

GUIDE, IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS AND TEMPLATES





# Family Partnerships Guide for early childhood educators






**Emerging  
Minds.**

National  
Workforce  
Centre for Child  
Mental Health



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# Getting started with the Family Partnerships Toolkit

The Family Partnerships Toolkit is a professional development training package. It is a set of self-guided resources designed to be facilitated in your setting by your early learning service's leadership team, as you implement the **Family Partnerships Practice Model** as your whole of service approach to family partnerships.

The training package is made up of both group learning (facilitated by your early learning services' leadership team) and individual learning (which involves self-directed online courses).

The toolkit includes:

- Family Partnerships Guide (this handbook)
- [An introduction to family partnerships for educators online course](#)
- [The Family Partnerships Practice Model: A guide for early learning service educators online course](#)
- A suite of implementation tools:
  - » Introducing the Family Partnerships Practice Model staff workshop
  - » Creating safe and inclusive spaces tool
  - » Family partnerships conversation tool
  - » Referral tool for educators

Explore the [Family Partnerships Toolkit](#) online

Continue through this guide for suggestions and advice on how to apply the toolkit materials in your early learning service.

## Family Partnerships Guide

This guide is designed to support the implementation of the **Family Partnerships Practice Model** in early childhood education and care settings. Think of it as your handbook, with all the key information required for facilitating and participating in the training and implementing the model in your service.

The guide takes you through a process that supports the use of the model across a whole service. It provides information and advice that will support you and your colleagues to:

- complete the partnerships training
- plan and prepare for how you will use the model in your service
- roll out the model
- reflect on how successfully the model is supporting family partnerships in your setting and what improvements could be made.

## Who is this guide for?

This guide is for early childhood educators using the Family Partnerships Practice Model, including **education leaders** (likely directors and those in coordination and leadership roles) who will be responsible for facilitating this implementation package with their staff, and **individual educators** who will be using the model in their engagements with families.

If you are an **individual educator**, please refer to instructions with a **blackboard icon**



If you are an **education leader**, please refer to instructions with a **flag icon**



## What is in this guide?

This guide covers everything you need to know to implement the Family Partnerships Practice Model in your early learning service, including:

- The three-phase process for using the model across a whole service
- Details of the four-step Family Partnerships Practice Model
- Extra content that explores key topics (snapshots)
- Implementation tools that you can take and use in your work

## Implementation tools

Throughout this guide we refer to a series of implementation tools that provide a practical support for some of the activities and actions required to implement the model. These are optional additional tools for you to use if you feel you need more support to implement some of the steps.

1. Introducing the Family Partnerships Practice Model staff workshop
2. Creating safe and inclusive spaces tool
3. Family partnerships conversation tool
4. Referral tool for educators

**Implementation tools** within this document are represented by the **wrench icon**



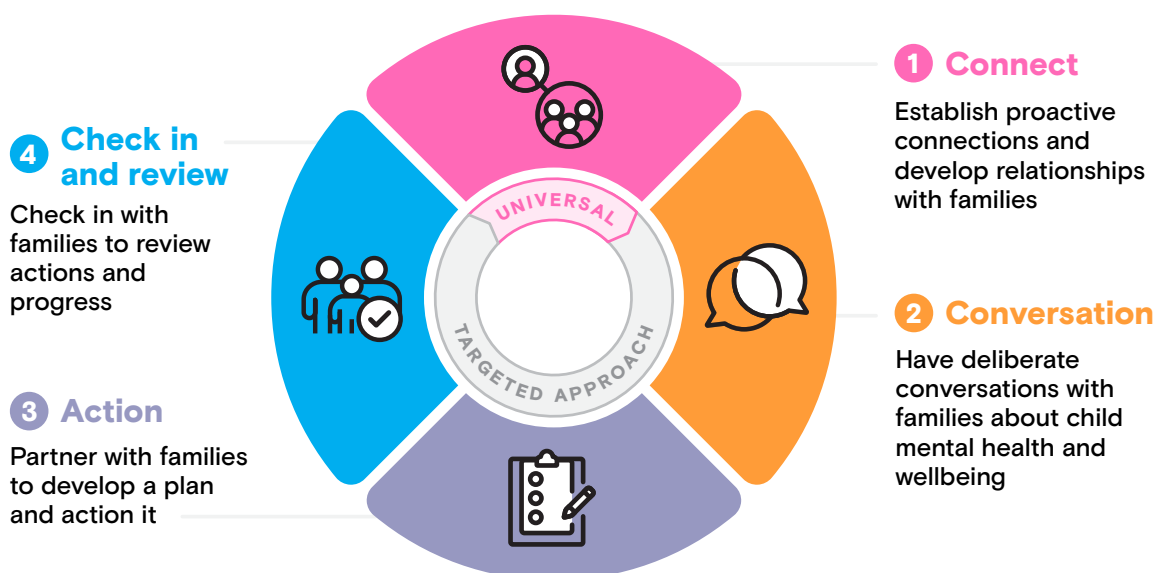
## Introducing the Family Partnerships Practice Model

The toolkit centres around the Family Partnerships Practice Model; a four-step model which provides strategies and guidance on setting up, implementing and maintaining effective family partnerships in your early learning service. The model is designed to improve your skills and capacity for holding sensitive and respectful conversations with families about children's mental health and wellbeing.

The four steps are:

1. **Connect:** Establish proactive connections and developing relationships with families
2. **Conversation:** Have deliberate conversations with families about child mental health and wellbeing
3. **Action:** Partner with families to develop a plan and action it
4. **Check in and review:** Check in with the family to review actions and progress

**FIGURE 1** The Family Partnerships Practice Model



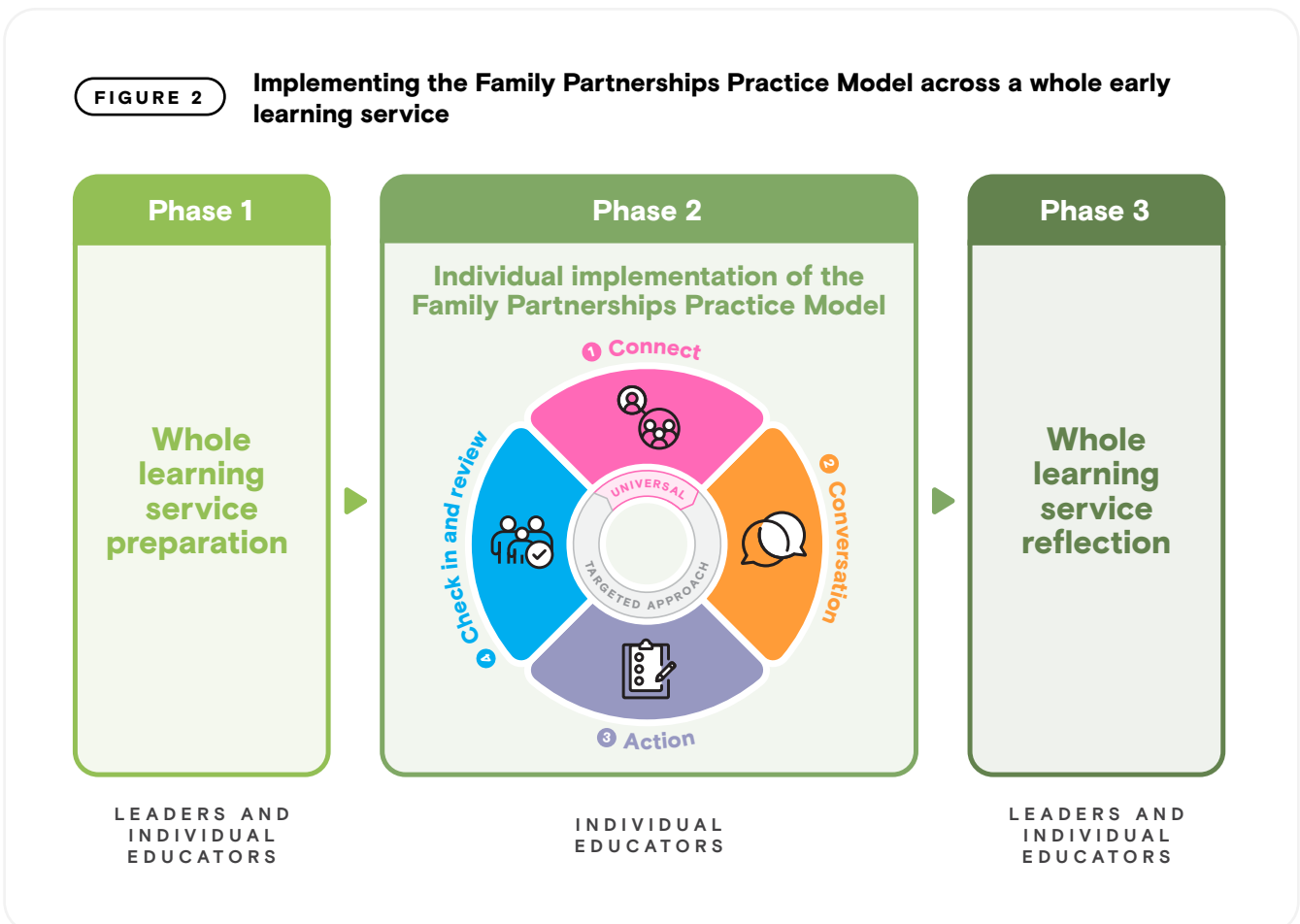
## Using the model across a whole early learning service

The Family Partnerships Practice Model is designed to be used across a whole early learning service. By working together as a whole staff to consider how your school conducts family partnerships, it is possible to create a school-wide culture that supports partnerships, and a set of processes and practices that ensures consistent implementation of effective partnerships for all families.

The process for whole service implementation is broken down into three key phases:

- 1. Preparation (whole-service, leader-led):** This phase is led by your service's leadership team and involves introducing the model and the professional development to staff, allocating time to complete the online Emerging Minds training courses, and planning and preparing how your school will embed the model.
- 2. Implementation (individual educators, supported by leaders):** Once you have completed the online training and planned your service's approach, it's time to get started with implementing family partnerships. All the information you need about implementing the four-step model can be found in the online learning courses and is reinforced in this guide so you can refer to it as often as needed. This phase of implementing the model is led by educators working with families and supported by service leaders.
- 3. Reflection (whole-service, leader-led):** This phase is about reflecting on and determining how well the model is working at a whole-service level, and identifying areas of improvement or further support. It is led by educational leaders and focused on facilitating engagement in reflective practice to encourage continuous learning about family partnerships.

The following diagram (Figure 2) shows how these phases fit together with the individual implementation of the model by educators within your service.



## Glossary

For the purposes of this guide, the term **parent** encompasses the biological and adoptive parents of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up a primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

**Social and emotional wellbeing** refers to the way a person thinks and feels about themselves and others. It incorporates behavioural and emotional strengths and is a facet of child development (AIHW, 2012).

In broad terms, social and emotional wellbeing is the foundation for physical and mental health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is a holistic concept which results from a network of relationships between individuals, family, kin and community. It also recognises the importance of connection to Land, culture, spirituality and ancestry, and how these affect the individual (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, p. 6).

Social and emotional wellbeing is also used by some people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, who may have differing concepts of mental health and mental illness (Everymind, 2020).

**Social and emotional development** involves the development of skills required to:

- identify and understand one's feelings
- read and understand the emotional states of other people
- manage strong emotions and how they are expressed
- regulate behaviour
- develop empathy
- establish and maintain relationships (AIHW, 2009).

**Educator** is a collective term used to represent education professionals working across the entire education sector. This includes early childhood education and care, primary and secondary schools, out of school hours care (OSHC) and pre-service training.

**Family partnerships** are the relationships between families (parents, carers, grandparents, foster carers and/or kinship carers) and educators that are centred on supporting the mental health, development and overall wellbeing of a child.



# Family partnerships – a snapshot of evidence and practice

## What are family partnerships?

In this guide, family partnerships are defined as the relationships between families (i.e. children, parents, grandparents, foster carers and/or kinship carers) and educators that are centred on supporting the wellbeing of a child.

A child's relationships at home, in the early learning setting and in the community, along with the broader social and economic context they live in all have an impact on their mental health, development and overall wellbeing.

Most infants, children and young people experience positive mental health if their relationships and environment are responsive to their needs and safe and supportive for their development. They can cope effectively with life's challenges, express and regulate a range of emotions, form close and secure attachments, and confidently explore their world (to an extent appropriate to their stage of development).

As an educator, you're in a unique position to shape children's mental health and development by creating safe, supportive and nurturing environments. Furthermore, you can also monitor changes in children's behaviour and wellbeing due to the amount of time you spend with them at child care or preschool. This makes you well-suited to observe, communicate and provide support to families as part of your ongoing care of a child or young person.

Research shows that a partnership approach between families and educators – characterised by reciprocal communication and an open and positive relationship – can help to improve children's wellbeing (including their mental health, learning and development) (Barton et al., 2021; Garbacz & Weist, 2019). This is what is known as a 'family partnership' approach.

Family partnerships involve creating a shared understanding of the different areas of a child's life, to better understand all the different factors that might be affecting their wellbeing, and to provide more targeted and timely support when needed. Authentic family partnerships are built on mutual respect, trust and understanding. When educators and families collaborate as equals, with each recognising the other's knowledge and perspective, it results in a strong partnership that supports a child's mental health, development and readiness to learn.

Studies show that when parents are more engaged with a early learning service, it leads to better outcomes in their child's behaviour, social and emotional wellbeing and learning outcomes (ARACY, 2016; Garbacz et al., 2020). By collaborating and sharing information, parents and educators can identify areas where the child may need additional support, what kind of support is needed and who can best provide it.

## A village approach

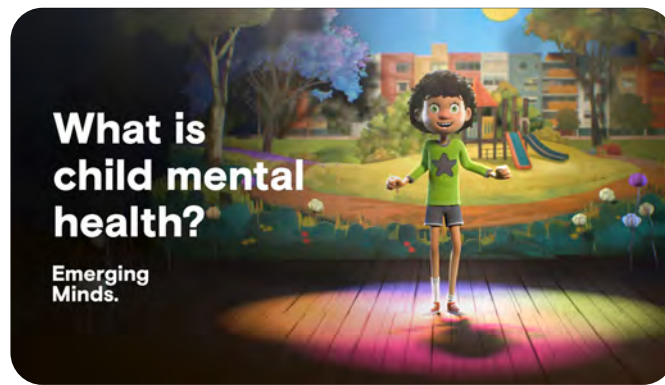
Family partnerships are part of a 'village approach' to supporting children's wellbeing.

This approach emphasises the need for many different people – including parents, educators, general practitioners (GPs), mental health practitioners, and other allied health professionals – to work together to look after a child's health and development. By working collaboratively and sharing their knowledge and expertise, these different individuals can provide the most effective support where needed.

A key aspect of this approach is [understanding the child's ecology](#). What happens in one context (e.g. the home) can shape and influence a child's emotions, mood, behaviour and engagement in another context (e.g. early education and care). This means that partnerships between families and educators are crucial in creating a consistent and supportive environment for the child.

Partnerships between families, early learning service staff and allied health professionals can help to promote positive mental health at home, early childhood education and care and in community settings. By implementing collaborative systems that support mental health across these different contexts, children can receive consistent, targeted and effective support.

Follow the link to watch a short animation about the key factors that influence children's mental health and wellbeing and your role in a child's 'village'.



