Incorporating child mental health promotion and prevention activities into primary health care: Getting started

Background

Recent data indicates that 13% of Australian children experience mental health challenges, with an additional 22% considered vulnerable to developing such difficulties (Goodyear et al, 2024). This growing demand for mental health support is occurring in a context marked by significant access barriers and workforce pressures. These include shortages in the specialist workforce, uneven distribution of services, and limited confidence among professionals in identifying and supporting children with mental health needs (Goodyear et al, 2024).

Strengthening the capability of the primary health care sector to support children and families early in the course of a difficulty presents a powerful opportunity for reducing prevalence of child mental health issues. This approach aligns with both national and international policy recommendations and has the potential to significantly reduce the long-term burden of mental health issues.

Primary Health Networks (PHNs) can play a proactive role in improving child mental health outcomes by embedding and supporting promotion and prevention activities within their regions. These efforts can shift the trajectory of childhood mental disorders, reduce their prevalence, and ease future service demands and associated costs.

Child mental health promotion

Child mental health promotion focuses on healthy outcomes and protective factors that promote positive mental health in children. It starts before vulnerability or exposure to risk factors and is available to all families across the continuum of care. Child mental health promotion activities do not require a referral to a specialist service and should be offered as a part of core routine practice by services who have regular contact with children and families.

Examples:

– Primary healthcare practitioners (e.g. GPs or nurses) provide child mental health literacy information to parents during routine appointments with children (e.g. during health/development checks).

– Information about factors that support positive child mental health is available to parents in commonly accessed services.

Child mental health prevention

Preventive care for child mental health involves identifying and mitigating vulnerabilities before specific mental health challenges develop.

Examples:

– Primary healthcare practitioners routinely asking about children's social and emotional wellbeing and offer anticipatory guidance and support when a parent presents with an adult vulnerability.

– Adult-focused commissioned services offering parent-focused supports to service users who are parents of children aged 0-12 years.

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Reflective questions to consider

- Which services (if any) in your region currently provide child mental health literacy information as a part of a routine practice?

- How confident do practitioners in your region feel to undertake child mental health promotion and prevention activities?

- Which specific programs or services within your region offer preventative support to families of children aged 0-12 years impacted by adversities? Are there any population groups that are currently missing out on preventative care?

- Which universal services in your region do families access most frequently? Are there opportunities to embed health promotion and prevention activities within those services to increase access to support?

Incorporating child mental health promotion and prevention into primary care: Examples of activities and available resources

Improving access to and the quality of mental health supports (including self-guided support) is one of the key priority areas for PHNs. Despite the challenges currently existing within the broader system, PHNs can play a pivotal role in strengthening mental health outcomes for children by:

- **Mapping** service activities for promotion and prevention to identify gaps and opportunities for change within existing primary health care services.

- **Supporting capacity-building** through educational and quality improvement activities centred around helping the workforce to incorporate child mental health promotion and prevention activities into their work. This includes promoting access to ongoing professional development, mentoring and supervision that enables the workforce to strengthen their confidence in supporting infant and child mental health and family wellbeing.

- **Coordinating access to child mental health literacy resources** for all parents and carers in their regions. This can be done though PHN-led child mental health promotion campaigns, incorporating child mental health literacy resources into relevant Health Pathways, and increasing awareness amongst service providers of the importance and benefits of such activities.

- **Incorporating preventative strategies into adult focused services**, e.g. ensuring that commissioned service providers routinely ask clients whether they are parents or carers of children aged 0–12 years. This simple inquiry opens the door to understanding family context and identifying opportunities for early support.

- Ensure that the content of Health Pathways and other clinical information platforms provide clear practice guidance on how practitioners can support children and families while they wait for another health care service, or instead of a referral.

Resources to support you in this work

In collaboration with practitioners, families and academics, Emerging Minds develops a wide range of resources which will support you in this work, available freely on our website. Select from the curated list below to get started.

- Family resources (these include resources designed to support families experiencing challenging circumstances) can be shared through general practices, community centres and embedded into relevant Health Pathways.

- Practitioner resources can be promoted to services in the region and used for capacity building. PERCS conversation guide, GP resources, resources for primary care nurses and organisation learning dashboards are examples of resources that might be particularly helpful for the primary health care sector.

- Organisational resources and quality improvement tools, e.g. Focus tool, Leaders toolkit or organisational checklist can be used to plan and track organisational quality improvement, service design and planning,

For more information about organisational activities that support child mental health, please contact info@emergingminds.com.au or visit Emerging Minds website.

Reference

Goodyear, M., Taylor, E., Marsh, C., Scharling-Gamba, K., Mclean, S., Burn, M., & Morgan, B. (2024). *Scoping child mental health workforce capability: Final report.* Emerging Minds.

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