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Sharing information with parents about children's social and emotional wellbeing

A step-by-step approach

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Key Messages

- Practitioners who work with parents of dependent children can help support children's mental health by providing parents with high-quality information about children's social and emotional wellbeing.
- Universal service providers play a key role in helping to support children's mental health because of the extent of their contact with a diverse range of families.
- There are nine key steps that practitioners can follow to ensure the information they provide to parents is high quality, useful and relevant to their family's circumstances.
- The steps involve:
 - *Preparation* (Steps 1–2): tasks prior to working with parents to ensure information and resources provided to them are up-to-date and high quality and
 - *Working with parents* (Steps 3–9): steps with parents to ensure information and resources provided to them are relevant and appropriate to their needs and circumstances, and those of their child and family.



What is this resource about?

This resource outlines how practitioners in universal health, education and community service settings can share high-quality information with parents about children's social and emotional wellbeing and mental health in an engaging and respectful way.

Who is this resource for?

This resource is for practitioners in universal health, education and community services who interact with parents of children aged 0–12 years, including those who work only with parents and not with children.

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Introduction

Every practitioner who interacts with parents of dependent children can play a role in supporting children's mental health. One of the ways practitioners can do this is by sharing relevant and appropriate information with parents about child mental health, so they understand how to support their children's social and emotional wellbeing and recognise the early warning signs of mental health difficulties (Centre for Community Child Health, 2018; Rhoades et al, 2017).

Universal child and family services play a key role in this process because of the extent of their contact with parents – through routine periodic contact (e.g. well-child checks) as well as opportunistic interactions, (e.g. episodic visits to a general practitioner) (Centre for Community Child Health, 2018; Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, 2011).

Not only do universal child and family service providers interact regularly with parents, they reach a significant proportion of families. For example, between 2012–15, 82.9% of Australian children (0–15 years) attended a GP at least once per year (Bayram et al, 2015).

The extent of universal service providers' interactions with families provides them with a unique opportunity to provide parents with useful information about their children's social and emotional wellbeing and respond to parents' questions and concerns about that aspect of their child's development. The type of information practitioners might provide to parents in these circumstances include:

- leaflets, brochures, booklets and links to websites and apps that provide information about topics related to child mental health such as:
 - general information about children's social and emotional development
 - tips on how to enhance children's mental health
 - supporting children's social and emotional wellbeing during and after adversity (e.g. traumatic incident, parental separation)
- information about activities, services and programs available to children, parents and families such as:
 - helplines
 - parenting support programs
 - couples counselling
 - family relationship services
 - no-cost/low-cost community events
 - peer support for parents, child mental health services.

Although providing information to parents may seem like a straightforward task, this paper outlines nine steps that may assist universal service providers to provide high quality information to parents that is appropriate to the unique needs and circumstances of their children and families.

The steps are divided into key stages:

- **Preparation (Steps 1–2):** tasks undertaken prior to working with parents to ensure the information and resources provided to them are up-to-date and high quality.
- **Working with parents (Steps 3–9):** steps undertaken with parents to ensure information and resources provided to them are relevant and appropriate to their family's need and circumstances.

It is important to note that the steps outlined in the paper are not designed for the purposes of diagnosing a child. They are aimed at helping practitioners locate and share information to:

- enhance parents' understanding of children's social and emotional development
- reassure parents that their child's behaviour is typical for their age and stage of development
- help parents decide whether they or their child needs further support and/or
- inform parents about what supports are available and how to access those supports.

This paper is intended for practitioners working with parents of children aged 0–12 years, including practitioners in the health, community services and early childhood education and care sectors. This paper draws upon evidence-based knowledge translation and exchange strategies designed for community-based organisations (Wilson et al, 2010). The steps outlined in this paper may not be appropriate for situations where a parent, child or family is in crisis.