WATCH THE VIDEO TO LEARN MORE

## Why is a family partnerships model needed?

Engaging with families is an integral part of your role as an educator. As we learned in the previous section, research shows strong partnerships with parents and carers not only enhance children's learning experiences but also play a critical role in supporting their mental health and wellbeing (ARACY, 2016; Barton et al., 2021; Garbacz et al., 2020; Garbacz & Weist, 2019). Despite this, many educators feel uncertain about broaching the topic of mental health and wellbeing with families, and it can be challenging to translate 'family partnerships' from the professional standards and policy documents into everyday practice.

Many educators report feeling underqualified, ill-equipped, or lacking the necessary resources to initiate these conversations. Addressing mental health concerns, even when well-intentioned, can be daunting for anyone, regardless of their experience, age, role or qualifications.

The Family Partnerships Practice Model has been developed in collaboration with educators and families in conjunction with the latest research, to help address these concerns. It provides practical strategies and guidance on how to engage in respectful, sensitive and effective conversations with families about children's mental health, development and overall wellbeing. It aims to help you establish a shared understanding with the family about how the child is going, both at home and in the early learning service, so that you can put in place the most suitable support.

## A child-centred and family-focused approach

As you saw in the accompanying online course, maintaining a child-centred and family-focused approach in your partnerships with families is a central guiding principle for effective implementation of the Family Partnerships Practice Model. This approach acknowledges the interconnectedness of a child's mental health with their family environment and emphasises two key aspects:

1. A **child-centred** approach, which places the child's needs, experiences and feelings at the core of all discussions and suggested actions. The child's development and overall wellbeing are the central focus, and decisions are made with their best interests in mind.
2. A **family-focused** approach encourages active collaboration with the family in planning and deciding on the best ways of supporting a child. It recognises the family's unique role in providing support and shaping the child's environment.

## Using your transferable skills to maintain a child-centred and family-focused approach

As an educator, you will naturally have many transferable skills, approaches and techniques that already support your work in family partnerships. These skills can be directly applied to the child-centred and family-focused approach used in this model.

These transferable skills include:

- **Empathy, active listening and understanding:** Drawing on these skills aids you in recognising and understanding the emotions and needs of both the child and the family, helping to create a supportive and understanding atmosphere.
- **Open communication:** Open and transparent communication allows you to maintain a focus on the child and family. It ensures that the child's perspective is included, the family feels heard, and there is a shared understanding between everyone.
- **Adaptability and flexibility:** Remaining adaptable and responsive to the diverse needs of families is important when working in a child-centred and family-focused way. All families are different, and you may need to adjust your communication style to align with the unique needs and preferences of the individual family you are working with.
- **Taking a holistic approach:** This involves acknowledging that a child's mental health is interconnected with their family environment and life at home, and addressing these factors when discussing their wellbeing.
- **Respect for diversity:** Recognising and respecting the diversity of family structures, backgrounds and experiences is crucial. This ensures every child and family is supported in a culturally sensitive and inclusive manner.
- **Taking a strengths-based approach:** This involves focusing on the strengths and positive aspects of both the child and the family. This approach promotes a more holistic understanding of how to provide support.

As you can see, there are many skills that you possess as an educator that will help you to work in a child-centred and family-focused way. You can revisit modules three and four of [The Family Partnerships Practice Model: A guide for early learning service](#) to revisit the skills that support family partnerships.

## The role of educators in supporting child mental health and wellbeing

As you implement the Family Partnerships Practice Model, it is also important to keep in mind the scope and boundaries of your role as an educator.

As you will remember from our [foundation course](#), educators play an important role in supporting child mental health and wellbeing. Much of what you are already doing in your day-to-day role will be supporting the mental health and wellbeing of the children you work with. It might be helpful to keep the following aspects in mind as you work through this guide:

### Educator wellbeing

To best support the children in your early learning service, you need to take care of your own mental health and wellbeing.

### Daily preventative approaches

Everyday routines and relationships play a powerful role in supporting children's mental health, development and overall wellbeing.

### Monitoring progress

As an educator, you are in a unique position to observe and notice children's emotions and behaviours over time and identify those children who may need extra support. These observations will support you to initiate family partnership conversations and make plans with parents to best support children's wellbeing.

## Activating support

Educators play an important role in supporting children, parents and families when difficulties arise. This support can be through providing information and guidance towards self-directed online services, or through working collaboratively with children and families to connect them with additional services or supports.

## What is beyond your scope as an educator?

There are also clear boundaries to your role as an educator. It is not your job to provide therapeutic support, to make a diagnosis or pathologise a child's symptoms, or to lead a referral process. These tasks require specialist knowledge and skills that are beyond the scope of your role and are therefore not expected of you.

Instead, educators should act as a supportive collaborator by providing relevant information, feedback and resources to the families and professionals involved. Educators should also respect the family's decisions and preferences and maintain a positive relationship with them throughout the process.

It is important to be clear on how to support children's mental health and wellbeing in ways that **do** fit within your role and what is expected of you as an educator. By remaining within this scope of work, you can support children's wellbeing and learning, and also ensure you are working within a safe environment yourself and not taking on work that is outside your already full workload.

Your workplace should also be able to support you in finding this balance. You may find it useful to discuss this with your colleagues as you consider your use of the Family Partnerships Practice Model.

If you would like to explore the role of educators in supporting children's mental health and wellbeing in more detail, you might find the following courses helpful:

- [An introduction to family partnerships for educators](#)
- [Understanding child mental health](#)



## Implementing the Family Partnerships Practice Model

The model has been designed for use across a whole early learning service and includes a suggested process for approaching implementation across a whole site and whole staff.

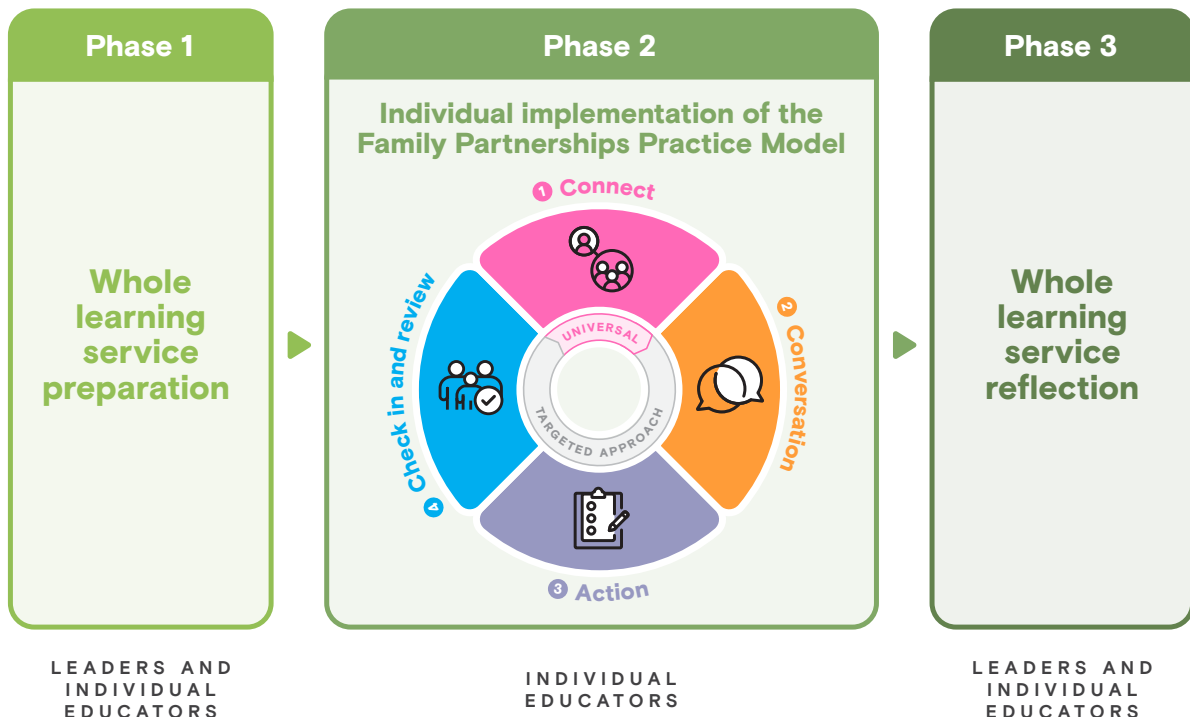
Partnerships are an activity that require consideration of multiple levels within your early learning service, as well as being mindful of the children and families your staff are partnering with. Focusing on the following key areas can help support effective partnerships:

- A whole of service culture that is inclusive, welcoming and open to two-way communication with families
- A consistent partnership skill level across your whole staff
- A practical model for developing partnerships that is used consistently across the whole service
- Consistent leadership across the whole school that supports both practical and organisational culture elements of partnerships

By following the whole service process as shown below, you can be confident that your partnerships will have the best chance of success for children, their families and your staff too.

**FIGURE 2**

**Implementing the Family Partnerships Practice Model across a whole early learning service**



# Phase 1: Whole learning service preparation

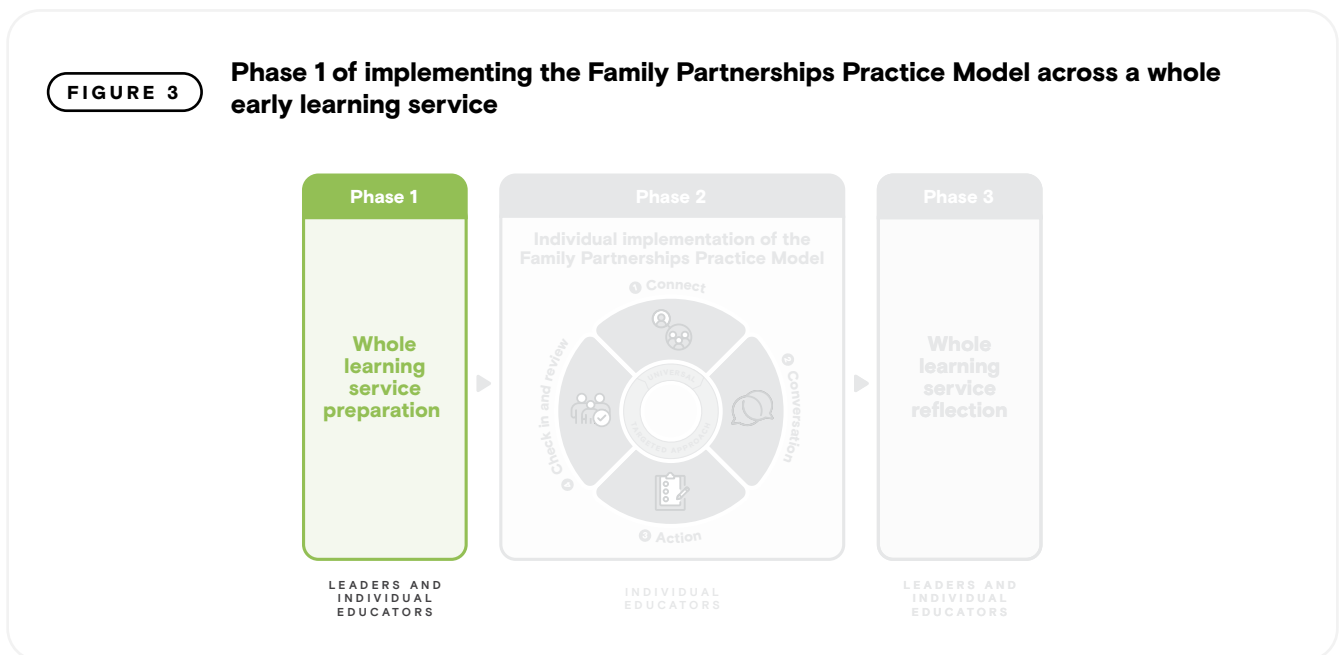
## About this phase

The first phase of the process is 'Preparation', which involves considering how your early learning service will prepare to implement the Family Partnerships Practice Model.

'Preparation' is primarily the responsibility of educational leaders (e.g. centre directors, managers or coordinators), and focuses on setting up the conditions for both staff and families to engage in the model. This includes:

- introducing the family partnerships model and training to your staff
- allocating time for staff members to complete the online training courses
- leading staff workshop activities to review how safe and inclusive your spaces and environments are for families; and
- making sure you have well communicated plans for how leaders will be available to support staff in their implementation of the model.

The following information and instructions provide information on what you as a leader can do to support your staff in having more consistent, effective and confident conversations with families about child mental health. These conversations can help foster a culture of family partnerships within your early learning service.



## Time required

The Family Partnerships Practice Model aims to help educators' day-to-day practice of engaging and communicating with families and to ensure consistency in how partnerships are implemented in your service. It has been developed as a way of focusing the time educators are already spending engaging with families, rather than introducing a new area of responsibility.

Your role as a leader in supporting your staff to implement this model does, however, require some planning and preparation time.

This preparation phase takes place prior to implementation at the room level where educators begin to develop partnerships with families. You may find that using your normal ways of preparing and planning for new initiatives can guide the length of time you will need in advance.

The time commitment required for preparation depends partly on the size and complexity of your early learning service. You may find again that using your normal ways of preparing and planning for new initiatives can guide the amount of time you will need to undertake the activities outlined in the following table.

### Key actions that support your service preparation:

Action	Details	Time required
<b>1. Introduce the model to staff</b>	Introduce the model to your staff using our workshop template, ensuring they understand its importance and relevance.	30–60 min staff meeting/workshop
<b>2. Online learning</b>	Create time for individual staff members to undertake the Emerging Minds online learning courses.  Optional: Set up an Emerging Minds Learning dashboard to monitor and support your staff members' completion of the online courses.	Foundation course: 2 hours  Skills course: 6 hours
<b>3. Developing a culture of family partnerships</b>	Actively work to create a culture of family partnerships by leading staff in workshop activities using the <i>Creating safe and inclusive spaces tool</i> and embedding any follow-up actions required into service plans.	60–120 min staff workshop
<b>4. Plan and share how the model will be supported in your service</b>	Clarify and communicate leadership support for the model in your context, including when and how leaders will engage in partnerships, what record keeping will be required of staff, the availability of any lists of relevant local services that staff might be able to use when discussing referrals, and any other relevant support for staff members themselves.	Amount of time needed varies based on context

#### 1. Introduce the model to staff (staff meeting/workshop)

Allocate time during a regular staff meeting or professional learning day to introduce the Family Partnerships Practice Model to your staff. Use this time to explain what the model is all about, why you're using it, and what is expected of staff.

Depending on the size, structure and management of your service, you may need to take a few steps to introduce the model to all your staff and any key management or executive bodies that oversee your organisation.

Use the 'Family partnerships – snapshot of evidence and practice' section of this guide (particularly pages 9–11) to help shape communication with your governing board or other executive-level decision makers. This can help you gain the support of those who may need to approve, or be aware of, such initiatives being used in your setting.

Use the following implementation tool to help shape your introduction to your educators. It is designed to provide ideas and inspiration for your introductory discussion/workshop.

One 60-minute meeting should be enough time to introduce the idea to your educators and begin to consider the topic of family partnerships as a team. That said, the suggested times and workshop ideas in this guide are designed to be just one way that you could structure this task, as opposed to the only way to approach these steps. Adapt and modify times, approaches and workshop ideas to suit your context and the time you have available.



### **Implementation tool: Introducing the Family Partnerships Practice Model to staff**

Refer to the *Introducing the Family Partnerships Practice Model to staff* tool for details on how to lead and facilitate this discussion/workshop with your staff. This tool provides a suggested breakdown of a staff workshop, as well as a presentation you can use with your staff.

