

# Exploring, assessing and formulating: Common practice challenges in child mental health

RACGP and Emerging Minds





## Dr James Best

GP Host

RACGP chair, Child and Young Persons Health

# Acknowledgement of Country

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands from where each of us are joining this webinar tonight.

I wish to pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.



# Partner



Advancing the mental health of  
infants, children and adolescents

[emergingminds.com.au](http://emergingminds.com.au)

@EmergingMindsAU

# Poll

Had you heard of Emerging Minds before registering for this webinar?

# Poll

Have you used the Emerging Minds website resources or previously completed an Emerging Minds eLearning course?

# Who are we?



Dr James Best  
RACGP Chair, Child and Young  
Persons Health



Vanya Libardi  
Lived Experience



Dr Cathy Andronis  
RACGP Chair,  
Psychological Medicine



Dr Nick Kowalenko  
Child and adolescent  
Psychiatrist

# Learning outcomes

1. Discuss diagnostic and biopsychosocial formulations in the context of child mental health
2. Outline the benefits of a whole-of-practice approach in supporting families and children.



# Case Study





Vanya Libardi  
Lived Experience and  
Emerging Minds Family  
Partner

# Exploring, Assessing and Formulating

## A parent's perspective

Vanya Libardi – Emerging Minds Family Partner

Mother of two



Exploring  
Parental Emotions  
The emotional rollercoaster of parenthood

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- Love, joy and happiness
- Excitement
- Contentment
- Confusion
- Worry
- Fear
- Frustration
- Anxiety
- Anger
- Depression
- Denial
- Despair
- Hopelessness
- Helplessness
- Trauma

## Exploring Childhood Emotions

The emotional rollercoaster of childhood  
(as expressed by my children)

- “Why was I born this way?”
- “What’s wrong with me?”
- “Why am I so different from other kids?”
- “I hate being weird, why can’t I be like them?”
- “Why does my brother get all your attention?”
- “Why do I have to see another doctor?”

### And on a more positive note:

- “Thank you for looking after me mummy”
- “I love how you understand me mum”
- “I know you are doing the best you can”
- “I love it when we all do something together and my brother joins in”





## Exploring the relationship between patients and GPs

### The Parent and Child

- We are the experts on our children
- We are with them 24/7
- We know when something isn't quite right
- Whether we are new parents or not, parental instincts and concerns need to be taken into account
- We appreciate the feeling of autonomy and that our voices are heard
- Sometimes we just need reassurance that we are doing okay

### The General Practitioner

- Listen to the parent and child, make us feel validated
- Make observations – both overtly and covertly
  - There may be more going on 'behind the scenes'

# What Children may think of General Practitioners and how to make an appointment successful

- “What are they going to do to me?”
  - Suggestion for GPs - Explain clearly and in age appropriate language what you will be doing during the appointment
- “I’m scared of needles” – (negative depiction of doctors, vaccinations, blood tests)
  - Suggestion - Assure the child that they are safe and not every appointment will involve needles
- “I don’t want to talk to a stranger”
  - Suggestion - Build rapport with both the parent and the child, this way they will be more willing to communicate what is really going on
- “You both talk about me like I’m not even there”
  - Suggestion - Include the child in conversation, they know what they are going through and appreciate having their voice heard
- “I didn’t understand what they were saying about me”
  - Suggestion - Recap the conversations held during the appointment, this way if the parent or child is unsure about something they can get clarification
- “I liked that doctor, they made me laugh”
  - Suggestion - Try and find a way to connect with the child, comment on the character on their t-shirt, ask what their favourite thing to do is, smile and be welcoming
- “He/she was cool, can we see that doctor again?”
- “I’m happy we came to see the doctor, now I’m going to get better”
- “The doctor made me feel safe because I knew what the appointment would be like”



## Assessment


### The emotional rollercoaster of diagnosis The Parent and Child

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- Apprehension
- Anger
- Confusion
- Denial
- Doubt
- Fear
- Frustration
- Judgement
- Regret
- Remorse
- Resentment
- Relief
- Acceptance





A young girl in an orange tank top is laughing joyfully, her eyes closed and mouth wide open. She is wearing a necklace and a striped strap over her shoulder. The tank top has the text "Guys 74 BEACH & FUN" printed on it. In the background, other children are visible, some looking towards the camera and others looking away. The setting appears to be outdoors, possibly at a beach or a park, with trees and a white fence in the distance. The overall atmosphere is bright and cheerful.

