensure that children's disabilities are appropriately identified, and that professional help and learning support are provided as soon as possible. This helps to minimise the effects of the disability and provides developmental support. Some disabilities, particularly those involving learning and social difficulties, may only become apparent after children begin school. In these circumstances, schools can provide crucial assistance through facilitating children's referral for specialist assessment and services.

Schools can increase the protective factors that support children's mental health by providing an inclusive and accepting environment for all children, including those with additional needs and mental health difficulties. It also helps to have effective working relationships and clear referral pathways with services, and work in partnership with parents, carers and health professionals in order to meet the needs of children with disabilities. By paying attention to the mental health needs of children with disabilities and identifying mental health concerns, school staff can facilitate appropriate support for children's mental health difficulties.

For more, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on children with autism, children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and recognising and getting help for children with a mental health difficulty.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2006, Disability updates: Children with disabilities, Bulletin, 42, Australian Government.

² Dix, K.L., et al (2010). KidsMatter for Students with a Disability: Evaluation Report Ministerial Advisory Committee: Students with Disabilities South Australian Government. Australian Government.

³ Dix, K.L., et al (2010). KidsMatter for Students with a Disability: Evaluation Report Ministerial Advisory Committee: Students with Disabilities. South Australian Government.

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Supporting children with additional needs

Lee liked going to school. He liked playing with his friends, doing science, and he especially liked sports on Friday afternoons.

Unfortunately, Lee got sick a lot and sometimes had to go to hospital. Lee had a genetic condition that meant his body didn't always work properly by itself. Lee didn't like having to take special medications and going to doctors all the time.

When Lee came back to school after being sick, he felt nervous and shy. His friends all seemed to have other friends and new games to play. But when the class needed a goalie for soccer, Lee was ready. He loved playing goalie and being part of the team.

Lee's teacher worried that he might get hurt playing soccer. She decided to talk to Lee's parents to find out more about his health and other needs. Together Lee's teacher and parents worked out some important things the school could do to include Lee safely and help meet his social and learning needs.



We're all 'differently abled'

Differences exist amongst all children and they will all benefit from having their individual needs met. Children with additional needs (such as children affected by a disability or medical condition) may face additional challenges when attending school or in the community.

When a child has additional needs, it may restrict them from being able to do some of the things that other children can do. For instance, chronic or permanent illness may affect children's physical health, as shown in Lee's story. Children with additional needs have their own unique strengths and abilities that need to be promoted to build resilience and support their learning, mental health and wellbeing.

Supporting children with additional needs

Supporting children with additional needs enables them to participate and feel included at school and in their community, and helps promote their strengths. Providing all children with the support they require helps to meet their needs and enables them to grow and achieve with their classmates. For children with additional needs, developing individualised strategies to support their needs can be beneficial, based on the child's individual requirements (eg routines and structure can often be helpful for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder). However, children do all vary and can respond differently to strategies. It is important to always consider the child's individual needs. By working together, families and schools can make sure that children with additional needs are well supported which is important for their mental health and wellbeing.

Schools can support students with additional needs by teaching children how to include and respect others

To include students with additional needs, schools can:

- work with parents and carers to meet children's physical, social and emotional needs
- teach children that we all have strengths and differences and that everyone has a right to feel respected and valued
- provide opportunities for children with and without additional needs to play and learn together
- promote cooperative, caring and helpful behaviours for all students
- celebrate all children's differences (eg culture, race, ethnicity, additional needs).



How parents and carers can help

Parents and carers of children with additional needs can talk to school staff about their child's needs and strengths and about ways to make sure they are included at school. All parents and carers can:

- encourage their own children to include those of different abilities in their play
- support their child to identify strengths in themselves and others
- teach social skills that can help children manage friendships
- be role models for inclusion by showing through their actions how to be caring and respectful towards others.