- [Go to Introducing the Family Partnerships Practice Model to staff](#)

## **2. Online learning**

### **Emerging Minds online professional development courses**

Allocating time to complete the Emerging Minds Learning online courses is an essential component of implementing the Family Partnerships Practice Model successfully. These courses are designed for individual educators to work through at their own pace.

There are two online learning courses available to support the implementation of the Family Partnerships Practice Model:

#### **Foundation course**

*An introduction to family partnerships for educators*

This course provides a general introduction to the concept of family partnerships and how they can be used to support children's mental health and wellbeing. Learners are introduced to a series of practice shifts that can guide their general approach to family partnerships. All educators should start with this course.

- [Go to the foundation course](#)

#### **Skills course**

*The Family Partnerships Practice Model – A guide for primary school educators*

This course is designed for educators who will be using the Family Partnerships Practice Model in their work. It introduces the model with information tailored to individual implementation. It provides a detailed overview of each of the four steps: 'Connect', 'Conversation', 'Action', and 'Check in and review'. The skills and approaches that underpin each step are also explored using fictional demonstration videos tailored specifically to the needs of educators.

- [Go to the skills course](#)

### **Setting up an Emerging Minds Learning dashboard to monitor and support your staff training**

There are two ways that your staff can access and complete these courses online. The first way is for each staff member to register and create a log in for [Emerging Minds Learning](#). You can provide the link to staff and they can independently register, complete the training and let you know when they have done so.

The second way to manage your staff training is to set up an [Emerging Minds Learning Workplace Dashboard](#).

Follow the instructions to set up your school, then invite your staff group. From there you can monitor their progress of the courses directly. It is up to you whether you would like to use the dashboard to track staff training.



## Using these courses to spark further staff learning

These courses provide valuable information and training for you and your staff to ensure you have the necessary skills and knowledge to implement the model effectively. In addition to completing the online learning, you could consider leading further reflective practice activities with your staff to embed and further build on the knowledge and skills presented in the courses. One way to do this would be to use the reflective questions and demonstration videos as prompts for group discussion with your staff at a regular staff meeting or as part of a staff training session.

### 3. Developing a culture of family partnerships (staff workshop)

#### Leading a culture of family partnerships

As a leader, you play a critical role in creating a culture that promotes authentic partnerships between educators and families in your early learning service. Your work in developing this culture will support your educators when they begin to implement the Family Partnerships Practice Model. Some key strategies for this include:

- **Ensuring a safe, welcoming and inclusive environment:** Create a supportive culture by ensuring the physical environment and overall atmosphere of your service is welcoming to children and their families, inclusive and conducive to positive relationships. This can be achieved by promoting diversity and cultural competence, celebrating the strengths and achievements of all children and families, and making sure that everyone feels valued and respected.
- **Embodying partnership values:** Demonstrate your commitment to family partnerships by modelling values such as respect, trust and open communication in your interactions with educators, families and children. This means actively listening to others, valuing their perspectives and working collaboratively to achieve shared goals.
- **Advocate for family partnerships:** Demonstrate your commitment by advocating for the Family Partnerships Practice Model with educators, families and the wider community. This can include sharing information about the benefits of the model, providing training and resources to support implementation, and highlighting examples of success.
- **Leading reflective learning sessions:** Create a culture of continuous learning by conducting reflective sessions with your staff following the completion of the online learning courses. These sessions should aim to encourage staff to revisit and apply the knowledge gained from the courses. Discussions can include opportunities to share experiences, address challenges and set goals for ongoing improvement.

#### Collaborating with colleagues to create safe and inclusive spaces

At this stage of the preparation process, we recommend running a second workshop for your staff that offers an opportunity to come together and consider how well you currently 'create safe and inclusive spaces'. Use part 1 of the *Creating safe and inclusive spaces* implementation tool to run a session (or series of sessions) with your educators.

The work of creating safe and inclusive spaces happens on multiple levels, from site-wide culture and the feeling families get when they enter your service, through to the more specific details. For this reason, we have divided the tool into two parts. Part 1 looks at the 'big picture', whole of service environment factors; while part 2 addresses how individual educators can create safe spaces on a more micro level, through their interactions with families and how they arrange the space and furniture in particular rooms.

In this preparation phase, you will focus on part 1 of the tool. Later, when educators come to think about safe spaces again when working on step 1 of the model ('Connection'), they will refer to part 2 of the tool.

By aligning your work to ensure the big picture feelings and atmosphere line up with the smaller everyday interactions and details, your service will be able to present a consistent, welcoming feeling to all families, which is a powerful base upon which to build family partnerships.



### **Implementation tool: Creating safe and inclusive spaces tool**

Use part 1 of the *Creating safe and inclusive spaces tool* to run a staff workshop on how to create a safe, welcoming and inclusive environment in your early learning service.

- [Go to \*Creating safe and inclusive spaces\*](#)

## **4. Plan and share how the model will be supported in your service**

The final step in the preparation phase is to clarify and communicate the service-wide approach that leaders will use to support staff in family partnerships. This action area may involve discussing and formalising information such as:

- when and how leaders engage in partnerships (including when it is appropriate for leaders to attend meetings with families)
- what record keeping is expected and/or required of staff
- what services are available in your local community that might be relevant for families and whether your service has lists of these services that staff can draw on when needed
- what ongoing coaching, support, debriefing or mental health support is available for staff as they work through family partnerships.

The amount of time needed to clarify and communicate the practical aspects of how the model will run in your service will vary depending on your context, including the size and structure of your workplace. We recommend using your usual planning systems and policies to embed your partnerships practices in your normal work processes.

This step is a chance to make sure all staff understand who is involved, what records need to be kept, what support is available and how they can access that support when they need it. Rather than requiring new policies or processes, this could just be a chance to make sure your whole staff is ready for the consistent implementation of family partnerships.

### **Preparation phase checklist:**

At the end of the preparation phase, your whole staff should feel confident and ready to get started with the Family Partnerships Practice Model. This checklist can be used to ensure you have covered off every aspect of this step:

- Leaders** have explored the Family Partnerships Toolkit and Family Partnerships Guide (including the implementation tools).

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- Leaders** have introduced the Family Partnerships Practice Model to staff.

---

- Leaders** have supported all staff members to undertake the two online learning courses.

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- Leaders** have clarified and communicated how they will provide practical support and leadership for partnerships, including specifying any expected record keeping and providing staff with any relevant lists of community services and supports that are available.

---

- Staff** have been informed about the Family Partnerships Practice Model.

---

- Staff** have completed the two online learning courses.

---

- Staff** have had the opportunity to consider, discuss and action ways to further improve the provision of safe and inclusive spaces across the service.

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- Staff** are aware of how leaders will support the model, what record keeping is expected of them and what other relevant information and support is available to them.

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## Phase 2: Individual implementation of the Family Partnerships Practice Model

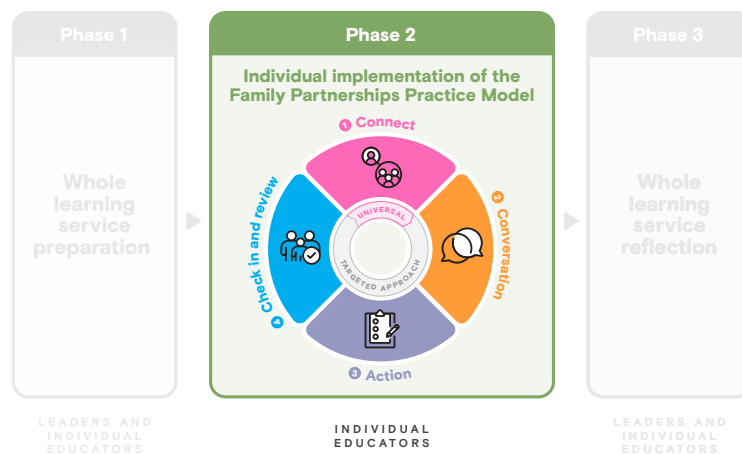
### About this phase

The second phase of the whole service process is where the four-step Family Partnerships Practice Model is used by all educators in their day-to-day work. The model is largely implemented by individual educators, but leaders play an important role in supporting staff in their interactions and conversations with families.

This section of the Family Partnerships Guide provides educators with everything they need to know to set up and engage in authentic and effective partnership with families.

FIGURE 4

Phase 2 of implementing the Family Partnerships Practice Model across a whole early learning service





As part of the advice on each of the four steps, you will find a checklist of actions for both individual educators and leaders to help guide implementation.

## The Family Partnerships Practice Model

By following the Family Partnerships Practice Model as shown in [Figure 1](#) (page 6), you can be confident that your partnerships will have the best chance of success for children, their families and your staff too.

The Family Partnerships Practice Model is a four-step model which provides strategies and guidance on setting up, implementing and maintaining effective family partnerships in your early learning service. The aim of the model is to improve your skills and capacity for having sensitive and respectful conversations with families about child mental health, development and overall wellbeing.

This model lays the groundwork for partnerships with all families. It also outlines how to go deeper into partnership conversations and actions for individual children when needed. Educators use the first step of the model with all the families in their care, making sure to ‘connect’ with the family of each child they work with and to consider relationships with all families in their early learning service. The remaining three steps – ‘Conversation’, ‘Action’ and ‘Check in and review’ – are used when an individual child would benefit from their educators and family collaborating to support their mental health and wellbeing.

The Family Partnerships Practice Model will be familiar to you from the online learning course, *The Family Partnerships Practice Model: A guide for early learning service educators*.

To further refresh your memory of the model, follow the link to watch a video about how the Family Partnerships Practice Model can be used in your early learning service to support children’s mental health and wellbeing.

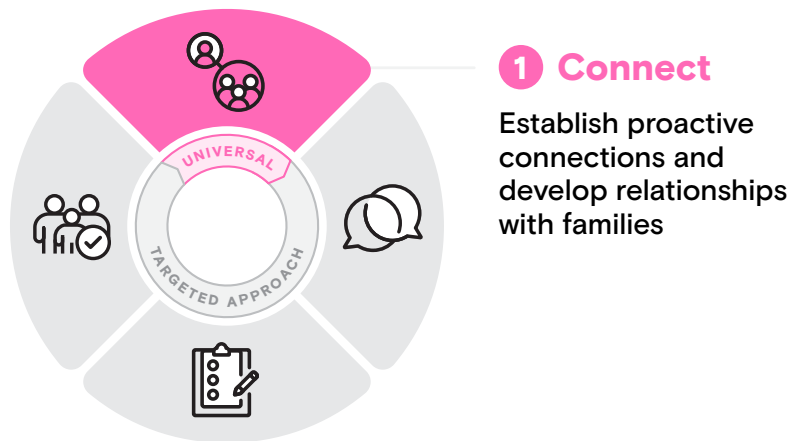


WATCH THE VIDEO TO LEARN MORE



## Step 1 – Connect: Establish proactive connections and develop relationships with families

**FIGURE 5** Step 1 of the Family Partnerships Practice Model



The primary goal of this step is to establish relationships, serving as the initial phase of the model. Educators aim to connect with families, laying the foundation for meaningful relationships.

Building connections is a gradual process that unfolds over time, characterised by numerous small interactions and communications between educators, children and families.

This work involves creating a welcoming and approachable environment throughout the entire service. Additionally, it requires specific efforts by individual educators to connect with parents, ensuring they feel valued and respected within the service environment.

### Approaches for Step 1 – ‘Connect’

As an educator you can use the following approaches to connect with families and lay the foundation for meaningful relationships:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>1. Create safe environments</b>                          | Ensure the overall environment, both at the service level and in individual interactions, feels welcoming and secure for families and that families have had some choice in how they can communicate and engage with educators. |
| <b>2. Establish proactive connections and relationships</b> | Engage in proactive efforts to initiate and cultivate relationships with all families.  |
| <b>3. Find a point of connection</b>                        | Identify common ground or shared interests to establish rapport with families.  |
| <b>4. Navigate challenges in connection</b>                 | Address and overcome any obstacles or difficulties that may arise in building connections with families, including making sure that you are genuinely offering opportunities for two-way communication.                         |

## Who is involved?

This step involves educators working with the entire cohort of families within their care. Educators strive to establish connections with all parents and children, ensuring the actions taken in this step are inclusive and beneficial for the entire early learning service community. Referred to as a 'universal' approach, this step is undertaken with all families, unlike the subsequent steps in the model, which are activated based on the specific needs of individual children and families.

## How much time will it take?

The 'Connect' step is not a one-off event but rather a process that unfolds over time. Building connections is an ongoing endeavour, spanning several weeks and months. It encompasses numerous small interactions, communications and actions that establish effective working relationships between educators, families, parents and children. Establishing and nurturing connections with families requires ongoing engagement and input from both leadership teams and staff.

*Snapshots will be used throughout this guide to give you a 'deep dive' into an essential element of family partnership practice. Each 'snapshot' explores a key idea in depth, providing an explanation of why the topic is important to family partnerships and how you can approach this area in your work. Having learned more about the topic in the snapshot, you will then be ready to use the implementation tool that follows to put these ideas into practice.*

### **Snapshot – The importance of safety and inclusion in family connections**

Creating safe and inclusive spaces is an essential aspect of this first step. Your success in developing connections with all families will depend partly on how families feel in your school. This snapshot will explore why this idea of creating safe and inclusive spaces matters in family partnerships and how it can help build connection.

Creating safe, inclusive and nurturing environments is fundamental for fostering meaningful connections between educators and families. Without a sense of safety, families may hesitate to engage fully.

A safe learning environment ensures everyone feels secure, respected and comfortable. It fosters an open and non-judgemental atmosphere and promotes child development and wellbeing, while supporting sensitive conversations between families and educators. As educators, your role in creating safe and inclusive environments is pivotal in ensuring an inclusive and nurturing learning environment where all children and families feel respected and valued.

#### **What do we mean by safe and inclusive environments and why do they matter?**

A safe and inclusive learning environment is a space where everyone – including both children and families – feels secure, respected and comfortable. It is a place where thoughts and ideas can be shared freely and without judgement; and where everyone knows they will be heard and responded to with care and professionalism.

Safe spaces are not only physically secure but also emotionally supportive. They actively aim to promote and support the development and wellbeing of children, while being supportive of the sensitive conversations that may occur between families and educators about child wellbeing and development.

Although all early childhood education and care settings in Australia are expected to provide safe and supportive environments for children and their families, there are specific actions you can take to enhance this in your own service. Creating safe and inclusive environments in your service also acts to enhance connection and partnerships with families.

Here are some practical examples of how you can create safe and inclusive environments for families:

- **Showcasing diversity:** Make sure that your service is welcoming of all backgrounds, cultures, family types, languages or abilities. Display materials and images that represent diverse cultures and languages. Encourage families to contribute and share their own cultural traditions and practices.
- **Establish clear policies and procedures:** Develop and communicate clear policies and procedures to ensure everyone is aware of expectations around behaviour, interactions and privacy.
- **Foster positive relationships:** Encourage positive interactions and relationships between children, families and educators. This includes taking the time to get to know families, showing an interest in their lives, and being respectful and responsive in your communication with them.
- **Provide regular communication and feedback:** Regularly communicate with families about their child's learning and development and provide opportunities for feedback and input. This includes sharing photos, stories and observations, as well as providing regular progress reports and inviting families to discuss progress in person.
- **Maintain a safe and comfortable physical environment:** Ensure that your service is safe and secure, both inside and outside. This includes regular checks of equipment and resources and making sure that children are supervised at all times. Create a warm and inviting atmosphere with comfortable and age-appropriate furnishings, toys and play equipment.
- **Support children's social and emotional learning:** Create a calm and nurturing environment that supports children's emotional wellbeing. This includes providing opportunities for quiet play and reflection, as well as ensuring that children have access to supportive adults and resources when they need them.