## Assessment and Formulation

### How the General Practitioner can assist

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- Empathy
- Understanding
- Guidance
- A holistic approach
- Patience
- Parent/child focused
- Reassurance
- Resources
- Referrals
- Support
- Advocacy



Dr Cathy Andronis  
RACGP Chair, Psychological Medicine

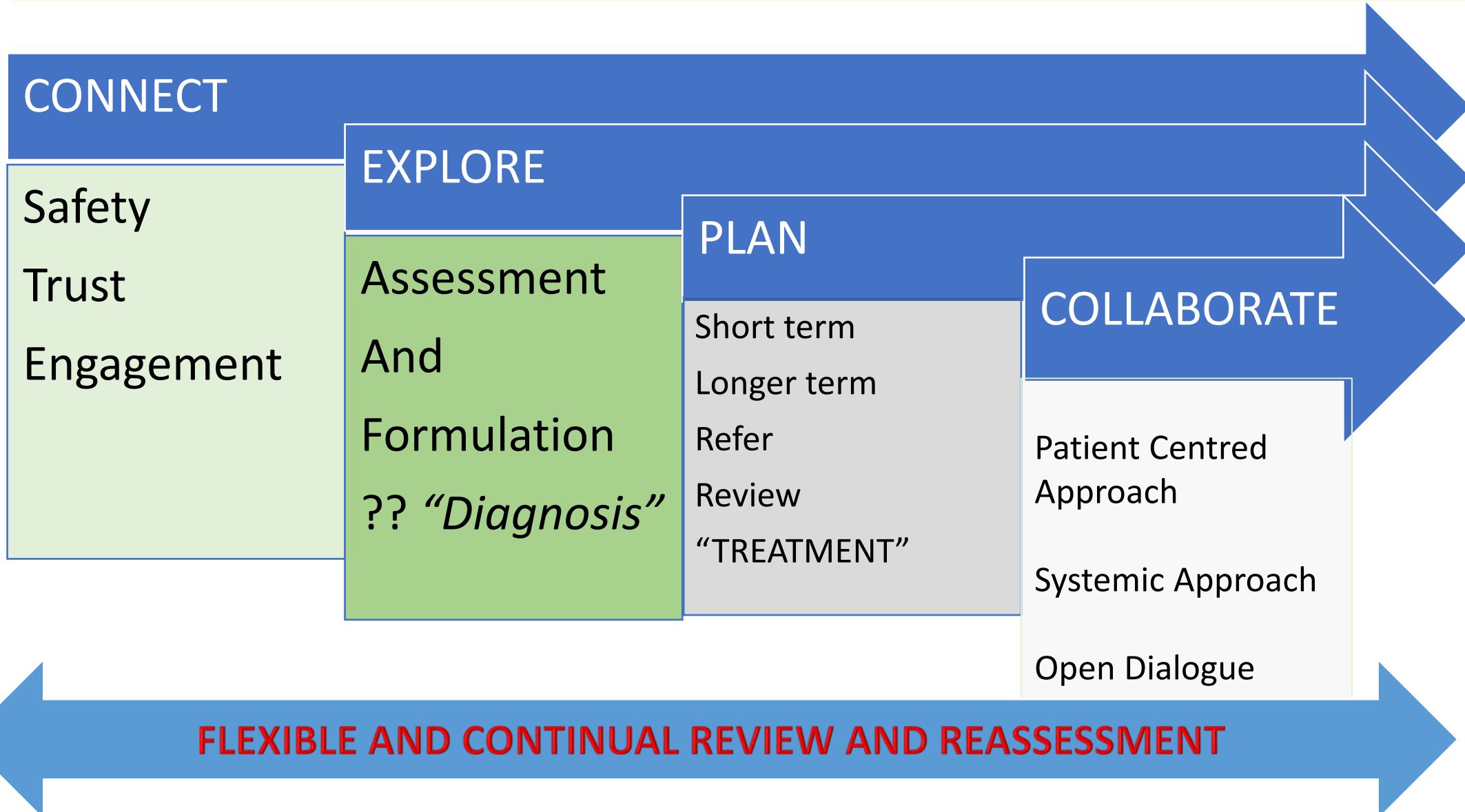
# Exploring, Assessing and Formulating:

A GP approach to the challenges in child mental health

Dr Cathy Andronis  
May 2023

# Understanding children and families

## An Interactive Process



# Sense of Safety in the Consultation

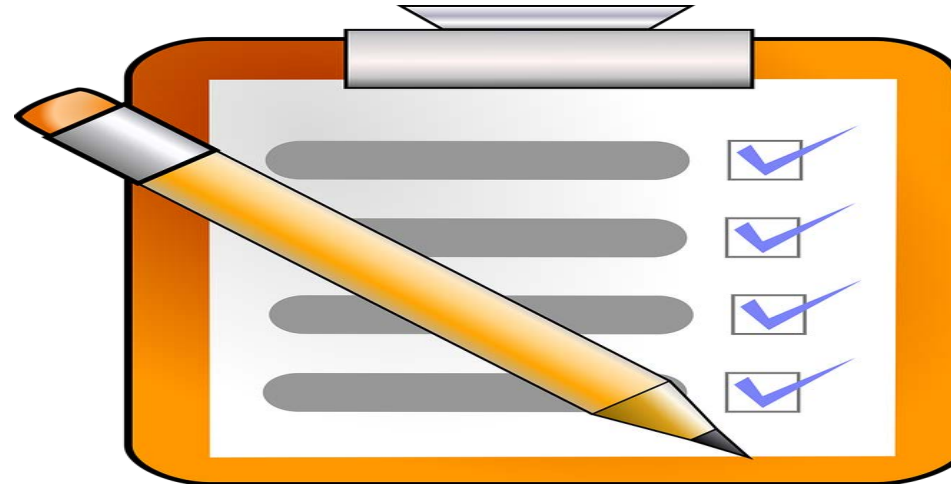
## HYPERAROUSAL

Fight and flight  
Sympathetic drive  
Preoccupied

Window of Tolerance  
Capacity to think and plan  
And Interact mindfully  
Feel **SAFE**  
**ANS balanced**

## HYPOAROUSAL

Freeze state-  
Parasympathetic drive  
Spaced out, dissociated  
Depressed, not present



# EXPLORING “*the problem*”

## The GP Consultation

WHAT'S  
REALLY  
GOING ON  
HERE

WHO'S  
THE  
PATIENT?



Imke's got it in for  
me!

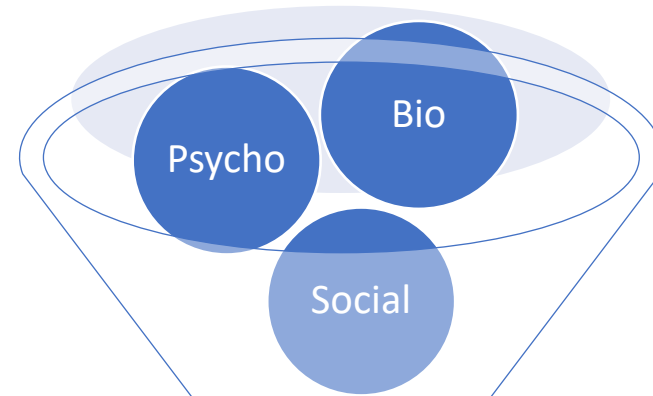
Please fix  
my child,  
there's  
something  
wrong with  
him



