

OCTOBER 2009

# Foundations

*Developing Social & Emotional Wellbeing in Early Childhood*

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Mental Health  
& WELLBEING

Practical  
Tips &  
Activities

SUPPORTING  
Children  
& Families

CHILDREN'S SERVICES MAGAZINE

# Contents

- 3 **MENTAL Health & Wellbeing**
- 5 **LAYING the Foundations of Wellbeing in Early Childhood**
- 8 **CREATING Supportive Environments**
- 11 **BUILDING Social and Emotional Skills**
- 13 **TOUGH Times: Supporting Children and Families**
- 16 **SUPPORT Services for Social and Emotional Wellbeing**
- 18 **CARING for the Carer!**

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**Front Cover:** Staff member and child from Possum Place Child & Vacation Care Centre, Newcastle, NSW. We would like to thank the children, parents and staff of the centre for allowing us to take photographs. All subjects in photographs taken by Limelight Creative Media were undercover, however this may not always be apparent as lighting techniques were utilised to ensure professional grade photographs. We advocate for organisations and individuals acting in a sun smart manner.

## From the Editor

WELCOME TO THE FIRST EDITION of **Foundations**, a magazine for children's services staff.

Our vision is to create a space where staff can receive and share information and practical ideas about supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of babies, children and families.

Here you will find suggestions for creating supportive environments and helping children develop good social and emotional skills. There are also activities for staff and questions you can think about or discuss within your team.

If you would like to share any information from **Foundations** with your families, you can include a piece from the magazine in your newsletter. Just drop in a quote or article, with a brief line to say where the material is from.

We hope you will find **Foundations** valuable as a way of reflecting on the social and emotional wellbeing of babies and children, and sharing ideas with families and with others in your profession.

We welcome your articles or suggestions for future editions, to help us ensure that **Foundations** will be a useful and practical tool that supports you in your work with children and families.



*Karen Stafford*

**Karen Stafford**  
Program Manager  
Hunter Institute of Mental Health



# & Mental Health & WELLBEING

## WHAT IS WELLBEING?

We have a feeling of wellbeing when we are generally feeling good with the way our lives are going. It is however, more than just having fun and feeling happy. It is also about feeling that our lives are worthwhile and we have a purpose. Because we are social beings, we are usually most happy and healthy when we have a range of positive relationships.

## SOME OF THE THINGS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO WELLBEING ARE:

- supportive friendships and relationships
- having a rewarding job or life role
- having enough money to meet our needs
- a healthy diet and physical activity
- getting enough good-quality sleep
- enjoying fun activities and leisure
- religious or spiritual beliefs and practices.

## WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

To set up and maintain an overall sense of wellbeing, our lives need to be well managed. Mental health is our capacity to manage our thoughts and feelings, behaviour and interactions with others.

When we have good mental health we can work effectively toward our goals, in our personal life and work life, and maintain our wellbeing. Because these two ideas are closely linked, we sometimes refer to them as 'mental health and wellbeing'.

## A PERSON WITH GOOD MENTAL HEALTH IS GENERALLY:

- aware of and able to manage feelings and behaviour
- self-confident, but realistic about their abilities
- aware of the feelings and needs of others
- able to get on with other people and negotiate
- able to ask for help and give help to others
- able to participate in group activities but resist peer pressure
- able to keep going when tasks are difficult or there are setbacks
- able to manage day-to-day stress and solve problems.



*"If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put foundations under them."*

*Henry David Thoreau*



## Promoting Mental Health & Wellbeing *in our Community*

There are many factors that affect our mental health and wellbeing. Some of the **foundations** for good mental health lie within us and some of them are in our environment. Thinking about our community as a whole, there are many things that can be done to support positive mental health outcomes.

### KEY COMMUNITY STRATEGIES INCLUDE:

- Supporting people through housing, health, education and social support services
- Providing services that support healthy pregnancy and birth outcomes
- Building a socially inclusive community that respects diversity
- Protecting people from discrimination, harm, abuse and violence
- Caring for children in ways that build secure attachments to family and other adults
- Helping children, adolescents and adults to develop good social and emotional skills
- Promoting good physical health, including nutrition and exercise.

