

## While you wait: Suggestions for service providers to support children and their families who are on waiting lists

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Service providers will often need to refer families and children to other services for specialist assessment or care. Unfortunately, waiting lists for these services are quite common, which can cause further stress for families as they continue to deal with the status quo.

The risk with long waiting times can be that what might have presented to you as a small problem, escalates into a crisis. Whilst being on a waiting list is not ideal, there are some things that service providers can do to support children and their families during this waiting period. These simple suggestions can help families to plan and build-in alternative arrangements.

This article was inspired by research into barriers and facilitators to early childhood mental health pathways in the Barwon region in southwest Victoria. One of the barriers identified was long wait times for appointments, and the following practices were suggested by professionals interviewed for this research.

### Engaging parents and carers

#### Keep the communication consistent

Be consistent in your contact with families and the other service providers and make sure you follow-through. For example, if you planned to contact a family on Friday, then contact them on Friday, even if you don't have any extra information to report.

Making contact following an appointment provides reassurance for a family that they are still on your radar, and provides an opportunity to assess how things are going. It can be a chance for parents to ask you questions that didn't occur to them during their



initial appointment, and an opportunity to collaborate on current management plans for their child. If, during this conversation, you find that issues have escalated, then you might consider arranging a follow-up appointment and/or additional supports, such as therapeutic or online support groups. Other options are self-directed guides for parents, or increasing their knowledge via good quality resources (see following).

You might also encourage parents to follow-up on the referral appointment themselves, or offer to follow-up for them if they don't feel confident to do so. Remind parents that they can and should advocate for their child, and should trust their instincts on their child's wellbeing

#### Remind parents that they can and should advocate for their child, and should trust their instincts on their child's wellbeing

If parents notice changes in the child's behaviour or mood, tell them they should feel confident in calling your service to seek extra support or advice. Sometimes parents can feel like they are being a burden or an imposition on the service by calling for extra support.

Remind them that it is your job to assist them.

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## Knowledge is power

As a health provider, you are in a position of power: to a parent, you might seem to have all the knowledge, which is why they are there to see you. But encouraging parents and carers to improve their knowledge will help them to have some agency over and understanding of the situation, and to contribute to developing a response.

Sometimes in appointments, information can be hard to absorb. It can be helpful to develop a fact sheet to capture the main points you cover in conversations.

You can also encourage parents and carers to do their own research. It is important, however, to advise parents to access information from reliable sources, such as government websites and registered health organisations. Refer to this article for more information:

[Emerging Minds: Sharing information with parents about children's social and emotional wellbeing: A step-by-step approach](#)

If you have suggestions for reputable websites, videos or other information about the issue or topic, then make sure you share these with parents.

Examples of parent guides and other useful resources include:

- Childhood anxiety

[Emerging Minds: Supporting parents of 4–8-year-old children with mild to moderate anxiety](#)

[Emerging Minds: Supporting parents of pre-teen children with mild-moderate anxiety](#)

- Autism spectrum disorder

[Autism Awareness Australia: Early years](#)

- Early childhood mental health

[Beyond Blue: Mental health issues](#)

[Beyond Blue: Mental health conditions in children](#)

## Peer support

Encourage parents to reach out to other families who may be having similar experiences. There are numerous parent forums and online support groups to help facilitate these conversations. It's wise to ensure that these groups have clearly defined boundaries and are well administered.

## Talk with the school

Encourage parents, with their child's permission, to talk with their school or kindergarten. This way, the school can be also part of the support and care measures that have been put in place.

Make sure there is a safe person at school that your child knows they can go to if they are feeling anxious or need to talk to someone.

## Including the child

Involving children in their own health care can help to improve their understanding and give them a sense of control over what is happening. Parents and carers could support children with the following suggestions:

### Peer Support

If a child is old enough, suggest that parents facilitate peer support opportunities for the child, too. These could be online, or there may be other local support groups running. Meeting other children with similar experiences can reduce feelings of isolation and provide opportunities to learn from others.

### Education and knowledge

Are there books, videos, movies or social media clips (e.g. YouTube) that could help a child to understand what is happening for them? Engaging with media can help children see that they are not alone, and can help them express their feelings in conversations with family and friends.

### Find out what the child thinks they need

What makes them feel safe and in control? Support the child to be aware of their own mental health: let them know that their feelings are important and take them seriously.

Encourage activities that promote mental health, such as exercise, good eating, listening to music regular sleep and mindfulness activities. Helpful mindfulness resources and activities include those on the Positive Psychology website.

Alternatively, perhaps there are some new skills a child can try: learning to cook, draw or play an instrument, or playing a new game.

## Finally

### Focus on the positives

It is easy to focus on the 'issue', especially if negative behaviours are escalating. It might be helpful, however, to prompt parents to remind their child about the reasons they are liked and loved – letting them know that they represent much more than just a 'problem' to be solved.

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