# Assessment....Diagnosis....Formulation.....

Mental Health  
**ASSESSMENT**  
Requires a  
**BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL**  
Approach

*"The GP  
Perspective"*



**Hypotheses**

## **DIAGNOSIS**

Symptoms grouped and categorised  
Using a  
DISEASE MODEL  
\*may need for access to services

## **FORMULATION**

Theory of how problems developed and how change could occur  
*\*\*may or may not include a diagnosis\*\**



# Mental health assessment: the 4 “P”s

Factors	BIOLOGICAL	PSYCHOLOGICAL	SOCIAL
PREDISPOSING			
PRECIPITATING			
PERPETUATING			
PROTECTIVE			

The processes of developing a **Formulation** are what we GPs usually do **Intuitively**.

We explore holistically, over a number of consultations and often know the family including other members. We “fill in the gaps” during our longitudinal involvement with them and understand them better.

Having a regular trusted GP correlates with better outcomes for patients in the longer term.

It’s likely that you have multiple patients and families in your practice where you could fill in this “formal” form and sometimes it might be particularly helpful to you and the family to **Explicitly** do so.



# Mental health assessment of Children

## **RESOURCES**

### **GPMHSC**

[https://gpmhsc.org.au/getattachment/5096408e-b25b-41c1-af1a-420da2f2a901/patient-wellbeing-assessment-and-recovery-plan\\_children-and-adolescents.pdf](https://gpmhsc.org.au/getattachment/5096408e-b25b-41c1-af1a-420da2f2a901/patient-wellbeing-assessment-and-recovery-plan_children-and-adolescents.pdf)

**Initial Assessment and Referral Decision Support Tool** <https://iar-dst.online/#/>

Recommended Level of Care (child version)



[Domain 1 - Symptom Severity and Distress \(Primary Domain\)](#)

[Domain 2 - Risk of Harm \(Primary Domain\)](#)

[Domain 3 - Functioning \(Primary Domain\)](#)

[Domain 4 - Impact of Co-Existing Conditions \(Primary Domain\)](#)

[Domain 5 - Treatment and Recovery History \(Contextual Domain\)](#)

[Domain 6 - Social and Environmental Stressors \(Contextual Domain\)](#)

[Domain 7 - Family and Other Supports \(Contextual Domain\)](#)

[Domain 8 - Engagement and Motivation \(Contextual Domain\)](#)

**Emerging Minds: CHILD (child, home, interactions, links, development) tool of domains**

<https://d2p3kdr0nr4o3z.cloudfront.net/content/uploads/2021/10/27132800/CHILD-tool-summary-blank-0-5.pdf>

# Challenges for the GP in child mental health presentations

- **Connect and Engage *before* Assessing and Managing- Create a Safe Space.**
- Don't miss a **Critical** or **Useful** Diagnosis - can intervene early.
- **“Mother knows best”** – validate
- **“Dr Google”**- ‘roll with the resistance’ - be curious
- **Maintaining Safety**
- **Engagement of family /carers, identified and unidentified patient(s)**
- **Why now?**
- **Undifferentiated** problems- managing **Uncertainty**
- **Transparency** - don't be afraid to say you **don't know**
- **Allow time** – longitudinal approach



Dr Nick Kowalenko  
Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist

# *Childhood Mental Health Assessment: exploring, assessing and formulating*

*Dr Nick Kowalenko*



## This presentation will include:

- Introduction: role of General Practitioners in early intervention
- Wellbeing continuum
- General Practitioner's Assessment for CAMH
- The Biopsychosocial approach
- The Biopsychosocial formulation