Through working with children and their families, staff in children's services can support better outcomes for children in terms of their health and learning. Early childhood services can play an important role in many of these areas, by supporting children's wellbeing and development and working in close partnership with families. ●

*Mental Health*





# Laying the Foundations of Wellbeing in Early Childhood

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD PERIOD sets down the **foundations** for learning, behaviour and wellbeing. Children's services staff play a key role in building these foundations, which can support positive physical and mental health, learning and socio-economic outcomes later in life.

There are two ways to do this:

- 1) Create supportive environments that promote children's best possible development, including social and emotional development; and
- 2) Work in partnership with families to address any additional needs and help them access other services.

## *Social & Emotional Development*

Social and emotional development is the process of learning skills that are important for our sense of self and our relationships with other people. Skills developed in early childhood help us to manage our feelings and get on well with others. As we grow and develop into adults, we can build on these early skills and develop the capacity to manage complex life challenges.

Babies and young children learn through their experiences and relationships. Temperament, social

context and health also play a part in shaping development. Important developmental tasks in the early years include:

- Building primary and secondary attachment relationships;
- Learning to manage feelings and behaviour; and
- Learning to get on with other people.

Early attachment experiences often become a model for the way people manage stress and relationships later in life. Secure attachments in early childhood are the best foundation for good cognitive, social and emotional development. Secure attachment develops as a child learns that a carer understands their needs and will help them. A secure attachment helps children learn positive ways to manage feelings and behaviour.

Toddlers develop a need for autonomy and gain a better understanding of their own feelings and the feelings of others. Children learn how to manage their feelings and behaviour by watching people, trying things out and through the feedback they receive. By putting all of these skills together, they develop an increased capacity for learning and maintaining positive relationships.



## *Supportive Environments*

To promote wellbeing, we need to create environments that support children's best possible social and emotional development. Children learn best when they feel safe and secure, physically and emotionally. This means respecting all children as individuals and acknowledging their diversity, culture, temperament and preferences.

In a supportive environment, staff care for babies and children in ways that build positive relationships and secure attachment. Staff understand children's cues and are caring and consistent in their response. This includes meeting the child's needs for physical care, play or rest, social interaction and emotional comfort.

Within this supportive environment, staff help children learn about feelings and relationships. Strategies include modelling social and emotional skills, setting up play situations or experiences children can learn from, and guiding their behaviour.

### *Something to think about...*

How does our physical environment support staff in creating positive relationships with the children?  
How does it help children to create positive relationships with each other?

## *Working in Partnership*

To support development and wellbeing we must also build partnerships with families. This means working together to provide opportunities that will best support that child's development. A partnership also supports children by promoting consistency in care practices and helping the child develop secondary attachments.

Creating a strong partnership takes time and a commitment to ongoing communication. We can share information with families every day and invite parents to share information with us. Over time, this can help us to build a warm and respectful relationship.

Sometimes families need extra support or advice to help them cope with a difficult situation or support their child's needs. When a trusting partnership has already developed, it is easier for staff and families to work together to share information and develop plans for supporting the child.







## *Something to think about...*

Which elements of our environment or our practices might encourage families to stay and talk for a while, so we can develop a positive partnership?

## *Putting it all Together*

To promote mental health and wellbeing in early childhood, we need to recognise that early social and emotional development is very important for the child's long-term outcomes.

A focus on social and emotional development is an important part of our planning, day-to-day care practices, policies, relationships with families and all the other aspects of our service.

## *In summary,*

to promote mental health and wellbeing, we need to:

- set up an environment that is safe and supportive both physically and emotionally
- care for children in a way that promotes secure attachment
- support children's best possible social and emotional development
- help children learn social and emotional skills and manage their behaviour
- work in partnership with families to support the child's development
- work closely with children and families who have additional needs
- help families to find other information and support services if needed
- include a focus on wellbeing in planning, policies and philosophy. ●

*"You must be the change you wish to see in the world."*

*Mahatma Gandhi*

Jenny Rue works with TAFE NSW, Hunter Institute. Jenny teaches in the Children's Services courses and provides training and advice for children's services in the wider community.

Jenny has a passion for working with students and staff to create environments that support children's social and emotional wellbeing. We asked Jenny to share her thoughts.