What Lee's parents and teacher decided to do

- Lee's parents and teacher communicated regularly about how Lee was going at school and at home so they could coordinate support.
- Together they decided that Lee's teacher would explain to the class why Lee kept getting sick and encourage his classmates to support him.
- Lee was given the role of classroom leader for science. This helped him and his classmates see what a valuable class member he is.
- Lee's teacher also arranged for one of Lee's health workers to come and talk to school staff about his condition and ways to support him and help him manage at school.

The following websites may be of interest

Parenting a child with a disability: www.raisingchildren.net.au

Parenting a child with a disability: www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Promoting inclusion: www.learninglinks.org.au

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Disability: Suggestions for families

Parenting a child with a disability is often challenging, especially when your child's additional needs are complex and time-consuming. Working together as a family and getting support from relatives, friends and professional services is really important. The following suggestions may be helpful to assist with these challenges and promote family wellbeing.

Be an advocate for your child

Being an advocate for your child involves letting others know about your child's needs and working with them to find ways to have them met. You can be active in this by finding out what kinds of additional support is available for your child and making sure this is provided. This can be hard work at times, so gather allies to help you. Supportive allies may include family, friends, school staff or health professionals who understand your child's abilities and difficulties and are committed to meeting the child's needs. There are also a number of disability advocacy groups who can provide valuable support.

Work collaboratively with the school

Discuss your child's needs with school staff and work with them to develop strategies for supporting your child's learning and their social and emotional development. Talk with school staff about ways you can collaborate to actively support your child's involvement in school life so that it is a positive and enjoyable experience. For example, you might write a letter to introduce your child to the class. Make sure to communicate regularly with your child's teacher so you can share information, provide updates and continue to work together effectively. One strategy is to use a booklet for daily or weekly communication between home and school. Another approach is to set up regular telephone or meeting times to talk about how your child is managing socially as well as academically.

Teach social and emotional skills

Social relationships can sometimes be difficult for all children. Parents can help by supporting the development of social and emotional skills. Extra help may be needed by children with disabilities if they have been absent from school due to ill health and have to re-engage with others, or if they face intolerance or bullying behaviour. For some children, the nature of the disability may mean that learning social skills is difficult and therefore requires lots of guidance and practice. For more, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on social and emotional learning.





Provide opportunities for developing friendships

Inviting classmates over to play can be a good way to strengthen a budding friendship. Help your child to choose activities or games that they can do confidently with friends. With younger children, or if your child's social skills are limited, ensure you are available to provide support if needed.

Support siblings

Be open with siblings about the challenges that affect their brother or sister with a disability. Provide important acknowledgement by showing you appreciate their help, but also ensure that they have time and space for themselves. Listening to their feelings and experiences lets them know you are there for them too. Setting aside some regular time to spend with your other children, even if it is brief, helps to maintain positive family relationships.

Get support for you

Parents have needs too. There is no such thing as a 'perfect' or 'super' parent. It's important to set realistic expectations of what you can and can't do. Take some time out. Spend time with friends, your partner, or alone doing something that you enjoy. Asking friends, family or respite services for help when you need it is a really important coping strategy for families. Talking with other parents or carers of children with disabilities can be very helpful.

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Disability: Suggestions for school staff

Students with disabilities require extra support to ensure their learning and developmental needs are met. A learning environment that emphasises inclusion and cooperation supports all students, both those with and without additional needs. Showing students how to value the differences in others and taking steps to address safety issues, such as bullying, helps students with disabilities to feel accepted and to belong at school. The following suggestions may also be helpful for school staff.

Be informed: do your research

Knowing about how a particular disability may affect a student helps with creating an inclusive environment and meeting the student's learning, social and developmental needs. Seek advice and support from special education services or from health professionals involved with the student, or seek resources from relevant information services that are backed up by good evidence.

Build strengths

Students with disabilities require a curriculum that is tailored to their needs. An individual learning plan should be created that addresses students' needs and builds on existing strengths. Working collaboratively with the student to identify learning strengths and interests is important for building engagement in learning and matching needs. Assess what the student can do and build on it step-by-step to ensure learning is a successful experience for the student and builds up their confidence. This applies to the academic curriculum and also to development of social and emotional skills.