## Section 1

# Introduction: role of General Practitioners in early intervention

# Common Mental Health difficulties: Risk factors, and access

Age	Prevalence	Multiple risk factors indicative of requiring specialist mental health support (3+)	Current level of access to specialist mental health services
0-4	<p>No current data</p> <p>A range of international studies indicate up to 16-18% meet levels of dysfunction highly suggestive of diagnosis</p>	<p>16.1% (0-1 yrs)</p> <p>12.1% (2-3 yrs)</p>	<p>MBS Any provider 0.9% (0-4 years)</p> <p>ATAPS 0.3% (0-11 years)</p> <p>State</p> <p>Ambulatory 0.4% (0-4 years)</p>
5-11	<p>13.6% meet criteria for diagnosis</p>	<p>19.2% (4-5 yrs)</p> <p>25.2% (6-7 yrs)</p> <p>28.9% (8-9 yrs)</p> <p>32.8% (10-11 yrs)</p>	<p>MBS Any provider 5.7% (5-11 years)</p> <p>ATAPS 0.3% (0-11 years)</p> <p>State</p> <p>Ambulatory 1.4% (5-11 years)</p>

Guy, S., Furber, G., Leach, M., & Segal, L. (2016). How many children in Australia are at risk of adult mental illness? Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 50(12), 1146– 1160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004867416640098>

# Access to Services

## National children's mental Health & Wellbeing strategy



### Access to services



**53%**

of children with mental illness used **health services** for emotional or behavioural struggles<sup>1</sup>

The following were the most commonly seen health professionals:

- **General practitioner**..... **35.0%**
- **Psychologist** ..... **23.9%**
- **Paediatrician** ..... **21.0%**
- **Counsellors or family therapist** ..... **20.7%**



**40%**

of children with mental illness used or attended **services provided by their school** for emotional or behavioural struggles<sup>1</sup>



Rates of mental illness were higher in those **living outside of greater capital cities** (12.6% for greater capital cities, 16.2% for those outside) but service use was similar (56.7% for those in greater capital cities, 55.1% for those outside)<sup>1</sup>

