



Recommending additional support

Plan ahead for conversations with colleagues, the child or young person and their family.

All families want the best for their child and while talking about a child or young person's mental health isn't always easy, there are a few important areas to cover that will help the child and family access support.

Conversations with families and young people

Conversations are an important step in ensuring children and young people get the support they need. This includes [conversations with family members](#) or young people, and may also include conversations with appropriate colleagues.

Preparing for a conversation

Here are some key things to consider before having a conversation with a family or young person:

- Check your learning community's policy and procedures, including those on conversations with families, child protection and mandatory reporting.
- Consider the relationships between educators and service or school leaders to determine who might be the most appropriate person to lead this conversation and who else might need to be involved.

- Check in with a member of the wellbeing team or leadership staff to be clear with your concerns and observations.
- Summarise information that has already been gathered, focusing on what you see and hear, rather than what you think about the child or young person's behaviours, emotions and thoughts.
- Consider the knowledge of the family, along with other information available (for example their attitudes and beliefs about mental health, cultural context, or connectedness with the learning community). This can help guide the language and approach for the conversation
- Identify a comfortable and confidential space that includes access to water and tissues to support the emotional safety of the family or young person. Consider the provision of an interpreter if this would be helpful.
- Consider whether the young person will be present during the conversation, taking into account their age, maturity and confidence, and who would benefit from their participation.

- Ensure the family is given due notice of the meeting and its purpose. Emphasise that the conversation will be about providing the best support for the child or young person.
- Provide the family with the opportunity to suggest how they would like the meeting to be held, including the time, location and who will be present. Consider also that the family might like to invite a trusted support person.
- Inform families they will be encouraged to share information about their child, including their strengths as this will help guide next steps.

Having the conversation

Keeping a few key strategies in mind can help the conversation to go smoothly:

- Reassure the family or young person that they are welcome, included and valued in the learning community, and that they will have the learning community's support and collaboration.
- Collaboration is key – remember to share information (rather than telling) and seek the family's perspective.
- Listen and be empathetic – consider how tone of voice, body language, verbal prompts and clarifying and summarising can show an understanding of the family's perspective.
- Focus on observations and interactions to provide specific examples to clarify the concerns and strengths that have been noticed.
- It's ok to pause and reflect before responding. Provide the family or young person the opportunity to do the same.
- Answer questions simply and without judgement. If you don't have an answer let the family know, and consider how you might find out together or gather the information required.
- It's ok to have different perspectives. There may be lots of reasons why the family do not agree or want support initially. If this is the case:
 - acknowledge their perspective and let them know support is available if needed
 - agree to monitor or carry out further observations and get back together at a later date

provide information on supports available and give the family or young person time to consider their options

- ask if there is someone else they would like to speak with (e.g. from your leadership or wellbeing team).

- It may be helpful to debrief with leadership or a trusted colleague and consider next steps.

Be You Professional Learning

To learn more about collaborating with families to support children and young people, see the Assist module of the [Family Partnerships](#) domain.

Where to find additional support

In discussions with the family and consulting with an appropriate colleague (from the wellbeing or leadership team), you may find that there are suitable support options from within your learning community.

Within the learning community

In your own learning community, there may be a range of support roles, depending on your context. These include early childhood advisor, educational leader, family support worker, area manager, inclusion support person, school psychologist, state or territory regulatory authority or member of a pastoral care team.

In this case, consider your own role and professional boundaries, which may include organising the information you have gathered, completing an internal referral form and even offering to arrange the first appointment for the child, young person or family.

External referrals

At times, a referral to an external agency or professional is more appropriate. Most referrals can be arranged through a family's GP, or National Disability Insurance Scheme Early Childhood Early Intervention (NDIS ECEI) partner.

The family may benefit from support to start the process such as making an initial phone call to a service or assisting the family or young person to make an appointment. For more considerations when it comes to accessing external mental health

services, see the [Overview of mental health services](#) fact sheet.

After a referral

Once a referral is underway, a learning community can continue to support the child, young person and family by:

- checking in to make sure the family have connected with support, and respecting their choice not to share this information
- liaising where appropriate with other professionals and implementing any suggested support strategies where the family has provided consent for this communication.
- monitoring the child or young person's progress and continuing to communicate with their family or chosen professional
- ensuring the child or young person and their family continue to feel a sense of belonging to the learning community.

Critical incidents

According to the World Health Organisation, a critical incident is an event outside the range of normal experience – one which is sudden and unexpected, makes us lose control, involves the perception of a threat to life and can include elements of physical or emotional loss.

It includes incidents such as natural disasters, accidents or serious injury of a community member, self-harming behaviours and suicidality, and disclosures of sexual and physical abuse.

It's important to be aware that when such incidents occur, an immediate response is required to ensure the safety of everyone affected.

Learning communities need to implement their critical incident management plan. This ensures educators and other staff know what to do in the immediate, short and longer-term after a critical incident – their roles and responsibilities, and how to respond to children, young people and families who've been affected.

Make sure you understand your learning community's policies and procedures, including those relating to child protection and mandatory reporting. If you are unsure about the process,

promptly involve a member of the wellbeing or leadership team to support you.

If you are concerned about a child or young person in your care at risk of immediate harm, call 000 or your nearest hospital emergency department.

Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about how to recognise and respond to critical incidents in the [Responding Together](#) domain.

Educator wellbeing

Early learning services and schools that prioritise educator wellbeing can have a positive impact on an educators' capacity to support a child, young person or their family experiencing difficulties. It can also support educators to look after their own wellbeing. When you need additional support, look within and outside the learning community, such as through Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), mentors, wellbeing staff, leaders and close colleagues.

References

Burn M, Lewis A, McDonald L, Toumbourou J. An Australian adaptation of the strengthening families program: parent and child mental health outcomes from a pilot study. *Australian psychologist*. 2019;54(4):261-71.

Garbacz SA, Herman KC, Thompson AM, Reinke WM. Family engagement in education and intervention: Implementation and evaluation to maximize family, school, and student outcomes. *Journal of school psychology*. 2017;100(62):1-10.

McDowall PS, Taumoepeau M, Schaughency E. Parent involvement in beginning primary school: Correlates and changes in involvement across the first two years of school in a New Zealand sample. *Journal of School Psychology*. 2017;62(11-31).

External links

[Communicating with families about children's learning](#)

[Effective communication with parents: for professionals](#) (Raising Children Network)

[How to facilitate difficult conversations](#) (ReachOut)