

Early intervention for mental health problems in children

Early intervention for mental health problems in children and young people is about providing specialist intervention and support services to improve their mental health outcomes now and into the future. Early Intervention aims to identify social, emotional and behavioural issues and link children and their families with appropriate information and support. For example, if a child is withdrawn and continually having trouble concentrating, early intervention may be appropriate.

Why is early intervention important?

Early intervention for mental health problems has the potential to promote mental health and better physical health, learning and socio-economic outcomes throughout life. It can help to prevent mental health problems and illness from developing, or reduce the severity, duration and impact of symptoms.

Certain factors can increase the risk of mental health problems developing such as parental mental illness, family violence, substance abuse, poverty, abuse and neglect. Children who are exposed to these risk factors can be more likely to experience poorer physical and mental health in childhood and later life. By identifying risk factors early and providing information and support to families, mental health problems can be identified, assessed and managed early in life and early in their development.

What can educators do?

At times, most children will show difficulties in managing their feelings and behaviour. Early intervention may be needed when behaviour and issues are severe, persisting over time, out of step for the child's age and stage of

development or when several problems are occurring together.

If early intervention is required, educators can practically assist by:

- discussing their observations and concerns with parents or carers;
- providing parents or carers with information and links to local health services or professionals, including general practitioners and mental health services;
- arranging referral to specialist intervention and services if needed;
- encouraging and supporting parents to address their own physical and mental health needs;
- developing additional support and referral structures in the workplace; and
- working with parents and other professionals to develop or implement a plan to support the child and their family within the service.

Educators are in a key position to identify children and their families who may benefit from early intervention for mental health problems. By recognising the early signs of mental health problems and linking families with appropriate information and support, educators can have a positive impact on children's mental health in childhood and throughout adult life.

Further Information

Early Childhood Intervention Australia: www.ecia.org.au

Sims, M., Davis, E., Davies, B., Nicholson, J., Harrison, L., Herrman, H., ... Priest, N. (2012). Mental health promotion in childcare centres: Childcare educators' understanding of child and parental mental health. *Advances in Mental Health*, 10, 138-148.