Work collaboratively with parents

Working closely and respectfully with parents and carers is crucial for meeting the complex needs of students with disabilities. Collaborative involvement from parents and carers in the development of individual learning plans for students is especially beneficial. This can enhance learning outcomes and build a sense of belonging for children and their families. Take special care to ensure that parents and carers of students with disabilities know who they can contact at the school for help and support, and what resources are available to them and their child. Maintaining a home-communication booklet or establishing a regular time to 'touch base' is often very helpful for teachers to keep in regular contact with parents and carers and exchange vital information about the progress and wellbeing of students.



Promote acceptance and caring

Teaching students about acceptance begins with your own personal beliefs and demonstration of inclusive behaviour in the classroom. Promote respect and inclusion by acknowledging that we are all 'differently abled', and through emphasising cooperative and caring relationships. When introducing a student with a disability to the class, the focus should be on the whole student and their strengths and abilities, rather than highlighting their disability.

Provide opportunities for social support

Social relationships can be difficult for students with disabilities. Provide structured support through teaching social and emotional skills. Setting up a buddy system, or providing for peer tutoring in structured classroom activities, are examples of strategies that can be particularly beneficial for student with disabilities – and for promoting cooperation and caring with all students.

Provide opportunities for active participation in school

Children with disabilities need to be able to participate in everyday school activities along with their peers. Adaptations to teaching methods, curriculum and the physical environment in the classroom and playground may be required. Extra support staff may be needed so that students with disabilities can participate in school-based excursions.

The Department of Education website for your state or territory provides policy information and practical guidelines for teaching and supporting students with disabilities at school.



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Cultural diversity and children's wellbeing

Australia is one of the world's most culturally diverse societies

Our community in Australia is diverse. Census figures show 27 per cent of the resident Australian population were born overseas. Twenty per cent of Australians have at least one parent who was born overseas, and the number of languages spoken at home by Australians is more than 400 (Australian Bureau of Statistics figures 2009 – www.abs.gov.au). Schools in Australia therefore have contact with students and families from many different cultural backgrounds.

We all learn to communicate and understand our world through sharing language, customs, behaviours, beliefs and values. Our cultural experiences and values shape the ways we see ourselves and what we think is important. Cultural perspectives influence how we parent, how we understand children, and how we educate them.

This overview looks at influences related to cultural diversity that may affect the social and emotional development and wellbeing of children from cultural and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Some of the issues discussed in this resource may also be relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. However, to adequately address the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, a more specific understanding of their particular cultural needs and circumstances is required.

What is cultural diversity?

Cultural diversity refers to people who identify with particular groups based on their birthplace, ethnicity, language, values, beliefs or world views. This does not mean that everyone from a particular cultural group will hold exactly the same values or do things in the same way. Showing support for cultural diversity involves talking with people to find out how best to include them and respect their cultural needs. Valuing and respecting diversity encourages people to accept individual differences amongst individuals and groups.



Culture and belonging

Research in many different cultures confirms the importance of all children developing secure emotional connections with the adults who care for them. However, the ways that parents and carers go about developing these connections vary based on cultural beliefs about parenting and child development, as well as individual preferences and capacities. For example, in some cultures children are expected to always listen and respect their elders, while in other cultures children are taught from an early age to speak up for themselves.

Children's connection to their culture develops through their experiences. Having a strong sense of their own cultural history and traditions helps children build a positive cultural identity for themselves. This also supports children's sense of belonging and self-esteem.

To be able to get on well in another culture, children need to understand and respond to different expectations (eg school versus home). It can be complex, and sometimes confusing, for children from diverse cultural backgrounds to fit within two cultures and make sense of the different expectations. In some cases children may experience 'cultural conflict' and feel that they have to choose one culture or the other, even though they have to live in both.

This can be stressful for children and have negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing. However, when children have a positive sense of belonging to both cultures, their mental health and wellbeing is supported and so is their learning.