By implementing these practical strategies, early learning services can create safe and inclusive spaces that promote positive relationships, support children's development and wellbeing, and foster strong partnerships with families.

Use the following implementation tool to explore more practical examples of how to create safer and more inclusive spaces, along with a range of activities to consider how this could apply to your day-to-day practice.



### **Implementation tool: Creating safe and inclusive spaces tool**

#### **Introducing the *Creating safe and inclusive spaces tool***

The *Creating safe and inclusive spaces tool* serves as a supporting resource for reflecting on and improving the safety of environments to enhance family partnerships. This tool offers practical activities and insights designed to assist you to assess current spaces and implement measures to ensure all families feel safe and welcomed into the service environment.

#### **How to use this tool**

The *Creating safe and inclusive spaces tool* has two parts:

1. Creating safe and inclusive spaces across a whole service
2. Creating safe and inclusive spaces in your work as an educator

The work of creating safe and inclusive spaces happens on multiple levels, from site-wide culture and the feeling families get when they enter your service, through to the more specific details. For this reason, we have divided the tool into two parts. Part 1 looks at the big picture, whole of service environment factors; while part 2 addresses how you as an individual educator can create safe spaces on a more micro level, through your interactions with families and the way you arrange the space and the furniture in particular rooms.

In the preparation phase, you focused on part 1 of the tool and participated in a staff workshop to consider how your spaces feel for families overall. Now that you're focused on step 1 ('Connection'), you can use part 2 of the tool to consider how you as an individual educator can influence how families experience your spaces. By making sure the big picture feelings and atmosphere line up with the smaller everyday interactions and details, your service will be able to present a consistent welcoming feeling to all families, which is a powerful base upon which to build family partnerships.

- [Go to Creating safe and inclusive spaces](#)

This section is for **education leaders** and **individual educators**



## 'Connection' checklist

At the end of the 'Connection' step:

- educators have developed the foundations of an effective partnership with each of the families of children in their care
- leaders can observe an environment that encourages families to engage in open conversations, and have ensured their service offers meaningful opportunities for educators and families to establish a strong working relationship for the benefit of each child's mental health, development and overall wellbeing.

This checklist can be used to ensure you have covered off every aspect of this step:

- Educators** have ensured that the spaces and environments they work in, and see families in, are open, welcoming and inclusive for all families.

---

- Educators** have consulted with families and established a range of ways of communicating that are both sustainable in terms of workload and convenient for all involved.

---

- Educators** have considered their usual ways of engaging with families and whether these opportunities allow for genuine, two-way communication and collaboration. If necessary, educators have begun to establish more opportunities for two-way communication.

---

- Educators** have started to connect and build relationships with families through their regular practices.

---

- Leaders** have supported efforts to increase the safety and inclusivity of spaces where relevant.

---

- Leaders** have supported educators to manage their communication and relationships with families in sustainable and healthy ways, keeping watch for signs that educators may be struggling with their workloads.

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- Leaders** have been actively involved in reconsidering the usual ways families are encouraged to engage with the service and ensuring there are opportunities for genuine, two-way communication as part of these activities.

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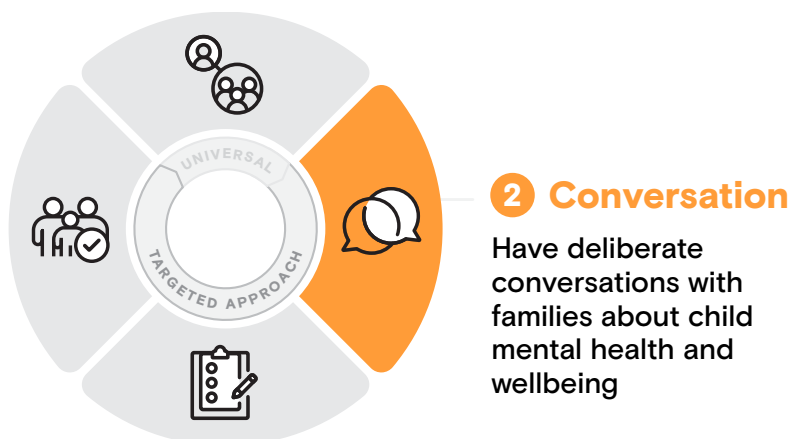
- Leaders** have supported educators to work through any challenges in connecting with families and have provided suggestions and ideas where relevant.





## Step 2 – Conversation: Have deliberate conversations with families about child mental health and wellbeing

**FIGURE 6** Step 2 of the Family Partnerships Practice Model



In the ‘Conversation’ step, educators engage in deliberate conversations with families about child mental health and wellbeing. This structured dialogue, facilitated by the *Family partnerships conversation tool*, aims to be effective, sensitive and respectful. The approaches used in this step foster a partnership approach between educators and families, facilitating a shared understanding of the child’s wellbeing. They allow time for both the family and educator to share observations and concerns and encourage shared decision-making regarding support strategies.

### Approaches for Step 2 – ‘Conversation’

As an educator you can use the following approaches to engage in a deliberate conversation with a family about their child’s mental health and wellbeing:

1. **Framing the conversation**      Setting the scene and establishing a context for the discussion.
2. **Naming the concern**      Identifying and articulating the specific issues or challenges related to the child’s wellbeing.
3. **Exploring both contexts**      Considering both the family’s and the educator’s perspectives and experiences to gain a comprehensive understanding of the situation.
4. **Developing a shared understanding**      Collaboratively developing a plan and determining the next steps for support.

## Who is involved?

In this step, educators engage in deliberate conversations with families about child mental health and development. Unlike the previous step, this step employs a 'targeted approach' based on the experiences of individual children and families. Educator discretion guides the decision to use this step, particularly to explore situations where increased collaboration between families and educators can support a child's mental health and wellbeing. Not every family may require this step within a regular year of interaction.

During these conversations, educators and parents will intentionally include the child's perspective in discussions. Decisions about whether to involve the child directly are made by educators and parents together, taking into consideration the child's age, development and the nature of the conversation.

## How much time will it take?

When using the Family Partnerships Guide, discussions with one family can take between 30 minutes and one hour, depending on the issue or context. We recommend keeping conversations concise while allowing ample time for taking notes, debriefing with colleagues, and/or personal reflection. Adequate preparation beforehand ensures the conversation is effective and covers all necessary points.

## Knowing when to activate the 'Conversation' step

As you saw in the previous section, the Family Partnerships Practice Model suggests undertaking the first step of 'Connection' with your whole cohort of families. The remaining steps are designed to be used as needed and likely only with some families in any given year.

As an educator, you will likely have a good sense of when you would 'activate' and move from 'Connection' into the 'Conversation' step of the model. It is also important for educators to be able to help create a transition from one step to the next for the family. When contemplating this bridging process, you may want to consider the following approaches:

- **Monitoring emotions and behaviour and observing any changes.** Children use behaviour to communicate their feelings and thoughts, so be curious about what is going on for them and what they want you to know. Also, observe how they participate in the service context and their interactions with peers. You might notice that a child has trouble with certain aspects, such as moving between activities or relating to others. This could indicate they are experiencing some social and emotional difficulties and need more support and a deeper conversation with you and their family.
- **Raise any issues with families as they arise.** As an educator you're probably used to providing families with regular updates so they're aware of any concerns as they arise. This practice can ensure that families feel informed and ready for any future conversations, avoiding any feelings of surprise when an issue or concern is raised later.
- **Listen to concerns raised by the child or family.** It may not always be you as the educator making the decision to activate this step of the model. Events or experiences in families' lives may lead them to instigate a more formal conversation about something they have noticed in their child or prompt the child to reach out to you directly.
- **Use your professional judgement and draw on the support of colleagues and leaders.** You will likely have a strong relationship with the child and a good awareness of how they are going, which puts you in a position to notice any changes that may occur. Remember that as an educator you are not expected to play any diagnostic role. Instead, your job is simply to communicate anything you've noticed that suggests a child may benefit from further support. If you feel there is something that could be discussed as part of a preventative approach to support a child's mental health and wellbeing, it may be time to use the next step in this model ('Action'). If you are unsure, speak with a colleague or leader who can support your decision making.

## How to navigate when a family is reluctant to engage

Navigating challenges in family engagement often involves communicating observations and concerns with families, especially when they may be hesitant to delve into deeper discussions. Preparing to initiate these conversations requires a delicate balance of skills and considerations, anchored in a foundation of trust and rapport.

One common challenge educators face is the reluctance of families to engage further when initially approached with observations or concerns. This hesitation may stem from various factors, such as feeling defensive, overwhelmed or uncertain about how to respond. In such situations, educators face the challenge of gently guiding the conversation towards a deeper level of understanding and collaboration.

To move from casual conversations to meaningful discussions, educators need to consider several key elements:

- Building a solid relationship with the family based on trust and rapport
- Communicating clearly and openly, without judgement or blame
- Drawing on the family's thoughts and concerns and validating their perspectives
- Being patient and persistent, and allowing the family time and space to process information

These elements can help educators establish a collaborative partnership with families and support them in addressing any issues or concerns that may arise.

## Conversations with families about mental health and wellbeing

Engaging with families is a central part of your role as an educator. Building strong partnerships with parents not only enhances children's learning experiences but also plays a critical role in supporting their mental health and wellbeing. Despite this, many educators lack confidence in talking about mental health and wellbeing with families.

Many educators report feeling underqualified, ill-equipped, or lacking the necessary resources to initiate these conversations. Addressing mental health concerns, even when well-intentioned, can be daunting for anyone regardless of their experience, age, role or qualifications.

The following approaches may help you to feel more comfortable in talking with families about children's mental health and wellbeing.

### Getting ready for the conversation

- **Make sure there are no surprises about the nature of the conversation:** Give the family a heads up about the focus and purpose of the conversation, so that they feel prepared and informed. You will likely have already raised the concern or focus area with the family before this stage, as you first noticed there was something going on for the child that was worth discussing.
- **Think about the space in which the conversation will occur:** Conversations about mental health and wellbeing are always better off held in person (where possible). Choose a space where both you and the family will feel comfortable. This could be the child's classroom, your office or a family room. A comfortable seating arrangement and an inviting atmosphere (where it doesn't feel like a job interview) can help create a more relaxed environment.
- **Prepare your questions and notes:** Write down any key points, observations or questions you want to highlight during the conversation. Use the [conversation guide template](#) to help you to structure and prepare for the conversation.

- **If appropriate, ask another team member to sit in on the conversation:** Depending on the topic of conversation or seriousness of the issue you're discussing, you might like to ask a member of your leadership or wellbeing team to join the conversation. Always let the family know who will be present for the conversation.

### Keeping the conversation going

- **Be open-minded:** If the conversation isn't going the way you expected, it's important to keep an open mind and consider the family's perspective. Try to understand their point of view and see if there's a way to find common ground.
- **Ask clarifying questions:** If you're unsure about something the family is saying, don't be afraid to ask clarifying questions. This will help you understand their perspective and ensure that you're on the same page.
- **Be strengths-based:** Approach the conversation with a positive, respectful and collaborative attitude. Remember that you and the family both want what is best for the child, and working together is the best way to achieve that goal.
- **Avoid giving parenting advice:** Instead, the aim of the conversation is for you to come together with the child's family, on equal footing, to share your observations about how the child is going and work together to make a plan to support them.
- **Avoid making a diagnosis or labelling behaviour:** As an educator, your role in supporting child mental health is to notice when there are changes in a child's behaviour, inquire and have a conversation with the child and their family, and provide support and referrals.
- **Look for solutions:** Ask the family what strategies or approaches they've already tried or are trying. Focus on finding shared goals; and let the family know you're there to work with them to find solutions that could work for their child and support them in putting them into place.
- **Be willing to compromise:** If you and the family have different ideas about how to address an issue, be open to finding a compromise that works for everyone. This could involve trying a new approach or seeking additional support (such as from your school's wellbeing leader or a member of the leadership team).

### Managing distress

Conversations about mental health and wellbeing can be difficult, depending on the issue you're discussing.

In some cases, families may get upset or become distressed during the conversation. Being prepared for these kinds of responses means you won't be caught off guard and can respond appropriately. Managing distress is about creating a safe and non-judgemental space, where the family feels validated, supported and heard. The following are some tips for what to do if a family becomes distressed during your conversation:

- **Stay calm and composed:** Maintain your own composure during the conversation. Responding in a calm and compassionate manner can have a reassuring effect and help to reduce feelings of distress.
- **Empathise and validate:** Acknowledge that these sorts of conversations can be hard and let them know that distress is normal. Validate the family's feelings and emotions by letting them know you understand this is upsetting for them and that it's OK to feel the way they are.
- **Avoid making assumptions or offering solutions immediately:** Resist the urge to offer solutions or advice right away, especially if the family is highly distressed. Instead, focus on understanding and validating their perspectives and emotions first.
- **Take a break:** Give the family the option of taking a quick break or picking up the conversation again at a later date.

- **Respect boundaries and privacy:** Remind the family of your commitment to maintain privacy and confidentiality, which can help to build their trust.
- **Follow up:** After the conversation, follow up with the family to check on how they're doing and whether they have any additional questions or concerns.
- **Debrief:** Find a time to debrief with a member of your leadership or wellbeing team. This gives you the opportunity to reflect on what went well or what you could have done differently, but also for you to check in on your own response to the situation as a self-care measure. Debriefing is also important to ensure you discuss any duty of care or mandatory reporting requirements, depending on the issue being discussed.

## Snapshot – CHILD domains

Knowing how to discuss a child's mental health and wellbeing can be difficult for educators when approaching conversations with families. The CHILD domains offer an evidence-informed way to think about this, which can support you in the second step of the model. This snapshot explores the CHILD domains, setting you up to use them in the *Family partnerships conversation tool*.

Feedback from educators highlights the challenge of knowing which areas of a child's life to explore in conversations with families. The CHILD domains can act as an evidence-informed and valuable tool to navigate this uncertainty and support educators to bring curiosity to various aspects of the child's life. As you read through each of the domains, take some time to reflect on the ways in which these domains can support a holistic, comprehensive and collaborative conversation with families.

### (About the) Child

Explore the child's interests, strengths, difficulties and temperament.

*Why is this domain important?*

Exploring these aspects helps you understand the child's individuality, preferences and needs. It also assists in identifying the child's protective factors, along with potential risk factors that may affect their wellbeing and development.

### Home circumstances and context

Inquire about the child's siblings, favourite activities at home, and any stresses or challenges the family may be facing.

*Why is this domain important?*

Exploring the home context helps you to gain a holistic picture of the child's ecology and the factors that may influence their mental health and wellbeing. It also enables you to build rapport with the family and show a deeper understanding and respect for their situation.

### Interactions between the child and parent

Investigate activities enjoyed by the child and parent, challenges in the parent-child relationship and emotions and routines within the family.

*Why is this domain important?*

Understanding these aspects of their interactions helps you to understand the quality and nature of the child's relationships and connection with their key support figures.

## **Links in the community**

Explore the child's social connections, engagement in early learning and involvement in community activities, along with the support networks available to the family.