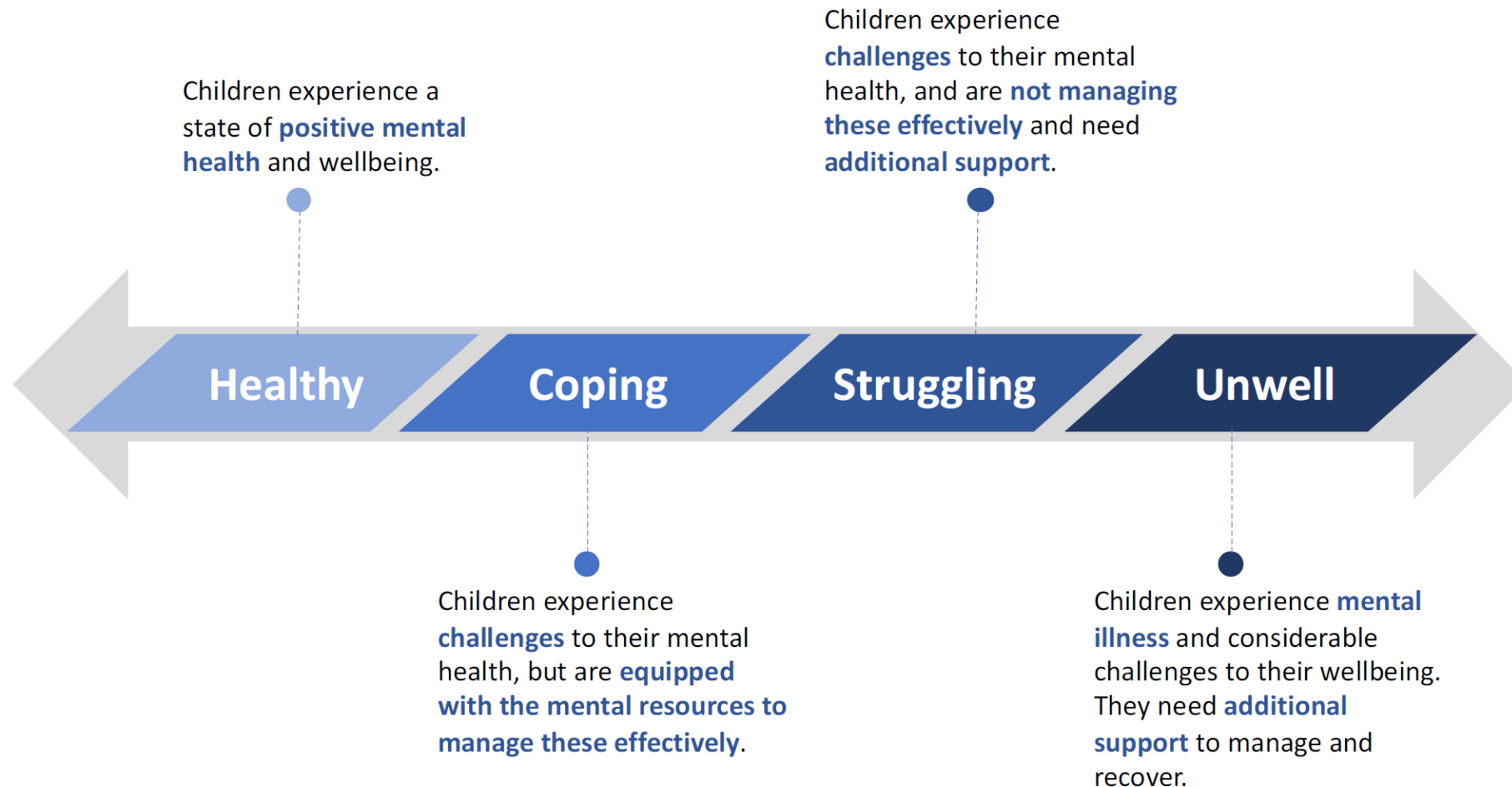
<sup>1</sup> Lawrence D, Johnson S, Hafekost J, Boterhoven De Haan K, Sawyer M, Ainley J, Zubrick SR (2015) The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents. Report on the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing. Department of Health, Canberra.



## Section 2

# Wellbeing continuum

# Wellbeing continuum: National children's mental health & Wellbeing strategy



*Image source: Draft National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, Draft December 2020, p. 6*



## **Polls**

Where do you think Imke would sit on this spectrum?  
Thriving, some challenges and coping, struggling and unwell

Are you confident doing a biopsychosocial assessment?