Particular challenges that may affect children and families from CALD backgrounds

Children and families from CALD backgrounds may face a range of challenges as they find their way in the broader Australian society. Some of the common challenges include:

Migration and resettlement

Families migrate from one country, region or place and settle in another for many reasons. Some families may migrate because they fear they will be harmed and discriminated against; they might voluntarily leave their country of origin to live in another country; or they might leave a country and ask to be recognised as a refugee to be protected.

Resettling in a new country or community can be complicated. Families need to find housing, employment, schools, social connections and services. Lack of knowledge about how things work in the new environment and communication difficulties can make the challenge of resettlement all the more stressful. Family, friends and others who would normally provide support may have been left behind in the move. Feelings of loneliness, isolation or concern for those left behind can occur. These difficulties affect all members of a family.

Language and communication

Language can be a major barrier for newly-arrived families. Difficulties communicating in English can cause challenges for families and undermine people's confidence. This may make finding a job or learning at school more difficult, and contribute to social isolation. Concern about language skills can make communication with schools and other services more difficult for parents and carers.

Communication issues can arise in other ways as well. When the experiences, customs and beliefs of children and families from different cultural backgrounds are not recognised or valued, it can lead to miscommunication. For example, making eye contact when speaking to someone else may be considered a sign of respect in some cultures; however, in some other cultures respect is shown by lowering eyes or looking away. If these differences are not understood by both people, it can lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding on both sides.

It is very important that families have access to support in the language they are comfortable with and are able to develop their communication skills if they so desire.

Particular challenges that may affect children and families from CALD backgrounds – *continued*

Effects of trauma

When migration is prompted by particularly stressful experiences, as is the case for refugees, there can be additional challenges for resettlement and wellbeing. Traumatic experiences may have occurred through being exposed to violence, war or torture. Children and families may have lived under threat and in fear; they may have witnessed the deaths of relatives or friends, or experienced hardship and danger in coming to Australia. Some have received harsh treatment in immigration detention on their arrival here.

These kinds of highly stressful circumstances can affect people long after the events have passed. Some of the common reactions that may occur in children who have been through traumatic events include an increase in fear and anxiety, which may lead to clingy behaviour, re-experiencing the trauma when feeling threatened, or difficulty in trusting and connecting with others. Such difficulties may lead to children experiencing difficulties trusting others, making it difficult for them to form relationships with adults or with their peers. For some children who have been traumatised, feelings of pain and anger can sometimes be seen in their behaviour, for instance, some children may tantrum or show high levels of emotional reactivity (eg become upset very easily). Difficulties associated with past trauma and resettlement can affect the learning and school performance of children who have been traumatised.

Discrimination and racism

Sometimes some people may resort to harmful words and behave negatively toward others as a way of managing their fears and lack of understanding about differences. This is called discrimination. Discrimination impacts negatively on individuals and entire communities. Being subject to discrimination can be a difficulty faced by many people from diverse backgrounds. This can be an issue especially for minority groups, such as those who look different from the majority of a population. Both direct discrimination (eg name-calling, bullying) and indirect discrimination (eg ignoring or excluding others from important events) can leave people feeling shut out and powerless. This can then have a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing.

Racism increases children's sense of difference and vulnerability by devaluing their culture and making them feel unwelcome. The effects of racism and discrimination can make life more difficult for families, and create undue stress and social disadvantage. Valuing diversity and being inclusive also helps promote respectful relationships and reduces the likelihood of discrimination and isolation.

Parenting across cultures

Cultural differences in parenting practices can lead to misunderstandings and be stressful for families. Common differences in parenting practices can relate to the ways affection is shown to children, attitudes to physical punishment, and how much emphasis is placed on family responsibility, compared with promoting children's independence. Some cultural practices can have very strict codes of behaviour according to age and/or gender.