*Why is this domain important?*

Understanding a child's sense of belonging and participation in their community helps you to identify the resources and services that can assist the family and the child in meeting their needs and enhancing their wellbeing and development.

## **Development**

Discuss the child's physical, cognitive, social and emotional development, along with any behavioural concerns.

*Why is this domain important?*

Exploring development supports you to assess the child's progress and achievements across different areas. It also helps you to identify any developmental delays or difficulties that may require further assessment or services, and collaborate with the family and other professionals to plan and implement appropriate strategies to support the child's learning, development and overall wellbeing.



## **Implementation tool: Family partnerships conversation tool**

### **Introducing the Family partnerships conversation tool**

As part of the Family Partnerships Practice Model, we have developed a tool to support you to engage in respectful, sensitive and effective conversations about child mental health with families. This conversation tool aims to assist you in establishing a shared understanding with families regarding their children's wellbeing, both at home and in the early learning service setting. These shared understandings are key to facilitating the implementation of suitable support.

### **How to use the Family partnerships conversation tool**

The conversation tool provides advice in two areas:

1. How to structure and lead the overall conversation with the family
2. How to use the CHILD domains to compile a series of relevant questions and prompts to guide your discussion

The tool presents a simple structure and template for your conversation to follow. Depending on your confidence levels, you can follow the suggested structure step-by-step or use the ideas in the tool as a guide to develop your own plan for the conversation.

In addition to the conversation template, the CHILD domains are included as an approach for structuring your conversations with families. These domains enable you to scaffold questions that are relevant to a child's particular social and emotional needs. They are an evidence-informed way of identifying what's influencing a child's life, by being curious about the following aspects:

**(About the) Child** – the child’s interests, strengths and temperament

**Home** – any changes or key factors within their home environment

**Interactions** – the interactions between the child and their parent and other important people in the child’s life

**Links** – different links and supports the child might have within their community, including sporting clubs, community organisations and health professionals

**Development** – a child’s developmental journey, strengths and challenges, and how they relate to their mental health and overall wellbeing

The conversation tool provides suggested topics and questions to explore with families for each area of the CHILD domains. Select from a range of questions and prompts in the tool and add them to your conversation template in the section that covers ‘exploring both contexts’. This helps you prepare for this aspect of the conversation in more detail.

The tool is designed to be flexible and adaptable to the needs and preferences of each educator, family and child. It can be used as a whole or in parts, depending on the focus and purpose of the conversation.

– [Go to Family partnerships conversation tool](#)

### **What if the conversation doesn’t go as planned?**

The guidance provided in this section is focused on how educators can work towards achieving a shared understanding with a child’s family about what they have been experiencing and their need for support. This is not always possible to achieve within one conversation.

If you reach the end of this step and find that you and the family are not yet able to find a shared understanding, you can keep working on the partnership and this consensus may emerge over several conversations, or over time.

As an educator in this situation, it is helpful to:

- make sure a leader knows that you have had a conversation with the family but were not able to agree on the next steps to support the child
- make sure you have documented the conversation, your attempts to discuss the issues and how the conversation played out; and
- work collaboratively with your colleagues and leaders to find ways that you might be able to keep working towards a shared understanding with the family over time.

Sometimes it takes more than one conversation to come to a shared understanding. If you find these tricky conversations have been hard, make sure you communicate with your leaders and colleagues and access any support you need.

If you find yourself in conversations with families that escalate beyond being ‘tricky’ and become unsafe or threatening, make sure you call on leaders who can support you and that you can activate any service policies that will keep you safe.



### ‘Conversation’ checklist:

At the end of the ‘Conversation’ step and in response to a need that has been noticed:

- educators have scheduled, planned and conducted a conversation with the child’s family about their mental health and wellbeing
- leaders have supported educators to respond to wellbeing needs they have noticed and to schedule, plan, conduct and debrief after a conversation with the child’s family about their mental health and wellbeing.

This checklist can be used to ensure you have covered off every aspect of this step:

- Educators** have scheduled conversations for times that work for both them and the family involved (and ensured leaders are aware of all planned conversations).

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- Educators** have set aside an appropriate amount of time (approximately 40 minutes) for the conversation and can be free of distractions and interruptions during this time.

---

- Educators** have communicated with the family ahead of the conversation, raising any concerns as they arise and ensuring the family isn’t faced with any big surprises during the conversation.

---

- Educators** have ensured the family feels prepared for the conversation including how long it will take and what the focus will be.

---

- Educators** have used the *Family partnerships conversation tool* to plan and prepare for the conversation, including selecting any relevant prompts and questions from the CHILD domains.

---

- Educators** have collaborated with colleagues to gather other relevant perspectives on how the child is going in the early learning service, and have invited other educators and/or leaders to attend the conversation (if appropriate based on your service’s policies and procedures).

---

- Educators** have made sure the space in which the conversation will take place is safe, private and allows for all parties to meet on an equal footing.

---

- Educators** have followed the conversation tool template as they conduct the conversation.

---

- Educators** have concluded the conversation with a shared understanding with the family about the child’s need for support and plans to address these needs.

---

- OR
- Educators** have concluded the conversation without having yet come to a shared understanding with the family about the child’s need for support. As a result, they have informed leaders, kept records of the conversation and developed plans to raise the concern again in the future.

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- Educators** have debriefed with colleagues and leaders as needed and know how to access any further mental health and wellbeing support for themselves that they may need.

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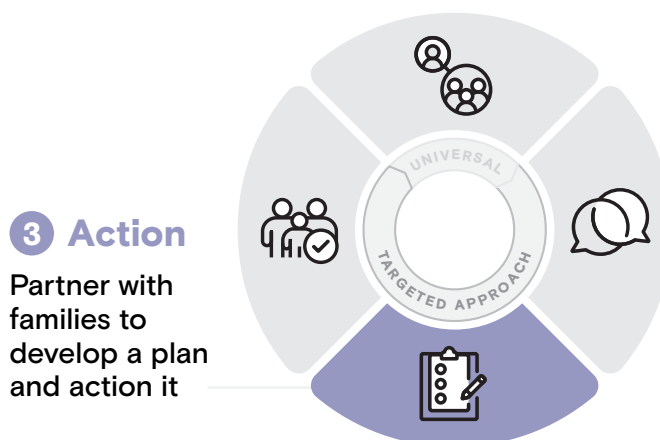
- Leaders** have supported staff before, during and after the conversation in line with the early learning service’s ongoing policies and procedures.





## Step 3 – Action: Partner with families to develop a plan and action it

**FIGURE 7** Step 3 of the Family Partnerships Practice Model



In the ‘Action’ step, educators identify and implement follow-up actions stemming from their conversation with the family. These actions are tailored to the individual child and may include referrals to additional supports, including online resources, professional mental health support and services.

### Approaches for Step 3 – ‘Action’

As an educator you can use the following approaches to develop an action plan that identifies, links to and implements supports relevant to the child’s needs:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>1. Centring the child’s perspective</b></p>     | <p>Prioritising the child’s perspective and involving them in planning and decision-making processes.</p>  |
| <p><b>2. Setting shared goals</b></p>                 | <p>Collaboratively establishing goals with the child and their family to guide intervention efforts.</p>   |
| <p><b>3. Defining clear actions</b></p>               | <p>Clearly outlining specific actions to address the child’s needs and support their mental health and wellbeing.</p>  |
| <p><b>4. Establishing a team around the child</b></p> | <p>Engaging with other staff, families and external supports (if appropriate) to form a coordinated team focused on the child’s mental health and wellbeing.</p> |

## Who is involved?

The 'Action' step follows conversations with families about child mental health and wellbeing, making it integral to every situation where such discussions occur. Educators lead this step, collaborating with families, colleagues and leaders, along with external supports as needed.

## How long will it take?

The duration of this step varies depending on the specific needs of the child and their family. Follow-up actions may influence interactions with the child during regular activities, and additional meetings or conversations may be necessary in some cases.

### Snapshot – Supporting a referral process

Supporting referrals is a common part of this step. Many action plans will not involve seeking professional supports for children's mental health and wellbeing, but from time-to-time this will be a process that sits at the heart of supporting a child and their family. Knowing how to approach referrals and being confident in your role in this process is an important aspect of responding to mental health and wellbeing concerns that have been identified.

This snapshot explores a range of ways that you can link families to supports. Once you have learned more about how you can provide families with links and pathways to accessing professional support, you will be ready to use the [referral tool for educators](#).

#### When is a referral process needed?

In many cases, the Family Partnerships Practice Model may be used to support a child and family through life's ups and downs. This includes situations in which the action plan involves some simple modification of routines and approaches at home and at the early learning service, to support a child through a difficult time. In these situations, it may not be necessary to involve any other supports or services.

In these situations, family partnerships are being used to foster a preventative approach to mental health and wellbeing; but there are a range of ways that further support and professional supports can be used in partnerships when needed.

#### Fostering a preventative approach through family partnerships

Educators play a key role in working with families to prevent the escalation of difficulties that may otherwise end up requiring professional support. By establishing strong family partnerships, educators can intervene early and provide support that may prevent the need for further professional assistance. This preventative approach emphasises the importance of collaborative efforts between educators and families in addressing children's mental health and wellbeing.

#### Drawing on online resources and supports

Additionally, families can benefit from utilising online resources and supports as part of their proactive approach to supporting their child's mental health. These resources offer valuable information, tools and strategies that can complement the support provided by educators. Considering factors such as waitlist times and the costs associated with accessing professional support, online resources and supports can serve as an important initial step in addressing concerns and promoting mental health within the family.

As an educator, you can play a role in proactive preventative mental health approaches through your daily work with children. You can also link families to relevant online supports when required.

**Supporting a referral to professional mental health supports**

When the need for a referral to professional mental health supports arises, you can help by connecting families with local services and encouraging them to seek referrals to specialised practitioners through their GP.

**Maintaining a collaborative family partnership through referrals**

When discussing referrals in the context of a family partnership, it is important to maintain a collaborative approach and actively involve the child and family in the decision-making process. Gaining the family's consent is essential prior to pursuing any referrals. The role of the child in this process will likely look different depending on their age and where they're at in their development. The family will ultimately make decisions and choices about a referral process.

As an educator, you can support families by providing links and information (when possible) and reassuring the family that you are open to providing information or observations to health professionals. You can also help by offering to work collaboratively with any health professionals who may become involved in supporting the child.

**Referral pathways**

In some cases, it may be necessary to support the referral of the child and family to a general practitioner (GP). They can provide advice on seeking more specialised support from a paediatrician or a mental health professional such as a counsellor, psychologist, social worker or occupational therapist, depending on the issue.

To do so, you first need to know your service's referral pathways and procedures, as well as what services are available to families in your community. There may also be policies, procedures and services available through your wider organisation, sector governing bodies or relevant departments, depending on the type of organisation you're working for. Check with your leaders to see whether you have access to services or processes in this way.

Understanding the steps involved in making a referral, including paperwork, appointment scheduling and follow-up is key. Speak to your centre director about policies or procedures in place to support this.

Talk to the family about confidentiality and how information will be shared between yourselves and the professional. It is also important to clarify your role as an educator in the referral process, such as sharing observations and insights with the professional if needed.

Finally, it's important to stay connected with the family and professionals involved, providing updates and receiving feedback.



### How can leaders support the referral process?

As a leader you can provide guidance on appropriate ways for staff to support families to seek referrals and to provide them with direct links to community services and supports. To guide this practice, leaders can focus on the following attributes:

- **Sound knowledge of child mental health and wellbeing** and how this impacts a child's learning and development in early childhood care settings. This could include providing links to further learning and information for staff as required. For further support in this area, check out these other Emerging Minds resources for early childhood educators:
  - » [Early childhood educators learning pathway](#)
- **Sound knowledge of referral pathways and internal and external support options**, so you can provide informed guidance to staff when necessary. This includes:
  - » knowledge of professional support services (e.g. GPs, occupational therapists, social workers, child and family health nurses, crisis support helplines) and relevant referral pathways to accessing this support
  - » a clear understanding of confidentiality and mandatory reporting requirements
  - » being clear about your role in referral and support
  - » developing and documenting clear referral processes and policies in your school.
- **Oversight of processes** to ensure that both mental health literacy and referral pathways are implemented uniformly by staff across your early learning service.



## **Implementation tool: Referral tool for educators**

### **Introducing the *Referral tool for educators***

The *Referral tool for educators* is designed to help you understand the different health professionals who provide services to children and families. You can use the tool to help you identify professional support options and referral pathways for families in your local area.

### **How to use the *Referral tool for educators***

Deciding when to support a referral process can be difficult, as mental health concerns present in diverse ways and are influenced by the unique circumstances of each family. To help you in this process, we've created the *Referral tool for educators*. This tool has been developed to assist educators in providing information to families about how they can seek referrals. It will help you to identify appropriate professional services and referral pathways for families within your local community. With this tool, you can be empowered to navigate the complexities of referrals with confidence and increased efficiency.

When using the tool, remember to consider the specific needs and circumstances of each family, ensuring that connections and referrals align with the collaborative decisions made in partnership with the family.

Incorporating the referral tool into practice allows you to effectively advocate for the mental health and wellbeing of children and families, facilitating timely access to support services and enhancing the overall support framework within educational settings.

Make sure you have read the previous section ('Snapshot – supporting a referral process') prior to using the tool. This snapshot provides some helpful reminders about working collaboratively with families and making sure you keep consent, confidentiality and your own service's policies in mind.

– [Go to \*Referral tool for educators\*](#)



### **‘Action’ checklist:**

At the end of the ‘Action’ step:

- educators and families (including the child) have developed a plan of action and put it in place at the early learning service, at home and in other settings if appropriate
- leaders have supported educators, families and any other relevant parties to collaborate to manage the ongoing success of the action plan.

This checklist can be used to ensure you have covered off every aspect of this step:

- Educators** have developed an action plan in collaboration with the child and their family that clearly outlines what support is planned at the early learning service and at home, and if any further support, advice or connections have been planned.

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- Educators** have set in motion all supports that will be in place within the early learning service, including coordinating with other staff and providers as required.

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- Educators** have planned how they will remain aware of progress with any planned external supports, including referrals to professional mental health and wellbeing supports.

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- Educators** have provided information and/or links to any other relevant local supports that were identified in the action plan, including any online mental health and wellbeing supports or community programs.

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- Educators** and **leaders** have coordinated ongoing communication and meetings with the team of professionals providing support for the child as required, including providing feedback or observations when requested and collaborating to adapt learning programs using suggested approaches when advised.

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- Leaders** have demonstrated their sound knowledge of child mental health and wellbeing – how it impacts a child’s learning and development in early learning service settings – including providing links to further learning and information for staff as required.

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- Leaders** have demonstrated their sound knowledge of referral pathways and internal and external support options available locally, and have provided informed guidance to staff when necessary.

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- Leaders** have maintained oversight of processes to ensure that both mental health literacy and referral pathways are implemented uniformly by staff across the service.



## Step 4 – Check in and review: Check in with the family to review actions and progress

**FIGURE 8** Step 4 of the Family Partnerships Practice Model

### 4 Check in and review

Check in with families to review actions and progress



In the final step of the model, educators and families maintain communication and evaluate the effectiveness and progress of the action plan. This involves regular check-ins with the family through routine communications, rather than formal meetings.