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Preparation

1. Keep up-to-date with the latest information and resources

To ensure you provide parents with comprehensive and high-quality resources and information about child mental health, it is important to regularly familiarise yourself with the information and resources available. This will help you keep track of developments such as:

- resources that help you, and the parents you work with, understand child mental health
- resources that you can provide to parents to help them support their children's social and emotional wellbeing
- services for children, parents and families.

(Some examples of information and resources you might provide to parents are included in the *Further Resources: Information to Share with Parents* section of this paper).

Most practitioners have limited time to personally review information and resources on a regular basis. Some of the things that might make the process easier for you include:

- asking your colleagues and peers regularly about new information and resources they have come across
- adding yourself to interagency circular emails
- subscribing to newsletters that offer information about new resources for children, parents and families
- following relevant organisations and services on social media to keep up to date with new information and resources
- collecting relevant information at conferences, workshops and seminars.

Team leaders and organisations can also support practitioners with this process by:

- providing a dedicated space where practitioners can share information and resources with each other (e.g. a bulletin board in the staff kitchen)
- putting aside time in regular staff meetings for practitioners to share new information and resources with each other
- providing practitioners with opportunities to participate in relevant professional development opportunities.

It is impossible for one practitioner to know all the information and resources available to parents. Remember that you don't need to know the answers to all the questions that every parent asks.

2. Assess the quality of the information and resources

It is important to assess the quality of the information and resources you provide to parents to ensure they are useful, effective and, at the very least, not harmful.

Assessing the quality of information and resources requires attention to five key areas (see Text Box 1).

Text Box 1

The characteristics of high-quality information and resources

- **Relevant** – reflecting the needs and circumstances of the target audience
- **Up-to-date** – information is current (e.g. services listed should be currently available, cited research should be published recently)
- **Reliable** – produced or published by authoritative sources with a reputation for trustworthiness and impartiality; information about services or interventions is unbiased and realistic
- **Accurate** – produced or published by people who are appropriately qualified; the information reflects current evidence or is backed by current evidence that is published in reputable sources and is clearly cited
- **Accessible** – understandable to the target audience; services or interventions listed are accessible to the target audience (e.g. affordable, geographically accessible).

Once again, you may not have the time to personally assess the quality of all the information and resources you provide to parents, however you can adapt some of the tips listed above to assist you with this process. For example, ask your colleagues about the sources they trust for information and resources for parents and subscribe to newsletters produced by reputable organisations in your field. Some tools to assess the quality of information and resources you provide to parents is also provided in Text Box 2.

Text Box 2

Resources for assessing the quality of health information

There are a range of resources available for individuals to assess the quality of health information, especially online. These resources can also be used by practitioners to determine the quality of the health information they provide to parents. Some useful resources for evaluating the quality of health information include:

Health Direct Australia <<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/health-information-online>>

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Medline Plus (US) <<https://medlineplus.gov/evaluatinghealthinformation.html>>

The Discern Instrument (UK) <http://www.discern.org.uk/discern_instrument.php>

Working with parents

3. Work with the parent to explore their concerns

When you're seeking to share information with parents about children's social and emotional wellbeing, it is important to work with them to ensure any information or resources you provide are relevant and appropriate to their family's needs and circumstances. This is especially important where parents are concerned about their child's social and emotional wellbeing.

Where parents express a concern about their child's social and emotional wellbeing, it may be useful to point out firstly what you can and cannot do for them, based on your professional role and remit. For example, if a parent raises a concern about a child's behaviour, you could tell the parent that you are not a child behavioural specialist and therefore cannot provide them with specialist advice in that area.

However, it is important to do this in a way that indicates to the parent that you are not dismissing their concerns. Parents who are worried about their child's social and emotional wellbeing may be especially sensitive to any indication (whether real or perceived) that their concerns are being overlooked or dismissed (see also McDonald, 2018). If you don't have time to talk with them immediately, try and set up another time to speak with them and let them know that although you can't speak with them in that moment, you still take their concerns seriously.