## Creating Supportive Environments *talking with Jenny Rue*

### **What can staff do to build relationships with children, particularly those new to a service?**

Spending time building an ongoing relationship of fun and trust with every child is by far the most important role of anybody working with young children. The starting point is the child's family. Finding out about the little details of a child's life (their pet's name, routines, what they call their grandparents) provides continuity of experience for the child. It also builds connections between home and care and can provide support for the parents.

Children new to the service need staff to carefully guide them through their day. They need the consistency of one or two staff who will stay close and be available to support their explorations and reassure them when necessary. This support will need to stay in place even after the child seems happy at the centre. Building relationships is an ongoing process!

### **What strategies can staff use to ensure that the physical environment is welcoming?**

The physical environment can support children by providing familiarity. Being greeted each day by familiar staff, having access to favourite activities, and an environment that remains relatively constant allows children to relax into their day. It is important that children are allowed to keep transition or security items close to them for as long as they need. Children will need to set their own time frames for parting with these and staff can be there to suggest strategies to allow for this separation. Perhaps a basket on a shelf nearby, to put the security item in, might be the first step!





## How can you plan your program so it is responsive to children's interests and helps you build a relationship with them?

- Have a routine that allows for some time flexibility. Allow plenty of time for slow transitions, for children to finish their activity in their own time and move on in small groups or individually.
- Allow time for special individual interactions while you are caring for babies and toddlers. Individualise the routine for each child, based on their interests and how they like to do things.
- Sit with children on chairs beside their activity or on the floor with them. Take the time to notice children's attempts to communicate, both verbally and non-verbally, and respond to these.
- Adapt your practices to make sure that there is time to spend on building a relationship with each child. This might mean that you minimise activities that are time consuming for adults. Select play materials that children can use independently.



The room should be homely, with small spaces, soft furnishings, low noise levels. Staff interact in calm, nurturing ways, speaking respectfully at all times.

# TEAM Activity:

## Creating a Supportive Environment

**As a team**, use this checklist to discuss what you currently do and any other approaches you might like to try. This list covers several aspects of creating a supportive environment and building positive relationships.

	Things we do well	Other things we could do
Use routines and practices that allow us to pick up on children's cues and respond quickly to their needs and feelings.		
Have some quiet, cosy spaces where children can relax, sit quietly, or use these spaces for conversations.		
Provide environments and activities where children can explore independently but still have carers nearby for support.		
Use routines, practices, rosters and set up environments that will allow staff the time to build relationships with each child.		
Use routines and practices that will allow staff the time and opportunities to build relationships with family members.		
Get to know each child as an individual, including their interests, preferences, personality, family context.		
Provide environments and activities that help children develop social skills and positive relationships.		
Take opportunities or use structured activities to help older children understand and explore feelings and emotions.		
Reflect diversity and inclusion throughout the environment, activities and all our interactions.		
Adapt our routines or care giving practices as necessary to support children who have any additional needs.		





Building strong social and emotional skills is essential to supporting mental health and wellbeing. Staff working with young children are in an ideal position to help children build skills that are appropriate to their age and stage of development.

Like many other aspects of development, social and emotional skills are influenced by culture, personality and social context. When we plan strategies to support children's learning we will need to think about these influences.

# Building Social & Emotional Skills

## **KEY SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL SKILLS IN THE EARLY YEARS INCLUDE:**

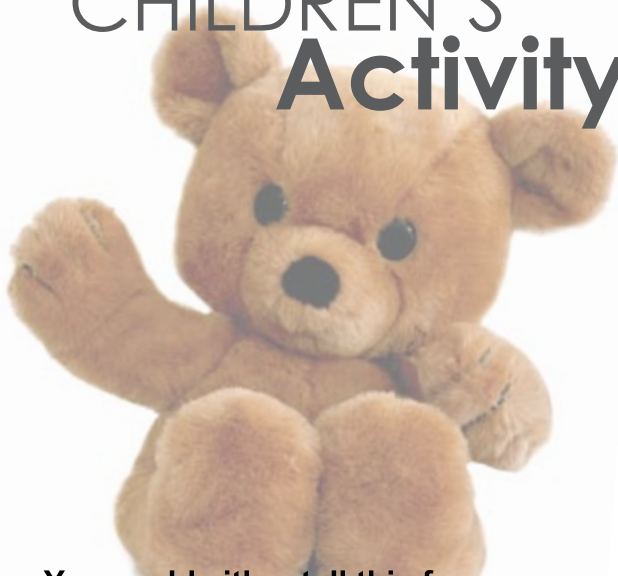
- being able to identify and understand our own feelings
- being able to identify and understand the feelings of others
- being able to manage behaviour when frustrated or angry
- being able to get on with other people and do things together
- knowing how to respond to the feelings and behaviour of others
- being able to feel empathy for other people and help them
- developing a sense of self and a healthy level of independence.