### Approaches for Step 4 – ‘Check in and review’

As an educator you can use the following approaches to maintaining connection and trust between educators and families, while ensuring the action plan is responsive to the child’s evolving needs:

1. **Sustaining the partnership** Continuously nurturing the partnership between educators and families to ensure longevity and trust.
2. **Checking in with the family** Regularly communicating with the family to assess how the child is responding to the support plan and if any adjustments are necessary.
3. **Gathering feedback** Actively seeking the family’s input to understand their perspective on the effectiveness of the action plan and any areas for improvement.
4. **Monitoring progress** Tracking the progress of the child and evaluating whether the support actions are meeting their needs.

## Who is involved?

Similar to previous steps, the 'Check in and review' step follows conversations and action planning with families. Educators lead this step, collaborating with families, colleagues and external supports as required.

## How much time will it take?

The timing of this phase varies, depending on the needs of the child and their family and how the support actions are being implemented. There is no fixed timeframe; it may occur weeks or months after the initial conversation, tailored to the individual circumstances. The goal is to maintain connection and trust while ensuring the action plan effectively meets the child's needs. Ongoing regular communication with families facilitates this process, although subsequent follow-up conversations may be necessary in some cases.

This section is for **education leaders** and **individual educators**



## 'Check in and review' checklist

At the end of the check in and review step:

- educators and families (including the child) have monitored, reviewed and adapted their plan of action and put in place any updates and changes at the early learning service, at home and in other settings if appropriate
- leaders have supported educators, families and any other relevant parties to collaborate to manage the ongoing success of the action plan.

This checklist can be used to ensure you have covered off every aspect of this step:

- Educators** have monitored the progress of the action plan in collaboration with the child and their family.
- Educators** have sought feedback from the child, their family, other educators and any other relevant parties to understand how others feel the action plan is going.
- Educators** have collaborated with the child, the family and others to make any required changes to the action plan.
- Educators** have set in motion all changes to supports that will be in place within the early learning service, including coordinating with other staff and providers as required.
- Educators** have reflected on the success of the partnership with the family and made any required changes to how they are approaching the partnership.
- In tricky situations, **educators** and **leaders** have worked together to try to develop effective family partnerships, and have kept clear documentation of conversations and used service policies to ensure staff are safe and supported.
- Educators** and **leaders** continue to coordinate ongoing communication and meetings with the team of professionals providing support for the child, including providing feedback or observations when requested and collaborating to adapt learning programs using suggested approaches when advised.
- Leaders** have established a supportive environment in which staff feel comfortable to review plans and partnerships within a culture of ongoing improvement.
- Leaders** have checked in with staff and offered opportunities to debrief on how their partnerships with families are going, and whether they need to take different or further action to provide support to the child or their family.
- Leaders** have provided staff with guidance on possible next steps to take if further support is required. This may involve you sitting in on meetings with families or assisting with referrals to professional mental health supports.
- Leaders** have implemented strategies to address any barriers or challenges that may hinder educators' abilities to engage in effective partnerships with families (e.g. time, training).

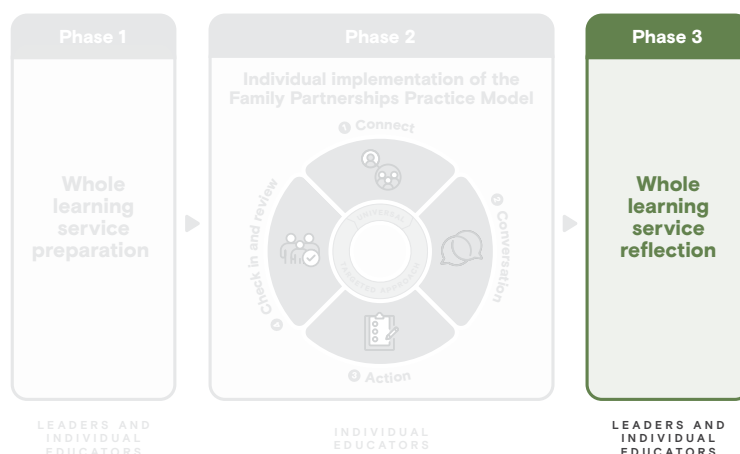




## Phase 3: Whole learning service reflection

**FIGURE 9**

**Phase 3 of implementing the Family Partnerships Practice Model across a whole early learning service**



### About this phase

After educators have implemented the model in full, leaders guide staff through a reflection phase considering how the Family Partnerships Practice Model is working in their context.

This phase is an opportunity to consider how the model is benefitting the development of family partnerships in your service, and how well these family partnerships are supporting children's mental health and wellbeing. It is critical for creating the conditions and systems for the model to succeed and to be sustainable in your early learning service.

As in the first phase, 'Preparation', this final whole-service reflection phase is driven by education leaders, who play a crucial role in assessing the effectiveness of the Family Partnerships Practice Model at the whole-service level. It aims to promote continuous improvement and learning among staff and involves:

- gathering feedback
- reflective practice activities as a whole staff
- identifying strengths and areas for improvement
- debriefing, support and further training opportunities if required.

Success at the whole-service level relies on leadership support, and the purpose of this phase is to evaluate how well the Family Partnerships Practice Model is being implemented across the service by staff. Here leaders are responsible for assessing what is working well, and for identifying areas in need of improvement or additional support (which may involve addressing environmental or systemic level changes).

By the end of this phase, your service will understand the benefits of the model for your educators and families, and have identified any areas for improvement in the future.

## Time required

This phase will require an investment of time from both leaders and educators; however, you can decide how to structure this time so that it works for you and your staff.

As with the preparation phase, the time commitment depends partly on the size and complexity of your early learning service. The key time commitments required for this phase are outlined in the following table.

There is flexibility in when the reflection phase takes place. This might depend partly on the time of year and the size and complexity of your setting. You may find that using your normal ways of reflecting, evaluating and reviewing new initiatives can guide the timing of this phase; or you could simply schedule some reflection time at a convenient date once the model has been up and running for at least 3–6 months or at the end of a calendar year.

## Key actions that support your school preparation:

Action	Details	Time required
<b>1. Gather feedback</b>	Gather feedback from children, families, educators and leaders about how they feel family partnerships are working for them.	To guide your planning, allow several weeks to gather feedback
<b>2. Staff reflection</b>	Lead staff reflection workshop to allow staff to reflect on their own practice and learn from others.	One 60-minute staff workshop is suggested as a way to structure this reflection, but your approach can be tailored to your available time and meeting structures
<b>3. Identify strengths and opportunities for improvement</b>	Use the feedback you have gathered to develop an understanding of your service's strengths in family partnerships. Identify any opportunities for further improvement and how you could implement these in future partnership approaches.	Use your normal planning and management procedures to plan for the implementation of any improvements
<b>4. Offer support and training opportunities</b>	Offer support, debriefing or further training to build educators' confidence in implementing your identified improvements in ongoing partnerships.	Varied, depending on the needs of your staff

## 1. Gather feedback

### *Gather feedback from educators and families*

There are a range of ways you can gather feedback to inform your whole service reflections. The following are some ideas and suggestions, but if your service has another approach that you would prefer to use, you can adapt and contextualise these ideas to work best for your staff and families.

#### **Educators**

Using the following prompts as a starting point, design a series of questions for educators that seeks to gather their perspectives:

- How well has the Family Partnerships Practice Model developed family partnerships in our service?
- How well have these partnerships supported children’s mental health, development and overall wellbeing?

Some question ideas to get you started:

#### **Partnerships**

- ‘Overall, how well has the Family Partnerships Practice Model developed family partnerships in our service?’ (This question could be answered on a scale.)
- ‘What are our service’s strengths in how we approach family partnerships?’
- ‘Are there any areas of family partnerships practice in which we could improve?’
- ‘Do you have any ideas for how we could approach these areas for improvement?’
- ‘Are there any areas you would like further training or support in to improve your capacity to sustain family partnerships?’
- ‘Are there any barriers to the success of family partnerships in our service that we should be aware of?’

#### **Supporting child mental health and wellbeing**

- ‘Overall, how well are our family partnerships supporting children’s mental health and wellbeing?’ (This question could be answered on a scale.)
- ‘What are the strengths of family partnerships in terms of supporting children’s mental health?’
- ‘Are there any areas that could be improved or any gaps you have noticed?’
- ‘Do you have any ideas for how we could improve these areas or address gaps?’
- ‘Are there any areas you would like further training or support in to improve your capacity to support child mental health and wellbeing in your role as an educator?’

#### **Children and families**

Using the same prompts as a starting point, design a series of questions for parents to gather their perspectives, and a series of questions or prompts for children that seek their feedback in an age-appropriate manner.

### ***Collate the feedback to present to your staff***

Once you have consulted with your educators, parents and children, collate their feedback into a presentation, ready to use in your staff reflection activities.

With your presentation of feedback ready to share, you can also prepare reflection questions to guide staff discussion using the prompts in the next section.

## **2. Staff reflection activities**

You can lead your staff reflection activities in a variety of ways, depending on how you usually approach reflective learning as a group. The following are some ideas for how your staff could reflect on the feedback you've gathered about how family partnerships are working in your service.

These are more general ideas for reflective practice; you can choose which, if any, are right for your service and the amount of time you have available to reflect as a group.

### ***Reflecting on your service's feedback***

#### **Conduct a reflection session with your educators**

1. Present the feedback you have gathered from educators, children and families.
2. Considering this feedback, facilitate a reflective discussion with your staff that addresses:
  - » how well the model has developed family partnerships
  - » strengths and areas for further improvement
  - » how well the model has supported children/young people's mental health and wellbeing
  - » how well the model has been implemented from an organisational perspective and whether educators have suggestions for improvements in the future
  - » whether there are any skills or aspects of partnership practice in which educators would like further learning or development
  - » how you as a staff could approach the identified areas of further improvement and whether there are there any changes you would make for future implementation.

#### **Reflection prompts to support discussion**

##### **Reflecting on family partnerships**

- 'How well has the Family Partnerships Practice Model developed family partnerships in our setting?'
- 'Are current methods of communication working for all partners?'
- 'Do educators and families feel like they've established a partnership that could be used to address future issues that may arise?'
- 'Do we need to reconsider our current practice?'

Use these prompts to explore staff perspectives, then draw on this and the feedback from others to create two lists:

1. Our services strengths in family partnerships
2. Areas we would like to see further improvement in

### **Reflecting on the power of partnerships to support child mental health and wellbeing**

- ‘How well have these partnerships supported children’s/young people’s wellbeing and development?’
- ‘Do educators and families feel that the actions they’re undertaking are meeting the mental health and wellbeing needs of the child/young person?’
- ‘Do children feel like the partnerships are successfully supporting their current needs?’
- ‘Do we need to reconsider our current plans?’

### **Reflective practice more broadly**

Reflective practice is an essential component of professional development and ongoing learning. It refers to structured and intentional processes of self-examination and thoughtful consideration of your experiences, actions, decisions and outcomes. It involves analysing and evaluating your professional practice and learning from successes and challenges to make improvements.

Reflective practice aims to build self-awareness, self-improvement, and more thoughtful and considered approaches to engaging and developing partnerships with families – ultimately enhancing the support you can offer to children and their families.

The following are some suggested reflective practice activities that you can facilitate with your staff:

- **Sharing of successes:** Allow opportunities for staff to share recent positive experiences and challenges with family partnerships – this might be at your regular staff meeting, for example. This informal sharing allows staff to learn from each other’s successes and brainstorm strategies for addressing common obstacles.
- **Group reflection sessions:** Lead guided reflection sessions where staff reflect on a recent family partnership experience or plan they developed to support a child’s mental health and wellbeing. Encourage staff to share insights, strategies and lessons learned and to discuss what worked well, along with areas for improvement.
- **Video reflection:** Together with your staff, watch the video scenarios in the online learning courses and encourage staff to reflect on the skills and key messages presented in the videos. Similar to the group reflection sessions, encourage staff to reflect on what they observed in the scenarios and identify any opportunities for improvement.
- **Feedback circles:** Form small groups where educators take turns sharing their recent family partnership experiences. After each sharing, group members provide constructive feedback, highlighting strengths and suggesting alternative approaches.
- **Collaborative problem solving:** Identify a recurring challenge in family partnerships and facilitate a collaborative problem-solving session. Encourage staff to brainstorm innovative solutions and discuss how these solutions align with the principles of effective family engagement.

The success of these reflective practice activities lies in creating a safe and supportive environment where your staff feel comfortable sharing their experiences and insights. The purpose is to foster growth, learning and continuous improvement in family partnership practices.

### 3. Identify strengths and opportunities for further improvement

Working with your staff through reflective practice (outlined in detail in the previous section) you will have developed a list of your service's strengths in family partnerships and a list of opportunities for further improvement.

Part of this reflective phase is to celebrate your service's strengths and acknowledge the hard work of staff and leaders to establish these strengths. You might like to acknowledge these strengths with your families and community and find ways to celebrate your success together.

Once you have your list of opportunities for further improvement, it's important to make plans for how you will work towards these improvement goals. Adjust how you are approaching family partnerships within your service and maintain an open and ongoing dialogue with staff and families to monitor your progress.

### 4. Support and training opportunities as needed

In this phase, educators are part of meetings and/or workshops run by leaders to reflect and provide feedback and suggestions for improvement. As part of this work, educators may identify any priority areas for future learning and ongoing development that they feel would support them to establish and sustain effective family partnerships. It's important to follow up by providing opportunities for support and further training that can assist staff members to continue to build their capacity and confidence in family partnerships. A useful starting point may be to revisit the online learning courses and other resources within the Family Partnerships Toolkit.

#### Reflection checklist

At the end of the reflection phase your staff have worked together to uncover key lessons about how your service approaches family partnerships and to grow confidence to collaborate on further improvements.

This checklist can be used to ensure you have covered off every aspect of this step:

- Leaders** have gathered feedback to give a service-wide overview of how well the Family Partnerships Practice Model has developed partnerships and how well those partnerships have supported the mental health and wellbeing and development of children at your service.

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- Leaders** have considered the feedback of educators, children, parents and any other relevant parties.

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- Leaders** have facilitated a reflective discussion for all educators that considered service-wide feedback, along with their own experiences. They have provided opportunities for educators to suggest areas of strength and opportunities for future improvement in both the implementation of the model and their own learning or practice.

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- Leaders** have used these reflections to inform decisions and plans relating to any changes to how family partnerships might be approached in the future.

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- Leaders** have ensured that ongoing family partnerships support and training are available for educators.

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- Educators** have provided their feedback on how well the model has developed partnerships and how well the partnerships have supported the mental health and wellbeing and development of children in your service.

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- Educators** have reflected on the feedback collated from other educators, children and families about family partnerships in your service.

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- Educators** have identified strengths and opportunities for further improvement in how family partnerships are approached in your service.

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- Educators** have identified their own further learning and skill development needs.

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## Tool 1: Introducing the Family Partnerships Practice Model to staff

### Part 1: Workshop agenda template

*The following template provides some suggested topics of discussion for your initial meeting/workshop with staff. It is designed as a guide only and can be modified or edited to suit the needs of you and your staff.*

#### Objectives:

- ✓ To share your service's commitment to using the Family Partnerships Practice Model to ensure consistent and effective implementation of family partnerships across your whole service.
- ✓ To begin to build an understanding across your whole staff of the importance of family partnerships and the positive role they can play in supporting children's mental health and wellbeing.
- ✓ To introduce the Family Partnerships Toolkit to your staff, including the online learning courses that are available for them to undertake in readiness to use the model.
- ✓ To communicate to staff the timeline you have set for them to undertake the online learning courses, and to begin discussions about how the model will run in your setting and how it will fit in with your existing practices and procedures.
- ✓ To sign post another upcoming workshop that will take place when staff have completed the online learning courses. This second workshop will be focused on creating safe spaces for all families within your service.