During any conversation with a parent, it is important to employ the skills of listening well (see Text Box 3) and avoid going into 'problem-solving mode' too early. Parents are likely to discount or reject reassurance or advice that is offered before they believe you have fully understood their situation. Using a strengths-based, non-judgmental approach – and acknowledging the parents' expert knowledge about their child – will help the parent engage with you.

Text Box 3

Tips for listening well

Listening well is one way of showing parents that you're available for them and that you value any opinions or concerns they raise (Raising Children Network, 2018). Being able to concentrate completely on the person seeking help is crucial (Braun et al, 2006).

Poor listening skills are a barrier to parents' engagement with professionals (Moore et al, 2012).

Some ideas for listening well include:

- Stop what you're doing and look at parents when they're talking to you.
- Be conscious of the non-verbal cues you're communicating. For example, by putting aside your 'work tools' (e.g. pen and pad of paper, work phone, laptop) you're indicating that you're open to a conversation.
- Check on the feeling as well as the content of what's said. For example, 'Am I right in saying that you felt distressed about that incident?'
- Use open-ended questions to ask for additional information if you need it. Open-ended questions give people a chance to expand on what they're saying rather than just saying 'yes' or 'no'. For example, 'What did you mean when you said he was "mucking up"?''

If a parent has approached you with a concern about their child, it might be hard for them to articulate exactly what they are concerned about. They may just have a sense that something 'isn't quite right.' To develop a clearer picture of what the parent is worried about, ask them if it's okay for you to ask them some questions, and explain why.

See also: Effective communication with parents: for professionals <<https://raisingchildren.net.au/for-professionals/working-with-parents/communicating-with-parents/communication-with-parents>>

4. Explore child, parent and family context

To ensure that the information you provide to parents is relevant and appropriate, it is important to get an understanding of the background and current circumstances for the child, the parent(s), and their family – in other words, their context. This is important because the most useful information for parents will be the information that is relevant and appropriate to their child's and family's needs and circumstances.

Let the parent know that you want to ask them some questions about their child and their family to get a better sense of what information might be useful to them. If they are happy for you to do so, you can ask them some open-ended questions (see Text Box 3 for a definition of open-ended questions) in a sensitive way, being mindful of the principles of effective engagement (see Text Box 4) and listening well (see Text Box 3).

Some of topics you could touch upon at this stage include:

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- their relationship with their child
- significant relationships (apart from parents) in the child's life (e.g. grandparents)
- family and home environments
- their values and beliefs about parenting.

Remember you are not asking these questions to assess the child's mental health or provide a diagnosis, rather you are trying to make sure that the information and resources you provide to the parents are relevant and appropriate to the needs and circumstances of the child, the parent(s), and their family.

Obviously, the child's age and stage of development factors into their context and will determine what information will be most relevant and appropriate to a parent (e.g. some services will only be eligible for children within a certain age range).

Text Box 4

Principles of effective parent engagement

Curiosity: remaining curious about parents' hopes for their children and seeing parents as more than just the sum of the challenges they face.

Respect: assuming parents want the best for their children and recognising a parent's knowledge and expertise about their child; a respectful approach is empathic and welcoming.

Collaboration: working alongside parents, children, families and agencies to achieve shared understanding, plans and goals; collaboration requires trust and meaningful participation.

Context: understanding the background, current circumstances and values of parents and families allows practitioners to see the 'whole' parent and 'whole' child and tailor support to their unique needs.

Strengths and hope: focusing on parents' strengths and helping them identify and build upon their skills, resources and 'know-how'.

Child awareness and parent sensitivity: actively seeking opportunities to talk to parents about their children and about their parenting; acknowledging and validating relational roles and responsibilities of parents, and adapting and responding to parents' needs in a flexible way.

