

Research and Practice Brief:

Supporting Educator Wellbeing and Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education & Care Services

Overview

This research and practice brief summarises findings from a two-year research project that examined innovative strategies developed by early childhood education and care (ECEC) services to support family engagement and educator wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Family engagement in ECEC and educator wellbeing are widely acknowledged as essential factors to ensure the best outcomes for children (ARACY, 2020; Thorpe et al., 2020). However, the impact of government-imposed restrictions during COVID-19 presented unique challenges for early learning services in terms of maintaining their connections with families – as well as the wellbeing of the educators providing that support.

This project aimed to capture and learn from the innovation demonstrated during this period, and to refine, translate and share some of the practices across ECEC centres more broadly.

The project had two key phases: i) the research phase, which explored and learnt from the experiences of educators, children and families attending Goodstart ECEC services during the pandemic, and ii) the enable phase, which supported five Goodstart centres to co-design, test and refine innovative family engagement and educator wellbeing practices.

The project was a collaboration between the Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood Hub at Melbourne Graduate School of Education, the Centre for Community Child Health, and Goodstart Early Learning.

National Quality Standard – Quality Area 5: Relationships with Children

This quality area recognises the importance of maintaining respectful and equitable relationships between educators and children to build trusting relationships, and to ensure that every child feels secure, confident and included. In particular, this quality area highlights the important role of positive educator-child interactions to ensure optimal outcomes for children.

National Quality Standard – Quality Area 6: Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities

This quality area recognises that supportive and collaborative relationships with families enhance children's inclusion, learning and wellbeing. In addition, this quality area highlights the importance of making current information available to families as well as relevant community services and resources to support parenting and family wellbeing.

Co-design and Innovation

The Centres of Innovation were supported over a 15-month period (May 21-Aug 22) through bi-monthly coaching and professional learning sessions to co-design, test and refine family engagement and educator wellbeing strategies at their Centres using a three-step process:



Key Learnings

During times of upheaval and transition, ECEC services can play an important role in supporting families. This project highlighted that ECEC services are well placed to support families given their strong relationships with children and families, strength-based approaches, and effective communication channels.

Small changes can have a positive impact on educator wellbeing and family engagement. Educators developed innovative strategies in response to specific challenges or opportunities at their service; these innovations were often small, targeted, and timely, increasing their impact and allowing them to be implemented within the time constraints of staff.

Educators can benefit from innovation in several ways. They can influence the direction of the Centre and develop new ways to connect with families and children. It can also provide opportunities to build on existing interests and skills, add variety to roles and strengthen relationships with team members, thereby increasing overall job satisfaction.

Top Tips for Co-design and Innovation

- Promote a culture of security and sharing - encourage educators to share special interests or activities they enjoy, such as hobbies or cultural practices
- Make the process easy, simple and enjoyable for your team: find ways to build on current routines and practices
- Find things that work for your team and centre - you might have to try a range of different ideas before you find the best strategies
- Find your allies and get them involved from the start of the journey
- Start small and take it at a pace that suits you and your team
- Don't be afraid to try - learning about what doesn't work can be just as valuable as learning what does work
- Document your goals and learnings, to help you refine and make improvements as you go
- Have fun! Make the workplace as fun and as playful as possible and you will be more likely to retain a happy and healthy team.

Innovations to Support Educator Wellbeing

Educator wellbeing strategies developed and tested by services included:

Creating informal opportunities to connect and de-stress

- Walking meetings with Centre Director
- Lunch dates with Centre Director
- Educators cooking for children

Promoting wellbeing and sharing wellness and self-care strategies

- Weekend Wellness Challenges (sharing wellbeing care on Teams)
- Feel good Fridays: Friday night 30-minute self-care sessions
- Buddy up COVID Testing for affected staff who need to test every 72 hours.
- R U Okay day promotion and tips on how to have conversations about mental health

Measuring staff wellbeing

- Measuring staff wellbeing at staff meetings through anonymous online Menti polls

Staff development

- Talent time: Incursions for educators to showcase their interests and talents including singing, music, story-time, cultural celebrations and jewellery making
- Mental Health First Aid training
- Professional journal project: Educators have their own profile on Storypark where they can record their goals and document their achievements over the year.

Developing new staff processes for communication and planning

- Quieting of email/Teams over specified periods to support switching off from work.
- Teams COVID update channel to communicate information quickly
- Future Friday: getting educator input into future Centre activities to create excitement and buy-in.

“ (We) still continue walking meetings – if I notice staff don’t look okay by their mannerisms – I say, ‘let’s go for a walk.’ Nothing worse than having a manager say to you ‘can I see you in the office’ - walks are more informal and relaxed.”

Innovations to Support Family Engagement

Family engagement strategies developed and tested by services included:

Home Learning kits

- Kindy packs made of fun activities and resources during lockdown while not attending. Kits were tailored to individual child interests.

Connecting families with community supports

- A poster was developed with names and numbers of local support agencies and was posted on Storypark for all families.

Regular phone calls and check-ins to update families on their child's progress

- These connections also provided a source of adult interaction for isolated parents and carers

Front door greetings during restrictions

- Kinder staff now walk children out at the end of the day so they can chat to families.

Shared online activities during restrictions

- Centres hosted a range of online activities for the whole family, including Spanish dancing and cooking sessions.

Staff talent time

- Incursions run by educators showcasing their interests and talents including singing, music, story-time, cultural celebrations and jewellery making. Families are welcome to join these sessions.

Video resource: Interviews with participants



“I actually have quite a few team members from India, and they all came together. They put together this beautiful cultural day... There was singing, there was dancing, there was storytelling about history... The children got to dress up as well.”

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