**Time required:** 30–60-minute staff meeting. Adapt the agenda template to suit shorter or longer time slots as you need. If you have time available, you might like to let staff get started on their first online course as part of this workshop.

**Materials required:** This workshop requires an internet connection, screen and computer to run a presentation. You can use or adapt the presentation provided in Part 2: Introducing the Family Partnerships Practice Model to staff.

**Suggested space:** You can run this meeting/workshop in the same space you would usually run your staff meetings or professional learning workshops. Depending on whether you run the final section of the suggested agenda (in which staff will log on to the Emerging Minds Learning website to register and commence their online learning), you may need to choose a space that allows your staff to work online on their individual computers.



**Workshop outline:**

Topic	Suggested discussion items	Presentation slides
<p><b>Welcome and introduction</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Welcome all staff and thank them for their attendance.</i></li> <li>- <i>Include any Acknowledgement of Country practices that you usually do in your staff meetings.</i></li> <li>- <i>'The purpose of this meeting is to discuss and prepare for how we are going to implement the Family Partnerships Practice Model in our early learning service.'</i></li> </ul>	<p>Slide 1</p>
<p><b>Understanding and supporting children's mental health and wellbeing</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Meet Emm – present the animation on slide 2.</i></li> <li>- <i>Ask a couple of staff volunteers to share how they see family partnerships could be an important way to support children's mental health and wellbeing.</i></li> </ul>	<p>Slide 2 (Emm animation clip)</p>
<p><b>Focus on family partnerships</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>'Family partnerships are one way that a early learning service can support children's mental health and wellbeing.'</i></li> <li>- <i>'Family partnerships can be tricky to do well for all families, so we are going to try using the Family Partnerships Practice Model developed by Emerging Minds. The model is informed by evidence and also by extensive consultation with educators and families.'</i></li> <li>- <i>'When partnerships work, there are benefits for the child, their family and also for educators.'</i></li> <li>- <i>'Part of our learning about family partnerships will involve possibly rethinking some of what we think we know about this work and doing some reflective practice together as a staff.'</i></li> </ul>	<p>Slide 3</p>
<p><b>About the Family Partnerships Practice Model</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>The Family Partnerships Practice Model is a simple four-step model for educators to use to make sure we have consistent family partnerships for all families.'</i></li> <li>- <i>Present the animation clip (slide 4).</i></li> <li>- <i>'The model builds on many of the ideas and practices you are likely already using as educators, but it helps us ensure we are following a consistent process.'</i></li> <li>- <i>'It also makes sure we cover all the essential elements that are likely to support positive partnerships and avoid some of the common traps that can be barriers to success.'</i></li> </ul>	<p>Slide 4 (Family Partnerships Practice Model animation)</p>
<p><b>The process for using the model across a whole early learning service</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>'The model is designed to be used by all educators in our early learning service and importantly to be supported by our leaders.'</i></li> <li>- <i>'The role of individual educators is focused on phase 2.'</i></li> <li>- <i>'The role of leaders is to drive phases 1 and 3 to make sure you as educators are supported to build partnerships in healthy and sustainable ways.'</i></li> <li>- <i>Check your understanding: Are you and your staff clear on the purpose of the model and the steps involved? Are staff clear on their roles in implementing the model?</i></li> </ul>	<p>Slide 5</p>

Topic	Suggested discussion items	Presentation slides
<b>Getting started with the Family Partnerships Toolkit</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'Everything we need to get started is in the Emerging Minds Family Partnerships Toolkit.'</li> <li>- 'It has resources to support implementation including: two online learning courses for educators, a Family Partnerships Guide (think of this as your handbook from the courses), and a series of tools you can use to make the model work in your own practice.'</li> <li>- 'Our starting point is all educators doing the online learning courses:'</li> <li>- 'The first is a foundation course, <i>An introduction to Family Partnerships for educators</i>.'</li> <li>- 'The second is a skills-focused course: <i>The Family Partnerships Practice Model: A guide for early learning service educators</i>. The course provides a detailed overview of each of the four steps in the model: 'Connect', 'Conversation', 'Action', and 'Check in and review'. The skills and approaches that underpin each step are also explored using fictional demonstration videos tailored specifically to the needs of individual educators who will be implementing the model. This course is designed for educators who will be using the Family Partnerships Practice Model in their work.'</li> <li>- <i>Explain to your staff when and how you expect them to undertake these two courses.</i></li> </ul>	Slide 6
<b>Getting started with the online courses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'The first step is for us all to undertake both the online learning courses.'</li> <li>- <i>Use the link/graphic on this slide to demonstrate to staff how they can register for Emerging Minds Learning and get started on the courses.</i> <a href="https://learning.emergingminds.com.au/">https://learning.emergingminds.com.au/</a> OR <i>if you have set up a dashboard to facilitate your staff accessing the courses, provide details of how they can get started</i></li> <li>- <i>Share specific details about the training, including the format, content and expected time commitment. This might include a follow up email with the key details and timelines.</i></li> <li>- <i>Emphasise the relevance of the training to their daily roles. Explain how it will enhance their ability to engage with families, support children's wellbeing, and contribute to the overall success of your early learning service.</i></li> </ul>	Slide 7
<b>Q&amp;A &amp; next steps</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Q&amp;A with staff about planning and preparation or about the model more broadly. Encourage staff to ask questions and address any concerns they may have. Be prepared to provide clarification and reassure them about the value of the training.</i></li> <li>- 'There will be another workshop for all educators once we have completed the online training. This next session will focus on creating safe spaces across our service and how this is something we can focus on to set the right conditions for partnerships to thrive.'</li> </ul>	Slide 8

Topic	Suggested discussion items	Presentation slides
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'We will plan to run this session on...'</li> <li>- 'Until then leaders will focus on the planning we need to do for the model and educators can work through the online learning courses at their own pace.'</li> </ul>	
<b>Optional</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Provide staff with time now to register and log in to the Emerging Minds Learning site and get started on the foundation course An introduction to Family Partnerships for educators.</i></li> </ul>	Slide 8
<b>Meeting close</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>After the meeting, follow up with an email with links to the online learning course and seek feedback.</i></li> <li>- <i>Be open to feedback from staff regarding the training and communication process.</i></li> <li>- <i>Make adjustments based on their input to enhance engagement.</i></li> </ul>	Post-meeting email and ongoing conversations

## Part 2: Workshop presentation template

The following presentation template provides some graphics and content for your initial meeting/workshop with staff. It is designed as a guide only and can be modified or edited to suit the needs of you and your staff.

### Presentation outline:

**Slide 1** Opening slide: *Family partnerships to support children's mental health and wellbeing*

**Slide 2** **Understanding and supporting children's mental health**

*Meet Emm* (Child mental health animation)

**Slide 3** **Family partnerships**

Family partnerships are the relationships between families (i.e. children, parents, grandparents, foster carers and/or kinship carers) and educators that are centred on supporting a child.

Authentic family partnerships are built on mutual respect, trust and understanding. When educators and families collaborate as equals, with each recognising the other's knowledge and perspective, it results in a strong partnership that supports a child's mental health, development and readiness to learn.

**Slide 4** **The Family Partnerships Practice Model**

(Family Partnerships Practice Model animation)

**Slide 5** **The process for using the model across a whole early learning service.**

**Slide 6** **Getting started with the Family Partnerships Toolkit**

- Online learning courses
- Family Partnerships Guide
- Implementation tools

**Slide 7** **Getting started with the Family Partnerships online learning courses**

- Foundation course: *An introduction to family partnerships for educators*
- Skills course: *The Family Partnerships Practice Model: A guide for early learning service educators*
- <https://learning.emergingminds.com.au>

**Slide 8** **Next steps:**

1. *Online learning courses for educators*
2. *Ongoing planning for leaders*
3. *Upcoming second staff session for all: Creating safe spaces workshop*

[Download a copy of the workshop presentation template and overview](#)



## Tool 2: Creating safe and inclusive spaces in your early learning service

### How to use this tool

This tool has two parts:

1. Creating safe and inclusive spaces across a whole early learning service
2. Creating safe and inclusive spaces in your work as an educator

The work of ‘creating safe and inclusive spaces’ happens on multiple levels, from site-wide culture and the feeling families get when they enter your service, through to the more specific details. For this reason, we have divided the tool into two parts. Part 1 looks at the big picture, whole of service environment factors; while part 2 addresses how you as an individual educator can create safe spaces on a more micro level, through your interactions with families and how you arrange the space and the furniture in particular rooms.

By ensuring the big picture feeling and atmosphere lines up with the smaller everyday interactions, your service will be able to present a consistent, welcoming feeling to all families, which is a powerful base upon which to build family partnerships.

### How to use Part 1: Creating safe and inclusive spaces across a whole early learning service

*Part 1 helps you run a staff workshop on creating safe and inclusive spaces.*

Leaders can use part 1 of this tool when they are working through the ‘preparation’ phase of the Family Partnerships Guide with their educators. The staff workshop ideas that are outlined in part 1 offer leaders a range of ways they can approach the third key action in this phase, ‘Developing a culture of family partnerships’. Leaders can use this part of the tool to **create and run a workshop** for their staff to consider how the service’s spaces feel for families overall.

For more information about the role of leaders in creating safe and inclusive spaces, see [page 17](#) of the Family Partnerships Guide.

### How to use Part 2: Creating safe and inclusive spaces in your work as an educator

*Part 2 helps you reflect on your role as an individual educator in creating safe and inclusive spaces in your day-to-day interactions with families*

Educators can use part 2 of this tool to support your work in step 1 of the Family Partnerships Practice Model, ‘Connection’. You can explore the reflective practice ideas to consider how you, as an individual educator, can influence how families experience your spaces.

For more information about how creating safe and inclusive spaces contributes to ‘Step 1 – Connection’, please see [page 21-24](#) of the Family Partnerships Guide.

## Part 1: Staff workshop ideas

**Prior learning:** This workshop is designed to be run after staff have completed the online learning courses, [An introduction to family partnerships for educators](#) and [The Family Partnerships Practice Model: A guide for early learning service educators](#). These courses cover significant content related to creating safe spaces. They will provide staff with a strong understanding of why safe and inclusive spaces matter, and how they are relevant to family partnerships.

We recommend that this staff workshop is held after staff have completed their online learning. By completing the courses first, staff will be ready to put their learning into action by considering how you can create safe and inclusive spaces in your early learning service.

### Objectives:

- ✓ To provide your staff with opportunities to imagine they are 'stepping into the shoes' of families to consider how your service might feel for them.
- ✓ For staff to reflect on and review their practice in creating safe and inclusive environments for children and for families.
- ✓ To identify what your service is already doing well to create safe and welcoming environments.
- ✓ To identify any areas for further improvement or gaps in your awareness, knowledge or practice.
- ✓ To identify ways you can adapt your spaces or practices to ensure all families feel safe, welcome and valued in your service.

**Time required:** A 60–120-minute workshop is recommended. The following workshop activities are designed for you to choose from, depending on what will work best for your staff in the time you have available. It is entirely up to you how long this workshop runs for, or whether it's better for your staff to run several short sessions over time.

**Materials required:** The suggested activities do not require any special equipment or materials. You might make use of a whiteboard or place to write notes to share with the group, and basic workshop supplies to support discussion and the generation of new ideas (e.g. Post-it notes, butcher's paper or online equivalents such as [Menti](#)). If you find it useful, you could choose to make a presentation that includes some of the questions and prompts that guide the activities. Just cut and paste from the details in the following sections, based on which activities you have chosen to do.

**Suggested space:** This workshop can be run in a variety of spaces. You will need somewhere that allows your staff to gather and reflect together, perhaps working in small groups at times. Given the focus, you might consider holding at least parts of this workshop in the spaces of your service that families interact with the most.

## Workshop outline:

Topic	Activity outline
<b>Welcome and introduction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Welcome all staff and thank them for their attendance.</li><li>– Include any usual Acknowledgement of Country practices.</li><li>– Introduce the topic, ‘Creating safe and inclusive spaces’ and reiterate that creating a safe and welcoming environment is important for building positive relationships with families and supporting children’s development and wellbeing.</li><li>– Address that this workshop will involve staff reflecting on and reviewing how safe and inclusive your spaces feel for families, and that this requires your staff to feel safe (including culturally safe) to have this conversation together.</li><li>– As a facilitator, pay attention to how staff are feeling during this workshop and make sure your staff are aware of any support that will be available to them after this workshop if they feel they need it. Perhaps also identify options for staff who may wish to take time out from certain discussions if they find them difficult.</li></ul>

Following is a list of possible activities you might like to run with your staff to explore the topic of safe and welcoming environments. Choose a selection of the activities and questions from the following ideas to make up your workshop plan.

### 1. Optional icebreaker

(approx. 10–15 minutes)

This activity gets staff thinking and talking about how much education settings have changed in how they treat families over time, and to wonder how adults feel generally in education spaces. Before you decide to add this activity to your workshop plan, think about whether you think your staff will feel comfortable to do this activity and make sure you are working within a safe space for staff to share with each other.

- Ask your staff if they are willing to remember back to their own education (or perhaps the stories they have heard from older family members) and whether they have any memories of how it felt to enter the space of their child care, kinder or schools?
- If staff feel comfortable, you might ask them to share some of their memories within small groups of two or three and then feed back to the whole group afterwards about the themes that were shared.
- This activity can be kept light or may also address more serious reflections. Leaders will need to facilitate accordingly.
- Complete this activity by asking staff to then reflect on your own service environment and how much they think things have changed? How do they think the parents who come into your space would answer that question? Would all your parents have the same answer? Are there some who might feel differently?

### 2. Reflection activities

(approx. 10–15 minutes)

This activity provides an opportunity for staff to reflect on your current practice in a few key areas that contribute towards creating safe and inclusive spaces.

- Use the [reflective question bank](#) (page 59) at the end of part 1. These questions can be used to lead a discussion with your staff about how well you are creating safe spaces in your early learning service.
- Depending on how many staff you have participating in the workshop, you could divide the group into three smaller groups and give each group a set of questions to discuss.
- Ask the group to discuss their responses to the set of questions in their small group and then report back to the whole staff with the key themes of their discussion, as well as some early ideas for what they see as the possible strengths and areas of improvement.