When children from CALD backgrounds are exposed to different cultural values, parents and carers may find practices that once worked in the home culture may no longer be effective. This can create confusion and miscommunication, and may also become a source of family conflict and tension, especially as children grow into the teenage years. Families might also be concerned about children losing their cultural identity through contact with children with different cultural backgrounds, for instance through the influences promoted in the media, at school, or through contact with children from different backgrounds. Questions of cultural identity are common themes causing tensions within CALD families, as family members may try to maintain their own cultural values while adapting to the range of cultural influences found in the wider community.

It takes time and effort for families and individuals to work out how to keep their own cultural traditions and, at the same time, understand and find a place within the wider Australian culture.



The role of schools

Schools play a central role in the lives of students and their families. The experiences of children and families from CALD backgrounds within their school communities can have significant effects on their sense of inclusion or exclusion and subsequent quality of engagement within the wider community.

In order to meet the learning, social and wellbeing needs of students and their families from diverse backgrounds, it is important for schools to understand their particular circumstances. These may include migration, refugee and resettlement experiences as well as different cultural values and styles of communicating and learning. Schools can play a critical role in supporting and engaging students and families from diverse backgrounds. They also have a significant responsibility to promote values of mutual respect and understanding, and to effectively address problems of discrimination when they occur in the school setting.

By actively promoting the needs and interests of students and families from culturally diverse backgrounds and building relationships of trust and understanding with parents and carers, schools can make a positive difference to CALD students' mental health and wellbeing. Having a positive sense of belonging in both settings helps children move between cultures with greater ease and confidence, and increases their motivation and engagement at school.

School staff can support children when they respect and understand that they come from diverse backgrounds and have different cultural identities (including specific expectations of behaviour and communication). Under these circumstances children and their families also feel more comfortable in and valued by their school.

Positive relationships between families and school staff convey respect for diversity and strengthen children's mental health and wellbeing.

Cultural competence and children's wellbeing

Cultural competence begins from the understanding that we are all influenced by the different social, educational and organisational cultures in which we live and participate. Recognising that our beliefs and values are not the only way of seeing or doing things opens us up to learning about other perspectives. Exploring similarities and differences in our cultural expectations improves our capacity to understand and relate to others, and helps to build a sense of belonging amongst children and their families.

One cultural expectation that may be new to many CALD parents and carers is the idea that parents, carers and school staff can work together to support children's learning and development. Some cultures (and some families) emphasise relying on family rather than outsiders to resolve difficulties. This can make parents and carers reluctant to discuss their concerns about children with school staff. Families may also be structured differently. For example, in some families grandparents, aunts or uncles may be centrally involved in decisions affecting children.

Developing relationships

Developing relationships across cultures requires good communication and flexibility to support children's wellbeing. It is particularly important to recognise that there may be very different understandings of mental health and a range of ways of expressing difficulties across cultures. For instance, children's emotional or behavioural difficulties should be considered within their cultural context and discussed with families in a supportive and non-judgemental manner.

Positive relationships between families and school staff convey respect for diversity and strengthen children's mental health and wellbeing.

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Helping children connect across cultures

“Would you like to come to my party?” Ella asked Sefra. “It’s on Sunday in two weeks.”
“Thanks Ella, I’ll ask my parents if I can come,” said Sefra.

Sefra wanted to go to Ella’s party, but it was at the same time as her weekly language class. Sefra’s parents always told her how important it was to keep up her culture and language. Would they let her miss the language class and go to Ella’s party instead? Sefra hoped they would.

Though she was excited about the party, Sefra also felt nervous. Not everyone who might be going was as good a friend as Ella. Some children in Sefra’s class teased her because she didn’t look or speak like they did. They stopped when Ella told them not to be mean, but it still hurt.

Sefra hoped the other children at the party would be friendly and play with her.

Being part of two cultures

Being part of two cultures can get complicated at times. Children may find there are differences in values and expectations. Sometimes there might be difficult choices. When different sets of expectations don’t match, it can make it hard for children to feel like they belong.