## **TO HELP CHILDREN DEVELOP SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL SKILLS, YOU CAN:**

- model the behaviour, language and skills you want children to use
- give supportive feedback to children about their behaviour
- help children label and talk about feelings – their own and others'
- give children opportunities to play together and have time alone
- help children to develop the skills needed for friendships
- encourage children to take turns and share
- use stories, art or dramatic play to explore feelings and relationships.

# CHILDREN'S Activity:

# Storytelling



**STORIES CAN BE A WONDERFUL** medium for talking about events, issues and feelings. They provide a safe and secure way for children to explore and experience a range of feelings, with support from an adult.

To do the following activity, you will need a bag, a teddy bear, a small hat and a blanket.

**You could either tell this from your own perspective, as if it really happened on your way in, or you could create a fictional character who is at the centre of the story.**

## **Story:** A strange thing happened .....

*A strange thing happened as I (or another character) was walking along this morning.*

*I stopped to pick up a piece of rubbish on the ground. It was a paper bag. But before I threw it into the bin I had a quick look inside.*

*I found this beautiful teddy bear... Look, he has this blanket wrapped around his shoulders and even has a little hat. His tag has the words "Tim's Bear" written on it.*

*I can tell this bear is loved very much. He looks like a bear who has had lots of cuddles. He is kept safe from the sun and warm with a blanket.*

*I brought him in and hoped you might be able to help me decide what to do...*

**After setting the scene, talk with the children about feelings and helping others.**

## **Questions:**

- Do you think Tim might be missing this bear? – How might he be feeling right now?
- Have you ever felt like that before?
- What do you do when you feel like that? – I wonder who Tim might ask for help?
- If you were Tim's friend what would you say to him?
- What can we do to help get this bear back to Tim?
- What should we do with Tim's bear until Tim comes for him?

**Guide the children to a positive ending, in which Tim can be reunited with his bear.**

## **Resources:**

There are also many books that can be used to explore feelings or relationships, such as:

*When I'm Feeling ...* series by Trace Moroney; Five Mile Press.  
*Friends*, by Kim Lewis; Walker Books.





# *Tough Times* Supporting Children & Families

**WHEN FAMILIES EXPERIENCE TRAUMA** or difficult life events, there may be a negative impact on a child's mental health and wellbeing. This can cause changes in feelings or behaviour. During difficult times, it is helpful for children's services staff to be aware of what is happening in the child's life and do what they can to support the family's wellbeing.

## *Case Study:* Chloe's Story

Chloe is four years old and attends a long day care centre every Thursday and Friday. One busy Monday morning, the authorised supervisor tells you Chloe will be with you full-time for at least a week.

Chloe's home was destroyed in a bushfire over the weekend. The family has emergency housing, but they have lost everything. They need time to arrange housing, clothing and other basic needs. They want Chloe to be in a familiar setting while they work through this.

Chloe and her mum arrive about 10:30 and talk with the supervisor, then come in to see the other staff and children. Chloe's mother seems tired and worried.

Chloe is made to feel welcome and is taken to join a friend in an art activity. Seeing that Chloe seems okay, her mother looks happier and says goodbye to Chloe and the staff.



## Impact on Children and Families

CHILDREN REACT IN different ways to tragic events like the one that has hit Chloe's family. Some may show clearly that they are upset and need additional support. Others seem okay for a while but their behaviour may change later.

Events like this have a big impact on mental health and wellbeing. The way we support children and families under stress can make a real difference. With the right care and support, children can recover quickly and may have few long-term problems as a result of their experience.

Australian studies show that after natural disasters, many parents become overprotective of their children. There can be a tendency for more conflict in the family, with parents becoming irritable or withdrawn.