For more information about the principles of effective engagement see the Emerging Minds online course **Engaging with Parents - An Introduction** <<https://emergingminds.com.au/training/engaging-with-parents>>



5. Develop a shared understanding about helpful information and resources

By this stage, you should have a better understanding of the background and circumstances for the child, the parent and their family. You can now start to work with the parent to focus upon the types of information and resources that would be most useful and appropriate for them, their child and their family.

Some of the things you could consider with the parent at this stage include:

- information and resources they have used in the past that they have found useful and why they were useful
- the format of information that they are most comfortable with (e.g. hard-copy documents, online information, apps)
- language considerations (i.e. where the parents speak a language other than English).

Where a parent is asking for information about services, you could also explore any logistical barriers they face in accessing services: Do they have private transport? Would they benefit from services that use interpreters?

6. Present information and resource options

Now that you have explored the family background and circumstances, and developed an understanding about the most appropriate types of information and resources, you can present parents with the information and resources you identified in steps 1 and 2 ('Preparation').

Where appropriate, provide the parents with a few options – a brochure, a list of services and information about a website, for example. However, try not to overwhelm parents with information. Start with 2–3 resources that seem most appropriate and let the parent know that you have additional information and resources should they need them.

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Provide parents with an opportunity to ask questions about the resources you provide. Where possible, if a parent has questions about a service, you could call that service while the parent is in the room with you.

Text Box 5

Speaking to parents when they're stressed

If they're worried about their child, parents are likely to feel stressed and anxious. This may impact upon their capacity to take in what you are telling them. In those circumstances, the following tips for clear communication are especially important:

- speak clearly and at a moderate pace
- be specific and concrete
- repeat key points (Government of South Australia, 2013).

7. Explain how resources can be used to promote a positive influence on the child's emotional wellbeing

Whatever information or resources you provide to parents, link it back to the child's social and emotional wellbeing. This will help reorient the parent to the key issue: the child's social and emotional wellbeing (see Text Box 6 for some examples of how you might say this).

Text Box 6

How to say it: Reorienting parents back to children's social and emotional wellbeing

'You might find these websites useful. They have some tips about how to talk to your kids about tough topics. It's great that you and Finn have started talking, and it'll be really good for him to be able to talk more about how he's feeling with everything that's happening at home.'

'It's great that you've developed some strategies for

dealing with Aroha's behaviour, but you need to look after yourself as well. Here's some information about how you can do that. If you feel better about yourself, that will be good for Aroha as well.'

'I can see that Percy and Delilah love being with you – that means you're doing a really good job. Here's a list of resources for relationship counselling. If you and your partner can manage conflict better, it'll help the twins learn how to manage conflict as well – and that will be really good for both of them when they get older.'

A strengths-based approach during this discussion will enhance parents' receptiveness to the information provided¹.

8. Agree on next steps

Once you've given a parent information, confirm with them how they are going to use it. This is especially important when a parent has a specific concern about their child's social and emotional wellbeing because it will help parents plan the next steps and reinforce to them your interest in the outcome of the process (see Text Box 7 for examples of how you might say this). In some circumstances, it may be useful to clearly state why you are confirming the plan. This will ensure parents do not misinterpret your interest in the outcome as a directive.

Text Box 7

How to say it: Agreeing on next steps

'So, you're going to look up the information about tantrums on that website? I'm really hoping it will be useful.'

'Just to recap, the plan is for you to call that helpline within the next few days? Do you think you'll be able to do that?'

'You're going to drop into the community hub sometime next week and ask them about local playgroups – that's the plan, right?'

A follow up conversation with a parent – although not always possible – will help to make sure they got what they needed (see Step 9). It may also help you in the future when you encounter parents with similar concerns.

Where there is an opportunity to follow up with the parents, or to meet with them again in person, you could agree on a few more steps (see Text Box 8).

¹ A strengths-based approach involves starting with people's strengths and building upon them rather than focusing on deficits and failure. In the family context, it assumes that all parents have strengths to bring to the parenting task and that families are often the best people to develop their own solutions (although they may need help to do so).