## Section 3

# General Practitioner's Assessment for CAMH



CONNECT

ENGAGE

FOLLOW UP  
AND REVIEW

ASSESS AND  
FORMULATE

PLAN AND  
MANAGE



EXPLORE



PLAN



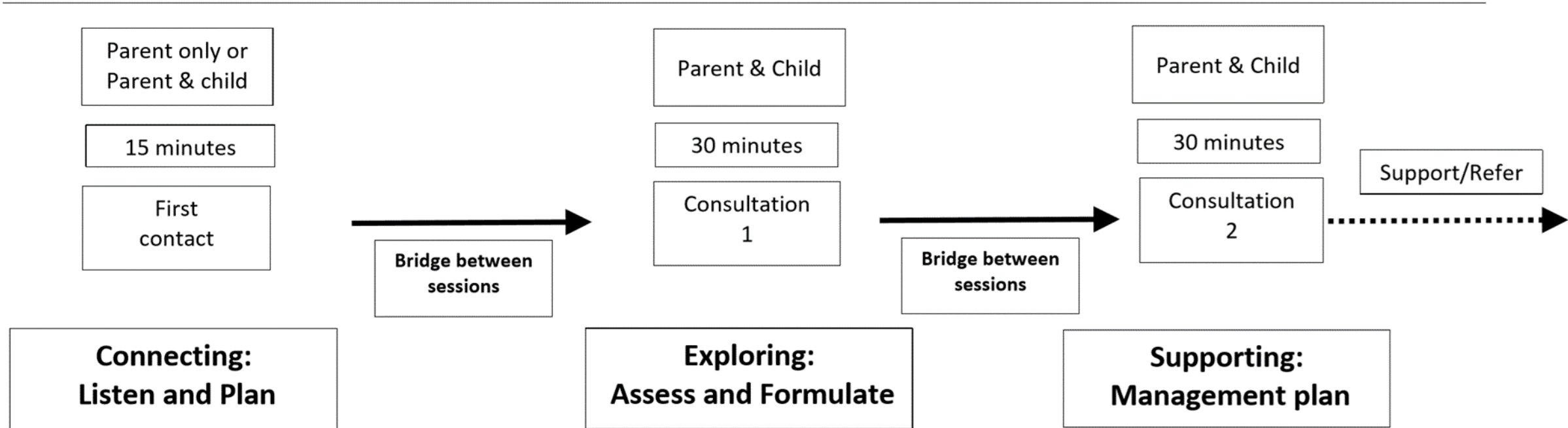
COLLABORATE



# Explore: Assess and Formulate

# GP consultation structure for GP consultations in child mental health

## Framework



## Section 4

# The Biopsychosocial approach

Psychodevelopmental



Physical



Spiritual/cultural



Social



# A biopsychosocial approach



**POLL: A mum wondering if her child “has it in for her” might be experiencing:**

1. Low mood and guilt with low confidence
2. Conflict with her partner
3. A developmentally challenging child
4. Parenting skills difficulties
5. Adverse impact of previous abuse
6. Common cognitions of motherhood

Which one of these are you most likely to encounter in your practice setting?





# Exploring concerns with the parent: Child 360 App

**Emerging  
Minds.**

National  
Workforce  
Centre for Child  
Mental Health

## Section 5

# The Biopsychosocial formulation

# Biopsychosocial formulation

	Biological	Psychological	Sociocultural
Predisposing	Neurodevelopmental issue!	Jen's belief about Child Mental Health	Experience of parenting
Precipitating		Mother – child dyad relationship	
Perpetuating		Emotional immaturity/ dysregulation	Amiri, Jen & Imke?
Protective			Amiri, Jen & Imke?

# Biopsychosocial assessment and formulation

*Learning outcome 1: Discuss diagnostic and biopsychosocial formulations in child mental health:*

Depends on:

- a) good clinical skills
- b) appropriate biopsychosocial assessment
- c) structuring GP's synthesis of problems, and strengths
- d) informing comprehensive holistic care & management plan





# Learning Outcomes 2:

## Challenges

1. Stigma
2. Parents' tolerance & attitudes
3. Skills & Confidence
4. Access and timeliness of next steps



# Biopsychosocial formulation & Collaborative care planning: the process

Applying biopsychosocial formulation to child mental health assessments in general practice assists case planning:

## GP comments

*1. Engaging the patient ensured her involvement in the plan and hence its success.*

*2. What's important is keeping attuned with how our formulation lands with the patient and being flexible/collaborative in time*

Mental health is a vital component of a child's development and lifelong wellbeing. These **online courses** have been developed to build your knowledge of child mental health and the opportunities you have to improve child outcomes.

**Supporting children and families in general practice after a natural disaster or community trauma**

1HR

This course is for GPs working with families and children affected by natural disasters such as fire, floods or storms, or by community trauma events.

**Supporting children's resilience in general practice**

3HRS

This course provides GPs with a conversation guide to assist their work with patients as parents, as well as a rationale for why GPs should conduct preventative conversations with parents about their child's mental health.

**A GP framework for child mental health assessment (5-12 years)**

6HRS

This course is for GPs who wish to increase their skills in assessing, managing and supporting children (5-12 years) with mental health difficulties.

**A GP framework for infant and early childhood mental health assessment (0-5 years)**

6HRS

This course is for GPs who wish to increase their skills in assessing, managing and supporting infants and young children (0-5 years) with mental health difficulties.