These changes in family relationships can have a further negative impact on children. Children's services staff and other adults can play an important role in monitoring Chloe's situation to see whether she needs any additional support.

Chloe could be feeling upset and stressed from her recent experiences, such as:

- leaving to get away from the fire
- seeing her home in ruins
- losing her belongings, toys, security items
- possibly losing pets
- unfamiliarity of her new accommodation
- uncertainty about the future.

Chloe might also be anxious about her parents' safety when she can't see them.



## Signs that children need extra support

CHILDREN WHO NEED extra support show this in different ways. A good relationship with the child will make it easier to see if his or her behaviour is different from normal. Staff might also notice that a child is behaving differently from other children at a similar stage of development.

Possible signs of stress:

- being withdrawn or quiet
- becoming easily upset or angry
- being difficult to comfort
- being anxious or nervous
- difficulty concentrating or staying with activities
- being mean or aggressive
- sadness and crying.

As Chloe has experienced trauma, there could be major changes in her behaviour. Some children show developmental regression, eg bedwetting when previously dry. Some children find it hard to sleep or seem restless. Children can lose their appetite and show little interest in food.

Children can also develop specific fears related to what has happened. In this case, Chloe might get upset if she sees a fire on TV or smells smoke.



## Supporting children

Staff could provide extra support in the following ways:

- where possible, maintain routines and avoid too many changes
- allow Chloe to stay near an adult for comfort and security
- answer children's questions calmly and truthfully, even if asked repeatedly
- use activities that allow Chloe to express her feelings.

## Staff Activities

Children's services play a very important role in the lives of the families and their children who attend the service. Helping the family during the recovery process can be an important way of ensuring that children's mental health and wellbeing is supported.

**Brainstorm:** How could your staff and service help Chloe's family to address some of their basic needs during this time of crisis, eg food and clothing, re-establishing a sense of community?

**Brainstorm** ideas to help Chloe to express her feelings. How would your practices and interactions let her know that it is okay to be open about her feelings?

## Other circumstances where children might need more support

Apart from natural disasters such as Chloe's bushfire, there are other circumstances that could lead to children needing more support, such as:

- having a physical illness, accident or disability
- experiencing any kind of abuse or neglect
- being affected by a family crisis such as illness or accident
- having a parent with a mental or physical health problem
- experiencing the death of a loved one
- going through family conflict or violence
- experiencing a family breakup.

Resources: *Want to know more?*

Why not have a look at the **Foundations website** where you will find additional information about the impact of natural disasters on children's and parents' mental health and wellbeing, with useful weblinks to resources by Early Childhood Australia and the Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network.



[www.himh.org.au/foundations](http://www.himh.org.au/foundations)

# Support Services for Social & Emotional Wellbeing



FROM TIME TO TIME we all need extra support. Sometimes, this can come from friends, family or work colleagues. Sometimes it may mean calling on support from specialist services, community groups or charitable organisations.

Staff in children's services plan and provide programs for children that are rich in opportunities to support their social and emotional development. There will however be times when children need more specialist support than we are able to provide.

Our role then involves working closely with families to help them to identify and access a range of suitable support services.



## Example

MANY REFUGEE FAMILIES experience trauma, loss and grief. This increases the risk of emotional, behavioural or mental health problems in the family. Once settled in Australia, people need a range of services and community support, to help build a sense of security.

Sometimes, children from refugee families have ongoing emotional or mental health problems as a result of their experiences. They might show this through:

- insecurity, anxiety or withdrawal
- limited and repetitive play
- difficulties with attachment and trust
- anger or aggression

A refugee family may need help to find appropriate services, such as trauma counselling, child psychologists or social workers, or a mental health service. You may be able to help them by talking with the family and working in partnership with a local refugee support agency.

## Resources:

While refugees come from a variety of backgrounds, the following publication may be helpful in considering issues affecting migrants and refugees.

Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (2007). *Raising Children in Australia: A resource kit for early childhood services working with parents from African backgrounds.*

[www.survivorsvic.org.au/resources/publications\\_and\\_resources.htm](http://www.survivorsvic.org.au/resources/publications_and_resources.htm)







## *In Practice*

### talking with Suzanne Sutherland

Suzanne Sutherland from Mayfield Central Preschool shares with us her experiences in supporting families and building a sense of community and belonging. The preschool caters for a diverse range of families, including refugees, grandparents as primary carers, single parent families and those new to the area.