When cultural differences are respected and a sense of belonging develops, there are many benefits to mental health and wellbeing for children, families and schools. By working together, schools and families can help children from all cultural backgrounds to understand, respect and appreciate diversity in others. Helping children to understand difference encourages them to feel good about themselves, understand where they fit in the world, and appreciate diversity in others. When adults behave in ways that are open and accepting it can help to teach children to respect diversity and embrace individual differences.

Everybody needs to feel accepted, respected and included. Feeling welcome and at home in both cultures is very important for positive mental health and wellbeing.

Australia is home to people from many different cultural backgrounds. Creating a positive sense of community for everyone involves learning to understand and appreciate others’ values, experiences and beliefs so that together we can build a caring and accepting society that supports mental health and wellbeing.

Parenting is rarely easy

Being a parent in a new country has added challenges. Just as it can be difficult for children to learn to be part of two cultures, learning to parent ‘between’ cultures can be stressful for families too. Being open to adapt your parenting to suit your child’s individual needs, and your own, can be beneficial for all families.



How parents and carers can help

- Tell your children stories to help them to develop a strong cultural identity and share a sense of pride in your culture.
- Talk to children about the Australian cultural values you appreciate. This will help them see how they can be part of both cultures.
- Seek support and advice from people you trust. Talking with relatives and friends who understand your values can help you think through the different problems you might face as a parent.
- You can contact your child's school if you have any questions about your child or their education. Schools welcome questions from parents and carers.
- Take an active interest in activities at your child's school. Get to know your child's teacher and look for ways to get involved at school, for example, by helping in the classroom or by joining parent working groups.
- If children complain of being teased or bullied, be sure to tell your child's teacher so the school can take action to stop it.



Things schools can do

- Provide opportunities for students to express and listen to different people and their cultural perspectives to develop respect for and appreciation of diversity.
- Talk to parents, carers and families about their cultural values and needs.
- Respect individual differences – don't assume that membership of a cultural group means everyone has the same values and needs.
- Invite family members into the classroom to observe and participate.
- Promote and model inclusive behaviour, for instance, by providing information and school correspondence in a number of appropriate languages for parents and carers.
- Work with interpreters or multilingual aids to ensure accurate communication with parents or carers whose English language skills are limited.
- Encourage social opportunities for parents, carers and families to support and learn from each other.
- Link families with local services to provide culturally-appropriate support and assistance.

The following websites may be of interest

About diversity:

www.cyh.com

Translated materials on parenting:

www.kidscount.com.au

Raising children in a different culture:

www.raisingchildren.net.au

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Cultural diversity: Suggestions for families

Parenting across cultures has particular challenges. Sometimes children and their parents or carers have different ideas about how to balance the values and expectations of two cultures. When children have a sense of belonging to both cultures it supports positive mental health and wellbeing. The following suggestions may assist you and your children to achieve a positive sense of belonging in both cultures.

Celebrate your own culture

Developing a positive sense of cultural identity supports children's self-esteem and their sense of belonging. By telling stories and sharing customs you can help children to connect with their cultural heritage. It is important to talk to children in ways that are appropriate for their age and interest. Knowing and taking pride in their own heritage can help children feel comfortable and secure with their identity.

Build social networks

Friendships and social networks are important both for children and for families, helping them to feel part of the community. Making connections with local people is important for feeling welcomed and building a sense of belonging in Australian society. Your connections may be with your own cultural group or you may prefer to build your connections with another cultural group. Your child's school can be a great meeting point for parents and carers where long-term friendships develop.

Get to know your child's school

Becoming involved in your child's school is a great way for families to feel connected to their community. There are often opportunities to participate in school events which may help you to get to know your child's school and the school community. Forming relationships with school staff can also help you to feel like you belong. For instance, having a good relationship with your child's teachers will allow you to ask questions about your child's progress, and share your cultural background with them. When families and teaching staff develop relationships, they are more likely to understand each other's perspectives, talk through concerns and support children together.