**Supporting resources**

The following resources support the knowledge gained throughout the courses we've recommended. Make sure to save your resources by adding them to your Favourites when you're logged in.



**GP Toolkit**

This toolkit contains resources for you including accredited online courses, parent resources, assessment tools, webinars produced by RACGP and podcasts.



**Supporting child mental health in general practice Podcast**

In this episode, discover how to effectively use the GP-patient relationship to start conversations with parents about their children's social and emotional wellbeing.



**Infant and child mental health: Exploring, assessing and formulating Webinar**

This webinar explores the features of a biopsychosocial assessment and formulation with children aged 0-5, its importance in supporting child mental health and its contribution to mental health treatment planning.



**How can GPs support children's mental health? In focus**

General practitioners are in a unique position to notice and respond to early signs of mental health concerns, and to promote positive mental health for infants and children. Learn more about how you can help.



**PERCS Conversation Guide for GPs Guide**

The PERCS Conversation Guide is designed to support collaborative, respectful conversations between GPs and parent-patients. It also includes example questions to help GPs explore the important domains within a child's life.

# Additional Emerging Minds Resources



# Emerging Minds

## General Practice pathway

Mental health is a vital component of a child's development and lifelong wellbeing.

These online courses have been developed to build your knowledge of child mental health and the opportunities you have to improve child outcomes.

**Emerging Minds has a range of toolkits, practice papers, webinar recordings, and podcasts for GPs.**

[learning.emergingminds.com.au](https://learning.emergingminds.com.au)

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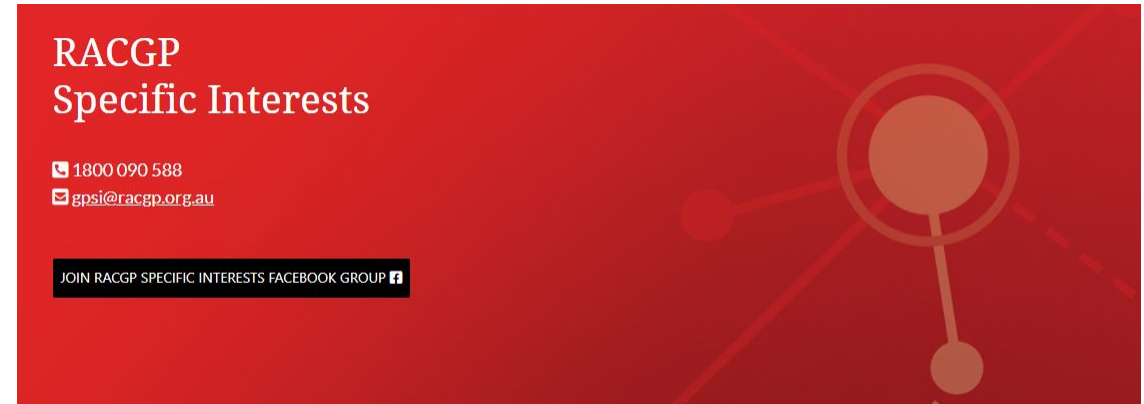
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# RACGP

Join the Child and Young Person's Health  
Specific Interest Group  
GPSI@racgp.org.au

A red banner with white text and a network diagram. The text includes the RACGP logo, the title 'Specific Interests', contact information (1800 090 588 and gpsi@racgp.org.au), and a button to join the Facebook group. The background features a network diagram with a central node and several connected nodes.

RACGP  
Specific Interests

☎ 1800 090 588  
✉ [gpsi@racgp.org.au](mailto:gpsi@racgp.org.au)

JOIN RACGP SPECIFIC INTERESTS FACEBOOK GROUP 

<https://www.racgp.org.au/the-racgp/faculties/specific-interests/become-a-member>

# Q&A and panelist discussion

Please type your question in the Q&A box below or  
upvote a favourite question



Advancing the  
mental health  
of infants, children  
and adolescents