When a mother at the preschool asked Suzanne to help her with English, Suzanne wanted to expand the benefits so she came up with the concept of getting families together socially every second Sunday. Both Suzanne and the families have found this beneficial.

“What we are wanting to do for the families associated with the centre is to build a community and give them a set of friendships....Particularly for the parents, feeling that they have moved to an area where they are just so cut off from their support network. So what I am trying to do is build a network for them.

I have learned more about...what is culturally good practice or what's culturally acceptable or relevant in the occasional conversations we've had in the social settings, or on the train.....learned more there than in the interview I did or even some of the material I've read to prepare myself.”

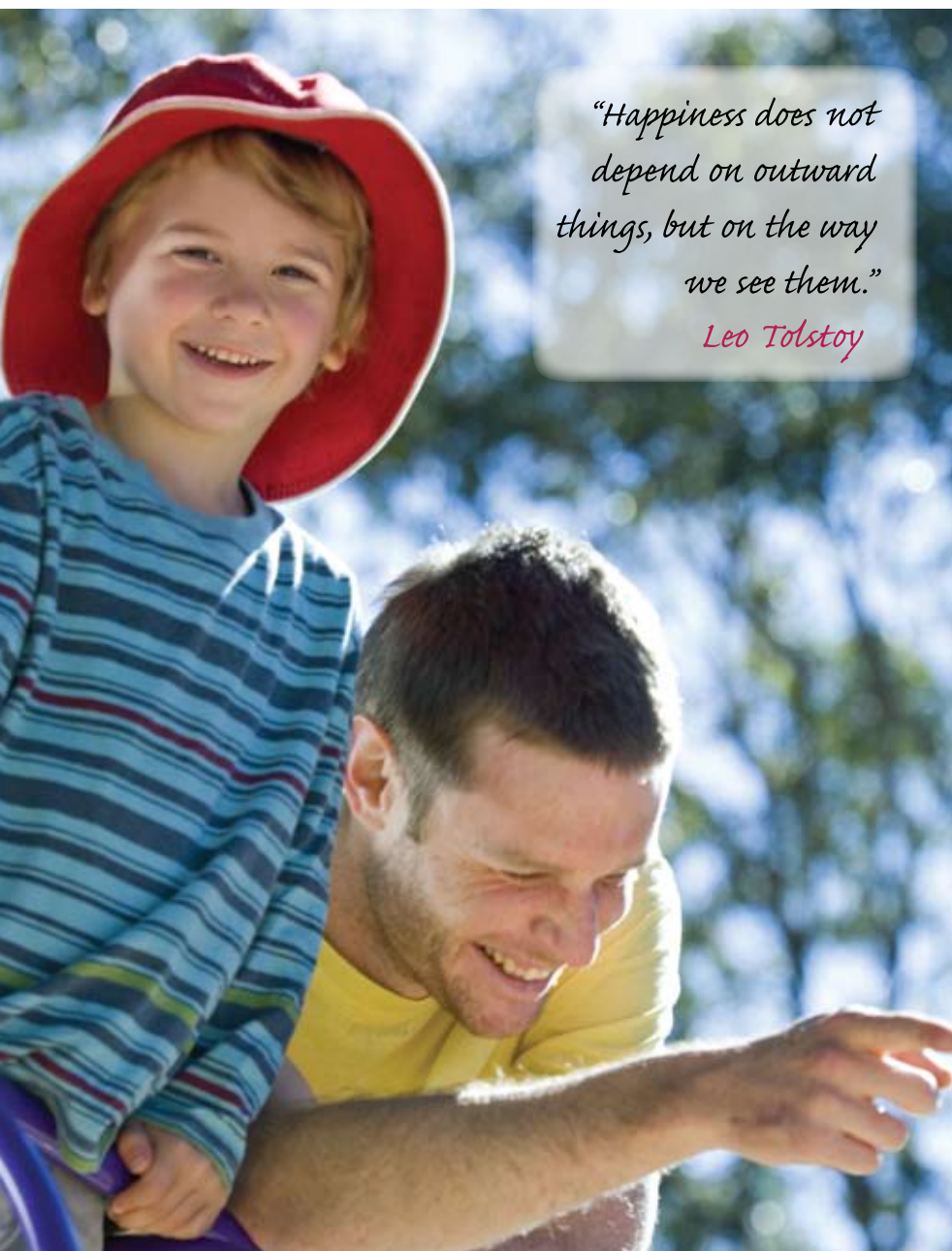
#### **Some of the strategies used at the preschool include:**

