

Advocacy and Mental Health

About Advocacy

Advocacy is speaking out about the needs, issues or rights of other people. This could mean representing the needs or interests of a particular person or family, or it could be about raising people's awareness of issues affecting certain groups within our community.

Advocacy is particularly about speaking on behalf of people who may find it difficult to have their needs heard or met. This includes babies and young children, who are not able to speak up directly about their broader developmental needs and the issues that affect their wellbeing.

Because children's services staff work closely with families and have extensive knowledge of the needs and development of children, they are in a good position to act as advocates for the rights and the wellbeing of children and to raise awareness about issues affecting families.

The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to live and develop in environments where they are recognised as individuals and their views and needs are respected. It supports the role of families and communities in promoting children's wellbeing and development and in protecting them from harm, abuse and exploitation.

The Early Childhood Australia (ECA) Code of Ethics acknowledges the UN Convention and provides guidelines for early childhood professionals about ethical principles that will support and protect the rights and interests of children. The Code of Ethics is available on the ECA website (www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au).

Why is this important for mental health and wellbeing?

Children's experiences and development in the early years can have a major impact on long-term outcomes for that child, including their mental health, physical health, learning and socio-economic wellbeing. Supporting a child's best possible physical, cognitive, social and emotional development is a good foundation for positive outcomes for both individuals and the community.

The development and wellbeing of babies and young children depends in part on their environment and relationships. Ideally, the family and community environments they spend the most time in should be safe and supportive, physically and emotionally, with carers who are responsive to the child's signals and needs. This gives the child the opportunity to develop a secure attachment style as the basis for their further social and emotional development.

To promote the mental health and wellbeing of all Australians, it is important that our community puts measures into place to foster safe and supportive environments and positive relationships for babies and young children. This should be reflected in the way our society provides family support, health care during pregnancy and early childhood, and support for quality early childhood care and education, as well as other services.

We also know that certain situations or personal factors can adversely affect the longer-term outcomes of children, such as experiencing abuse or domestic violence. The way our society intervenes to address such issues is also an important factor influencing mental health.

Advocacy is one way to ensure that the needs of babies, children and families are heard and acknowledged when decisions are made about providing services or support. This can mean advocating for the needs of a particular child or family, or advocating at the community level.

What should I look for?

Look for opportunities to advocate for the needs of babies, children and families, in regard to their wellbeing and children's optimal development. It is particularly important to advocate for those who may be at greater risk of developing mental health problems or disorders, such as:

- Children who have additional needs because of a disability, developmental delay, chronic ill health, or an existing emotional or behavioural problem
- Children whose parents have a mental illness that causes problems for the family
- Children whose parents or family have problems with drug or alcohol abuse
- Children whose families experience socio-economic problems such as financial worries, difficulty accessing safe and appropriate housing and support services, *etc*
- Children at risk of abuse or neglect, domestic violence or community violence
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and families in need of support
- Children and families who have experienced trauma, loss or grief, e.g. refugees.

What should I do?

There are many ways that you can become involved in advocacy to support the mental health and wellbeing of babies, children and families. Here are a few examples:

- Speak up for children or families in your service who have additional support needs
- Research and discuss issues affecting children's wellbeing and development and provide information to colleagues, parents, family and the community
- Suggest improvements to policies, procedures or practices in your service or in society
- Take part in council and community discussions about local needs and services
- Write articles for newspapers, magazines or other media about children's needs
- Join associations and read newsletters related to early childhood and family needs
- Write letters to your local member or government agencies about children's needs.

Where can I find out more?

The Response Ability website (www.responseability.org) has more detailed fact sheets on a range of issues affecting children and families, listed under *Education and Children's Services*.

Early Childhood Australia website: <http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au>

Gibbs, L. (2004). *Action, advocacy and activism: Standing up for children*. Sydney, NSW: Community Childcare Cooperative Ltd (NSW).

United Nations Children's Fund (1990). *Convention on the rights of the child*. Switzerland: Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Retrieved 15 May, 2009, from http://www.unicef.org/crc/index_30160.html.