



Healthy families

Healthy family relationships and safe and supportive home environments are central to children and young people's development and wellbeing.

Family diversity

Be You uses the term 'family' to encompass parents, carers, extended family members and other adults responsible for children and young people's care. Family members may not necessarily be biologically related or even live with the child or young person all the time. Some individuals may have one or several parents or carers, including grandparents, step-parents, same-sex parents, aunts and uncles, foster parents or adoptive parents.

A family can be made up of anyone a person considers to be their family.

For most individuals, the family environment and family relationships have the biggest impact on life outcomes. Positive family relationships can help children and young people flourish, but adverse experiences can negatively impact their wellbeing and subsequent development.

All families are unique. Supporting families involves recognising that they come in all shapes and sizes, with different needs and circumstances.

Research shows the quality of family relationships is more important than their size or composition. Whoever the family is made up of, they can build strong, positive relationships that promote wellbeing

and support children and young people's mental health.

Families matter

Childhood experiences have lasting impacts

And the relationships children and young people experience directly impact their wellbeing. Those provided with social, emotional and physical support are more likely to reach their full potential and experience better health outcomes in adulthood.

Families directly affect development and long-term wellbeing

The home environment and family functioning are the biggest influencers on development, with the learning environment the next most influential setting.

Healthy family relationships help children and young people feel secure and loved. This state impacts their brain development and sense of self (that is, a realistic sense of their skills and abilities, and where and how they fit into the world).

Positive relationships with family support individuals in building independence, responsibility, confidence and trust. They provide a place where these can be explored safely, where there's guidance and room

for mistakes. Families also give children and young people a model from which they learn about relationships and how to build connections throughout their lives. Children and young people who learn healthy relationship skills are more likely to experience positive peer relationships and grow up to become confident and resilient individuals.

Healthy families

What do these look like?

In healthy family relationships, people trust and rely on each other for support, love, affection and warmth. Families often share common goals and work together to reach those goals (for example, children and young people may help their families get the dinner dishes done so that everyone can relax).

Family members feel safe and connected to one another. Sometimes these relationships involve conflict, which is a normal part of family life. Conflict can occur between adults, children and young people. In healthy relationships, these conflicts are dealt with in a safe and respectful way.

Healthy family relationships mean that positive interactions outnumber the difficult times. Adults experiencing difficult life situations can provide learning opportunities in teaching and modelling coping strategies – children and young people shouldn't be burdened with stress, but it's helpful for them to see families successfully managing it with positive coping strategies.

The key qualities of a strong family unit identified by Australians in the Family Strengths Research Project were:

- **communication** – listening to each other and communicating with openness and honesty
- **togetherness** – sharing similar values and beliefs that create a sense of belonging and bonding
- **sharing activities** – spending time together doing things they enjoy (for example, sports, reading, camping or playing games)
- **affection** – showing affection and care regularly through words, hugs, kisses and thoughtfulness

- **support** – offering and asking for support, with family members knowing they will receive help, encouragement and reassurance from one another
- **acceptance** – understanding, respecting and appreciating each family member's unique qualities
- **commitment** – seeing family wellbeing as a first priority and acting accordingly with commitment and loyalty
- **resilience** – being able to tolerate difficulties and adapt to changing situations in positive ways.

The biggest challenges in family relationships were highlighted as communication breakdown, parenting issues and difficult relationship dynamics.

Risk factors in families

There are many reasons why some individuals are more vulnerable than others to developing behavioural difficulties and mental health issues. Risk factors for children and young people are things that increase the likelihood of mental health issues developing.

Risk factors within the family include:

- family conflict, instability or separation
- lack of involvement with children and young people, or inconsistent parenting
- family violence, child abuse or neglect
- mental health issues or substance abuse
- a serious illness or disability
- financial difficulties.

Protective factors in families

Protective factors decrease the chance of an individual experiencing mental health issues. These are related to good outcomes for children and young people, and serve to protect them if they're exposed to risk.

Protective factors within the family include:

- strong and stable family relationships – for example, consistent, caring relationships
- supportive parenting – for example, being available to listen to and talk with children and young people

- strong family values for example, a shared understanding of how to treat others
- consistency in routines and limits – for example, responding the same way to children or young people’s behaviour.

How you can support families

Many factors within the family impact a child or young person’s mental health and wellbeing. Because these factors occur within the home, as an educator, you may not always be directly aware of them. Acknowledging that there are multiple influences on children and young people’s wellbeing will help you better understand and assist an individual who you think may be experiencing a mental health issue. Your early learning service or school can support children and young people’s mental health through efforts to connect with and support families.

Build partnerships with families

- Value family members’ knowledge of each child or young person.
- Value the family’s contributions to, and role in, each child or young person’s life.
- Communicate freely and respectfully with families.
- Share insights and perspectives about children or young people.
- Engage in shared decision-making.

Communicate openly and build trust with families

Shared information helps everyone gain a deeper understanding of:

- how to best work together to support children and young people
- children and young people’s behaviour at home and in the learning environment
- the most effective ways to support learning
- what children and young people enjoy and what their strengths are
- resources for addressing social and emotional difficulties.

Working together with families

There are things families can do to actively build strong and healthy family relationships.

When working with families, you might like to share strategies that you have observed work well. For families wanting some support, you might suggest they try the following activities at home:

- Spending regular quality time together as a whole family and with each child or young person, even if it’s for a few minutes each day.
- Offering help and support to one another.
- Doing fun things and laughing together.
- Talking to each other.
- Telling each other what you like about your family (for example, “Dad, I like your hugs” or “Cara, you asked for that very politely”).
- Having family discussions to organise family events and to work through difficulties.
- Trying to include children and young people in decisions affecting them (for example, giving younger children choices to help them make a decision).
- Teaching and modelling problem-solving skills to children and young people so they become more confident at resolving their own conflicts.
- Getting support from family, friends or professionals when they need help juggling demands.

Children and young people need the support of a nurturing, well-functioning family. The strength of family relationships directly impacts their development and wellbeing.

As an educator, you’ll likely observe or hear about risk and protective factors in families. You are in a unique position to be able to sensitively offer support and resources for families to better support their children and young people.