- Having a familiar person, such as the family's settlement officer, come with them to visit the preschool the first time.
- Using digital photography to teach children about tasks or sequences of events, such as washing hands.
- Taking photographs of objects or events and having families write the word in their home language. After hearing it spoken, a staff member writes the word phonetically on the photo so others can learn to use these words.
- Borrowing cultural resources such as children's books, puzzles, posters, music and artefacts, eg from the diversity learning unit in Waratah.
- Working with other services, including translators and child mental health services. ●

# Caring

The mental health and wellbeing of children and families is important, but so is ours! Working in early childhood is rewarding but it is also challenging and can be stressful. Stress can come from outside the workplace too.

If we forget to look after ourselves, it is harder to cope with stress and to manage our work-life balance. This could affect your capacity to build positive relationships with the children, with other staff, or with family members and other visitors who come to your service.



*"Happiness does not  
depend on outward  
things, but on the way  
we see them."*

*Leo Tolstoy*

## For the Carer!

Tips for looking after your own wellbeing:

- ✓ choose a healthy diet, with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, some protein and dairy food
- ✓ do regular exercise, setting realistic goals (check with your GP first if you have health problems)
- ✓ make sure you get enough good-quality sleep, as everybody needs a different amount
- ✓ build and maintain a network of close personal relationships with supportive people
- ✓ spend time on your personal interests, hobbies or favourite activities
- ✓ use a range of healthy strategies to relax and manage stress
- ✓ reach out for help if you need it, from workmates, friends, family, your GP or health professional.

By taking care of yourself physically, socially and emotionally, you will be better able to maintain your own wellbeing and support the wellbeing of children and families.



# Breathe *your stress away*

Stress can have a strong effect on our bodies and on our mental health. It can impair our ability to make decisions, carry out tasks and enjoy life.

It may surprise you to find that you can combat stress simply through breathing. Breathing is automatic. We do it constantly, often without noticing. But we can choose to think about it and change *how* we breathe.



When people are relaxed, their breathing is usually slow, even and gentle, through the nose. When you breathe properly and deeply, your abdomen goes in and out. This is because your diaphragm, a membrane between your lungs and the lower part of your body, is going up and down.

When people are stressed, they often take small shallow breaths, rather than breathing deeply. By thinking about and practising deep, steady breathing we can get a sense of calm and relaxation.

## Activity:

Find a quiet, relaxed place and set aside 10 to 20 minutes. Sit down and make yourself comfortable, in any position. Raise your rib cage and place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen. Focus on breathing gently in and out through your nose. Notice your upper chest and abdomen moving as you breathe. Allow the tension in your body to slip away with each breath that you take.

Practising relaxation and breathing exercises on a regular basis can help you to keep your stress levels to a more manageable level.

If you are experiencing a lot of stress, or severe stress, it can have a negative impact on your physical and mental health. Think about going to a health professional to work through this. You could start with your GP, or a psychologist may be able to assist you.

*"We are what we repeatedly do.  
Excellence, therefore, is not an act  
but a habit."*

*Aristotle*





## IN THE NEXT EDITION

**HEARING children's voices:**  
Respecting their views

**WHAT is Anxiety**

**CHILDREN'S Emotions**

**RECOGNISING Children's Emotions**

**STAFF Wellbeing**

**CHILDREN of Parents With a  
Mental Illness**

**THIS MAGAZINE BELONGS TO:**

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For more information please visit [www.himh.org.au/foundations](http://www.himh.org.au/foundations)



**hunter institute**  
of mental health



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This magazine is produced for children's services staff, with children's services staff. If you would like to contribute to this magazine by sharing your experiences with us please contact the institute at: [himh@hnehealth.nsw.gov.au](mailto:himh@hnehealth.nsw.gov.au)

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