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How to say it: Following up with parents

'So, just to summarise our plan: you're going to look up the information about tantrums on that website, have a talk to your partner about what you want to do and get back to me about how you went?'

'When you get home you said you're going to call that helpline and when I see you again we'll talk through other options if we need to?'

'You're going to drop in to the community hub next week, ask them about local playgroups and maybe go along to a playgroup session, then let me know how you and Dillon went? Does that sound like a reasonable plan?'

If you're able to have a follow up conversation with a parent (see Step 9), it might be useful at this stage to:

- ask them if they are okay with a follow-up conversation
- let them know when you plan on doing that and ask them if they think this is enough time for them to have read the information and
- let them know why a follow up conversation is a good idea (i.e. to check whether the information met their needs).

9. Follow up with parents about the resources

The principles of effective engagement are just as important during the follow-up phase as with all the other phases described in this paper. For example, some parents may feel they have 'failed' if they haven't read the information you gave them. Using a respectful, non-judgmental approach with parents will help reassure them that the follow-up conversation is not a 'test'.

Where parents have read the information, some questions you could ask to help determine whether the information was useful include:

- Was the information easy to understand?
- Did the information or resource help you address your concerns?
- Could you access the information or the resource easily?
- Do you feel like you have the information you need to address your concerns in a way that aligns with your family circumstances, values and beliefs?

If the parent answers no to any of these questions, and where it is relevant and feasible, you could consider working with them further to identify other information or



resources that will better meet their needs.

As part of a strengths-based approach, you could also praise the parent for taking the time to review the information you gave them.

Following up with parents in this way has numerous benefits for you and for the parent, including:

- **helping to establish a stronger relationship between you and the parent:** by showing the parent that you take their concerns seriously and want the best outcome for them and their child, you are helping to build a relationship of trust and respect, which are essential foundations for an effective working relationship
- **providing the parent with the opportunity to raise additional concerns:** this can be an escalation in the problem or an inability to access a local support service
- **enhancing your knowledge about what works for that parent and that family:** once you know which resources have been useful for a specific parent and family, you can tailor the resources you provide to them the next time they, or you, have a concern about their child
- **enhancing your knowledge about the usefulness of specific resources:** this may help when you work with other families, for example, if a parent tells you they like a specific resource because it's easy to understand, you can recommend that resource to other parents who are looking for the same type of resource.

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Further information

Emerging Minds Building Blocks for Social and Emotional Wellbeing e-learning course <<https://emergingminds.com.au/training/building-blocks-childrens-social-emotional-wellbeing/>>

Emerging Minds Engaging with Parents e-learning course <<https://emergingminds.com.au/training/engaging-with-parents/>>

Why is it difficult for parents to talk to practitioners about their children's mental health? practice paper <<https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/why-is-it-difficult-for-parents-to-talk-to-practitioners-about-their-childrens-mental-health/>>

Further resources: Information to share with parents

Information about child development

Child development: The first five years <<https://raisingchildren.net.au/newborns/development/understanding-development/development-first-five-years>>

Child development: The first eight years <<https://raisingchildren.net.au/babies/videos/development-first-eight-years>>

Relationships and development <<https://raisingchildren.net.au/newborns/development/understanding-development/relationships-development>>

Information about child mental health

Preschooler mental health <<https://raisingchildren.net.au/preschoolers/health-daily-care/mental-health>>

School-age mental health <<https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/health-daily-care/mental-health>>

Information about child mental health services

KidsMatter Directory for kids' mental health and wellbeing <<https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/health-and-community/resources/directory-kids-mental-health-and-wellbeing>>

Information for parents about looking after themselves

Parents: Looking after yourself <<https://raisingchildren.net.au/grown-ups/looking-after-yourself/parenting/looking-after-yourself>>

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