Safe and Supportive Environments

About Safe and Supportive Environments

To promote the best possible learning and developmental outcomes for babies and young children, it is important that we strive to provide safe and supportive environments for them in the early years of life. This should be a priority in the family context, in early childhood care and education, and in our community as a whole. A safe and supportive environment is a setting in which all children can feel socially, emotionally and physically safe and valued.

Why is this important for mental health and wellbeing?

Supporting a child's best possible physical, cognitive, social and emotional development in early childhood lays a good foundation for their wellbeing and success in later life, including their mental health and wellbeing. Mental health relates to our thoughts, feelings, behaviours and relationships with other people. It is an important part of human health and happiness and it can also affect our quality of life, physical health and our personal or professional acheivements.

Babies and young children learn about the world through their relationships and experiences. Over time, they develop a self-concept, which is a sense of who they are and their place within the family and community. A safe and supportive environment will help them to develop a positive and secure self-concept, by fostering in them a sense of inclusion and belonging.

Children also need the opportunity to develop key social and emotional skills in the early years, as these form the basis of their ongoing social and emotional development and will affect their mental health later in life. If children experience environments in which they do not feel safe, secure and included, they may develop patterns of behaviour and negative coping strategies that increase the risk of mental health difficulties in adolescence or adulthood.

What should I look for?

A safe and supportive environment is planned and set up in a way that supports positive relationships and good communication. These services often have a warm and relaxed atmosphere in which relationships are built on trust and mutual respect. This will be seen in the relationships between staff, as well as their relationships with children and families. The communication style will generally be sensitive, patient and respectful, even when things are busy or when staff are dealing with difficult situations.

What should I do?

The principles of a safe and supportive environment apply to all aspects of the setting. A safe and supportive environment can be set up by paying attention to:

- The quality of the relationships shared
- The approach taken to programming and planning for individuals and groups
- The decisions about the physical layout of space, aesthetics and structure of the day
- Willingness to advocate for young children.

Some ideas under each of these areas are provided on the following page. You may also like to refer to two other handouts in this series entitled *Communicating with Children* and *Partnerships with Families* for more detailed suggestions about building positive relationships.

Relationships:
- Respond quickly and effectively to the cues of babies and children, to meet their needs.
- Use positive verbal and non-verbal communication with babies and children.
- Get to know individual children and be aware of their preferences and learning styles.
- Spend time talking with children and families about their interests and experiences.
- Aim for consistency in routines and practices at home and in childcare or preschool.
- Help older children to develop autonomy, friendships and prosocial behaviours.
- Get involved in children's play experiences, as leaders, followers or collaborators.
- Work toward extending children's skills and understanding in age-appropriate ways.

Programming and planning:
- Offer a variety of experiences to babies and children that will reflect their diverse cultures, interests, developmental levels and personal preferences.
- Allow for both group activities and alone time when planning the program.
- With older children, negotiate the program where possible and give them choices.
- Where possible, consider continuity of care for children when organising staff rosters.

Physical environment and timing:
- Make sure the physical environment supports both group activities and solitary play.
- Try to ensure that the environment is not overwhelming to the senses.
- Make sure that the physical environment gives older babies and children opportunities for autonomy and independence, with a range of areas that are safe to explore.
- Organise the day around familiar routines, but make sure the structure is flexible enough to be adapted to children's natural preferences and rhythms.
- Take steps to reflect diversity and inclusive practice throughout all aspects of the environment, so that all children and families feel valued and respected.

Advocacy:
- As opportunities arise, help other staff or family members to better understand the individual child's needs and development.
- Make recommendations about how your service's policies or practices may be improved to be more responsive to the needs of children and families.

Where can I find out more?

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