Learn about parenting in Australia

Some parenting practices may be quite different in different cultures. Finding out about parenting practices and expectations in Australia, including things like legal requirements of parents and supports available, can help you work out the best ways to manage problems that may arise. Many families from culturally diverse backgrounds find that blending the best parenting ideas and practices from both cultures is very helpful.

Be flexible

Children can feel confused when the values and behaviours expected at home seem to be different from what happens with their friends. It is helpful to be flexible when deciding on rules and expectations so you can take into account any difficulties your children may be facing. Listening to your children and talking openly about the concerns they may have regarding different expectations for school and home means that solutions can be found through understanding and compromise.

Be patient

Adjusting to a new life after migration has lots of challenges for both families and children. Establishing a secure and caring home environment helps to provide children with a sense of stability. Finding people who understand you and can support you as you settle in is really important. It is also often very important to access the help that is available through government agencies, community organisations and English language programs.

Seek support

Getting help in your own language can be especially important at times of stress or when dealing with complex issues. Many community organisations around Australia provide specific support and advice from a cultural perspective. Some organisations offer regular meetings or short courses to help with parenting or other family issues.



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Cultural diversity: Suggestions for school staff

School staff have a significant role to play in supporting children and families of cultural and language diverse (CALD) backgrounds. When staff are welcoming and approachable it helps to build a sense of belonging and trust for students and their families. Cultivating a culture of respect, caring and inclusion of difference amongst the whole school community is very important for supporting positive mental health and reducing school-based risk factors for children from CALD backgrounds. Read on for specific suggestions on how to do this.

Get to know your community

Accurate knowledge about the diversity of families in your school community, and their needs and preferences for receiving information, will help guide school policies and practices around communication. Remember that there is also diversity within cultural groups. It is most important to connect with and understand individual families and their needs.

Communicate effectively

Ensuring that teaching staff have an understanding of the cultural backgrounds, preferred communication styles, and concerns of CALD students and families is very important for overcoming communication difficulties. Be mindful of school correspondence, displays and activities and ensure that they are geared to including and supporting the diverse cultural backgrounds of all families. Classroom practices may need to be adapted to enhance communication between teaching staff and students, and amongst students from different cultural backgrounds. When selecting social and emotional learning programmes for your school, it is important to consider their appropriateness for different cultural groups and to adapt them accordingly.



Engage parents and carers

When spoken or written English is a barrier, interpreters or translated material can help school staff and families communicate with one another. By providing materials in appropriate languages and offering professional interpreting services, schools and other organisations can help to break down communication barriers for families and encourage them to be involved with the school. Contacting parents and carers prior to, or early on during the new school year may also help to involve them. Having an 'open door' policy at designated times may help parents and carers to be more inclined to approach teachers about issues or questions they may have regarding their child.

Celebrate diversity

Teachers can encourage a positive school environment for children of CALD backgrounds by inviting diversity into the classroom. Provide a range of opportunities for children and their parents and carers, to share their cultural stories in an atmosphere of respect and acknowledgement. Mutual respect across cultures involves being open to learning different ideas and approaches and appreciating the enrichment this provides. Be mindful of differences in parenting styles between cultures and try to be sensitive to the issues faced by parents from newly emerging populations (eg refugee communities). In this way, clashes between the school and cultural values imposed by parents and carers may be minimised.

Build connections

Being safe and feeling safe can take time to achieve. Connecting with others who have been through a similar experience provides opportunities to talk about difficulties and can help to reduce isolation. Culture-specific community organisations may be especially well-placed to provide sensitive support during resettlement. Specialist services are also available in different states to provide assistance to families from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Counter racism and discrimination

Racism can be countered by identifying and challenging the kinds of practices that disadvantage or discriminate against those of different racial or cultural backgrounds, and promoting inclusive practices in their place. It is very important for schools to encourage and support children to take positive action against discrimination and bullying by speaking up and reporting incidents. Complaints about racism and harassment should be taken seriously and addressed promptly when they occur.

For further information on dealing with bullying at school see: www.bullyingnoway.com.au.



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