Topic	Activity outline
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If staff are identifying areas of strength and opportunities for improvement, you might like to start noting these somewhere visible in your workshop space, such as on a whiteboard or a Post-it note wall. This is something you will come back to later in the session.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Experiential activities</b></p> <p>(approx. 15–20 minutes, possibly longer if you have a large site)</p>	<p>The purpose of reflecting and reviewing in this workshop is to try to put yourselves in the shoes of families and try to imagine how they feel in your spaces. This next activity asks staff to imagine they are literally walking in the shoes of families through your site.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Explain to staff that to help them get into the shoes of families, you are all going to get out into the spaces and take an ‘inquiring walk’. This isn’t about conducting an ‘audit’, but instead takes a more inquiring and curious approach. It asks staff to see the space anew from a different vantage point and think about how different families would feel.</li> <li>- Ask staff to work in pairs or small groups to go for a walk through your early learning service as though they were a parent or carer, and think about how the space feels for them.</li> <li>- Make sure all spaces are included in the walk – you might like to ask staff to head in different directions to cover a specific area or have all the groups cover the whole site (this may depend on your staff size and the time you have).</li> <li>- As part of this walk, encourage staff to try out your own spaces. Do you have a family room or space for private conversations? Try out the space as though you were a family member and consider how they feel. How are they set up (e.g. the furniture placement, whether you can close the door, if other people can see in)? Are they welcoming and conducive to private or sensitive conversations?</li> <li>- Ask staff to make notes as they go, discuss what they notice with their colleagues and remember to think from a few different families’ perspectives as they walk through.</li> <li>- Bring the whole group back together after they have had time out in the spaces and ask each team to share their key findings. Remember to keep looking for strengths, as well as opportunities for improvements or gaps you might not have noticed before.</li> <li>- Add any new ideas to your growing list of strengths and opportunities for improvement.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Identify strengths and opportunities for improvement</b></p> <p>(approx. 10 minutes)</p>	<p>By reflecting on and reviewing your spaces (and possibly also planning to consult families directly) your staff will now be in a position to develop some ideas about your service’s strengths in terms of safe and inclusive spaces, and also to suggest some opportunities for improvement or gaps you would like to address.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ask staff to use Post-it notes or butcher’s paper to contribute their ideas under the headings of ‘Strengths’ and ‘Opportunities for improvement’.</li> <li>- You can add to the lists you have already started earlier in the workshop or start new lists if you haven’t already set them up.</li> <li>- You might think of other useful categories such as ‘Gaps’ or ‘Areas we need to understand more about’; you can add as many headings as you like.</li> </ul>



Topic	Activity outline
<p><b>Next steps</b> (approx. 10 minutes)</p>	<p>The final step in this workshop is to take your reflections and develop a plan for how your service will continue to review and adapt your spaces to encourage safety and family engagement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consider the ideas for further learning in the <a href="#">‘After your workshop’</a> follow-up ideas section.</li> <li>- Identify any areas that staff would like to learn more about.</li> <li>- Consider the ideas for further review of practices and policies in the <a href="#">‘After your workshop’</a> follow-up ideas section.</li> <li>- Identify whether any further review is required and who will undertake this work.</li> <li>- Add any other action items identified by staff and leaders.</li> <li>- Agree on how and when this work will be discussed in ongoing staff meetings to track your progress with agreed actions.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Meeting close</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Thank staff for their engagement in the workshop.</li> <li>- Ensure that staff are aware of the supports that are available if this workshop has raised any concerns for them.</li> <li>- After the meeting, follow up with an email with any agreed actions or further inquiry activities that were identified.</li> <li>- Be open to receiving ongoing feedback from staff and families to help you understand how you’re progressing in this area. Make adjustments based on future learning.</li> <li>- As a facilitator and a service leader, if you have noticed that any parts of this workshop felt difficult or that staff were uncomfortable talking openly about creating safe and inclusive spaces or cultural safety, you might like to consider some follow-up work as a leadership team. Consider whether your workplace culture is supporting the creation of safe and inclusive spaces for families by ensuring a safe space for staff. Seeking anonymous staff feedback might assist you to understand if this is also an area you might need to focus on to support safe and inclusive spaces across your early learning service.</li> </ul>

## After your workshop: Follow-up ideas to keep reflecting, reviewing and learning

### 1. Ideas for further reflection with families

#### Ask families’ opinions

Develop a plan to consult with families. Discuss and decide, as a leadership team or with staff, how you will approach families and what you would like to understand more about.

You might like to inquire about:

- How families attending your service feel about your spaces?
- What do they like and what do they think could be improved?

You can do this through conversations with families or more formal communication channels, such as a survey in your newsletter or email to all families.

## Observe and remain curious

In addition to, or instead of asking families, you might like to observe families using your spaces. Make a plan to spend the coming weeks considering your spaces and noticing:

- How do families engage with the physical environment?
- How do they engage with staff?
- Are you noticing any trends?

Plan to discuss your observations at a future staff meeting.

## 2. Ideas to engage in further learning and training

It is possible that this workshop and the family partnerships online learning courses have helped staff identify areas they would like to know more about.

Engaging in further training involves seeking out professional development opportunities focused on diversity, equity and inclusion. This targeted training will enhance your knowledge and skills in creating environments that are welcoming and supportive for all families. Seek out training opportunities that are available for your staff either online or face-to-face in your local community.

### Ideas for further Emerging Minds learning

Learn more about working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in the following courses:

- [Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children: A framework for understanding](#)
- [Using Aboriginal cultural knowledge systems to strengthen families' resilience](#)
- [Improving the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children](#)

Learn more about working with children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in the following courses:

- [Understanding children's mental health in culturally diverse communities](#)
- [Culturally responsive practice strategies for children's mental health](#)

## 3. Ideas for further review of current practices

Reviewing current practices involves critically assessing existing policies, protocols and practices within your learning environment. This helps in understanding how these practices align with and support the diverse needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, cultural and linguistically diverse (CALD) families, LGBTQIA+ families, children and parents with disability, and families experiencing social disadvantage.

Some actions you might like to take in your setting include:

- Schedule a designated time to review current policies, protocols and practices within your learning environment.
- Create a checklist or assessment tool to systematically evaluate how these practices align with the diverse needs of families.
- Engage with leadership, colleagues or mentors for feedback and insights on areas that may need improvement.

## Reflective questions bank (for Workshop activity 2)

The following list of questions can be used to lead a discussion with your staff about how well you are creating safe spaces in your early learning service.

### Communication

- What sort of communication channels do you have with families? Have you asked families what the most convenient way and times are for educators to communicate with them?
- How do your staff welcome families when they enter your setting?
- Do educators have access to a room or quiet space for conversations? How is that space set up in terms of temperature, furniture, sound levels, and atmosphere?
- Are there a variety of ways to access a child's educator(s) that meet the needs of all families?
- Do you think your service provides a range of opportunities for genuine two-way communication between educators and families?
- What are your current strengths and opportunities for improvement in this area?

### Diversity and inclusivity

- Does your service consider how it can be a culturally safe place for Aboriginal and Torres strait Islander families?
- Does your service have families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds? If so, what do you know about these cultures? Do you need further support to be able to effectively communicate with and support these families?
- Are your signs in any other languages spoken by families in your service?
- How do you demonstrate cultural inclusivity in your physical space? For example, do you have flags representing different cultures on display?
- Does your service consider how it provides a safe space for LGBTQIA+ families?
- Does your service consider how it provides a safe space for families from all backgrounds and situations?
- Is your current communication approach working for some families better than others? Are you unintentionally leaving some families out?
- What are your current strengths and opportunities for improvement in this area?

### Physical spaces, safety and access

- How do you balance security and safety obligations with family access and ease of entry?
- Is the entry accessible for those with additional needs? For example, is there ramp access for prams and wheelchairs?
- How many of your spaces are accessible to those with additional needs?
- Is the physical space welcoming to all families?
- What are your current strengths and opportunities for improvement in this area?

## Part 2: Reflective practice ideas for individual educators

By utilising these reflective practice approaches and advocating for targeted training, educators can contribute to an authentic and inclusive learning environment that meets diverse family needs.

The following reflective and inclusive practice suggestions focus on a theme of listening to families to understand their experiences in your spaces. We've included the voices of families with lived experience of family partnerships throughout the following prompts, to help you consider how families are feeling when engaging with services.

### 1. Reflect on your own practice and the environment you are working in

As an educator working with your specific room of children and families, consider the following reflective questions. They can help you reflect on any areas of unconscious bias that your workplace might hold, or even feelings that your families might bring with them based on previous negative experiences in other education settings.

Unpacking and understanding how education and care settings can feel for families and being proactive about letting go of any historic biases or unhelpful attitudes can support you as an educator to engage families. This reflective practice is not intended to suggest that you haven't already been working hard to engage families. But in some ways the system wasn't set up to make this easy for educators or families, and not all families find it equally easy to connect with their educators.

#### Relationships and connections with families

- How well do you know the families of the children in your service?
  - » Who are the families in your service? What sort of engagement or interactions have you had with them?
  - » Are there some families you know better than others? Why is this?
  - » Is there anything you can take from your interactions with those families you know well and apply to those families who you have spent less time with?
  - » Are there other strategies you can try with those harder-to-reach families?
- How do you think families feel about the relationships they have with you? Would they reflect on it positively?

#### Examining whether our approach works for all families

- Is our current approach working better for some families than others?
- Are we unconsciously missing the needs of some families? For example: does the system we work in privilege parents who have time during the day to engage with educators or take part in activities onsite?
- Have you asked the families how and when they would like to communicate with you?
  - » If not, how could you undertake some consultation to learn more about what your parents want to communicate?
  - » How could you balance offering families flexibility in communication and still maintain a healthy and sustainable workload yourself? Do you need to seek the support of your leaders to discuss this?
- Do you have specific cultural groups represented among your families, and do you feel you have the knowledge, skills and confidence to work effectively with all members of the community?
  - » If you feel that you require support in this area, who might be available to support your learning?

- Have you considered the diversity of your families and whether they all feel welcomed and safe to discuss their circumstances with you? Do you work with families who:
  - » identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
  - » identify as LGBTQIA+
  - » are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD)
  - » practise a religion
  - » have lived experience of mental illness
  - » have lived experience of disability
  - » have lived experience of the criminal justice system
  - » have lived experience of financial or job insecurity
  - » have lived experience of poverty
  - » are experiencing homelessness
  - » have had negative experiences with the education system.
  - » Are you confident all families would feel welcome in your service?
- If you feel like you require support in this area, who might be available to support your learning?

### Offering opportunities for two-way communication with families

In the online learning courses, you saw that effective partnerships feature two-way communication between educators and families. This can be tricky sometimes when our education system was historically known for a more one-way flow of information from education institutions out to families.

As an educator, you likely have a good understanding that parents and educators working together, respecting the knowledge that each brings to the care of the child, leads to positive outcomes. However, you may find that the system wasn't always designed to make this easy, and perhaps there are more opportunities for parents to **receive information** from your service than to **contribute knowledge** about their own child.

### Reflection questions

- If you think about the range of ways families engage with your service, do you think there are enough opportunities for two-way communication and collaboration?
- As an educator, how could you help parents to feel confident that you welcome two-way communication?

Here, a parent with lived experience of family partnerships reflects on their perception of a power imbalance between parents and educators:

'...you have this automatic power imbalance between the educator and the family. The parent feels like you have all of the knowledge and you have all of the power, so you need to bring that back and allow the parents to have that voice to be able to express what they know works for their child, because they are with them all the rest of the hours that you are not with them. So you need to trust that we know our kids best and if something isn't working and we are getting an explosive child at home, then something's got to change ... You need to have a level of vulnerability as educators because that allows us as parents to come in with our vulnerabilities and to try and even up that power imbalance just that little bit, so that I know that you actually care about me and my child as much as you care about your own children or the rest of the children in the learning environment.'

## Reflection questions

- Does this reflection surprise you as an educator?
- How can you make sure children, parents and educators all feel empowered within a partnership?

## 2. Keep developing your inclusive practice

By reflecting, remaining curious, engaging in ongoing learning, and focusing on your practices with families in the room, you can create safe spaces for all children and their families. The following are some ideas you can use to keep developing your inclusive practice:

### *Take a curious and reflective stance*

Remaining curious entails cultivating an open, authentic and non-judgemental approach when working with families. This involves learning about a family's culture, routines and rituals, and other aspects of their lives. These understandings will help you tailor the environment to ensure it remains safe and inclusive.

### **How can I apply this in my work?**

Some actions you might like to take in your setting include:

- Initiate conversations with families to learn about their cultural backgrounds, traditions and experiences.
- Implement regular reflective practices to assess your own biases and assumptions and how they may impact your interactions with families.
- Take a position of trust and mutual respect with families, where you value them as experts in their own lives.

A parent with lived experience of family partnerships suggested the following mindset when engaging with families:

'Be inquisitive, be curious. "What's that about? What is that teaching me? What's that telling me?"  
Or, "What don't I know?"

### *Engage in further learning and training*

Engaging in further training involves seeking out professional development opportunities focused on diversity, equity and inclusion. This targeted training will enhance your knowledge and skills in creating environments that are welcoming and supportive for all families.

A parent with lived experience in family partnerships highlights the need to keep working to connect with families:

' These people may be experiencing many, many external pressures and stresses. So, find a way to connect, whether that be inviting them into the classroom space to see what's going on, inviting them to just come and have a sit and have a cup of tea with you and actually connect and realise that you're a person. You may find that there's some people who have language as their barrier and that's why they don't feel comfortable engaging with you. There may be cultural reasons as to why they're not engaging with you. Dig deeper, search as to where that disconnect is and find a way to really bridge that gap and make them feel like you will have time for them and that you do have time for them, or you'll make that time.'

## How can I apply this in my work?

Some actions you might like to take in your setting include:

- Research and identify relevant professional development opportunities focused on diversity, equity and inclusion.
- Discuss with your leadership team any funding or support that may be available for attending training sessions.
- Create a personal development plan with specific goals and timelines for acquiring new knowledge and skills.

Ideas for further Emerging Minds learning:

- [Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children: A framework for understanding](#)
- [Using Aboriginal cultural knowledge systems to strengthen families' resilience](#)
- [Improving the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children](#)
- [Understanding children's mental health in culturally diverse communities](#)
- [Culturally responsive practice strategies for children's mental health](#)

## 3. Adapt your classroom environment

A safe and welcoming environment in the room and service generally is a significant start towards creating safe spaces for families. As an educator, you can ensure that parents feel welcome and valued in your spaces.

A parent with lived experience of family partnerships reflects on the importance of feeling like you belong:

'I think one of the things that's really made a difference in being able to connect with the educators is feeling like I have a space within my children's education environment where I belong. My particular children's school has a parent's lounge where I can come and I can hang out and see what's going on. I know how to find the educators if I have a worry, I can find out when they have some time where I can give them a call and say, "Hey, this has really been bugging me." But I think one of the wider things is that our kids' wellbeing is everybody's business...'

## How can I apply this in my work?

- The look and feel of your space sends a strong message to families. As an educator, you're likely working hard to ensure each child feels valued and respected in the space, and it can help to extend this to thinking about the child's family too. Consider whether all families would feel their language, culture, experiences and identity are acknowledged visually in your space.
- Make sure you have access to physical and virtual spaces that provide safe spaces for partnership conversations.
- If these conversations happen onsite in a room in your service, consider:
  - » the level of privacy in the space so that sensitive conversations are not overheard by or visible to others
  - » the comfort of the space in terms of temperature, furniture, sound levels, atmosphere, etc.
  - » the layout of the space and furniture to encourage a sense of equality between educators and parents
  - » your approach as an educator and whether it's welcoming, calm, unhurried, empathetic, respectful and non-discriminatory
  - » the time and scheduling so as not to be rushing the conversation
  - » the availability of support for families and educators if required
  - » whether you're maintaining a culturally safe space in language and behaviour.



## Tool 3: Family partnerships conversation tool

This conversation tool has been developed to help educators have respectful, sensitive and effective conversations about child mental health with families. It aims to help you establish a shared understanding with the family about how the child is going both at home and at early learning, so that you can put in place the most suitable support.

### Who is this tool for?

This tool is aimed at educators who are implementing Step 2: 'Conversation' in the Family Partnerships Practice Model. It is for all educators regardless of their career stage, role or experience.

### How to use this tool

This tool is one of a series of implementation tools within the Family Partnerships Guide, developed to support educators to use the Family Partnerships Practice Model in their service.

To get the most out of this tool we recommend using it alongside the Family Partnerships Practice Guide, particularly pages 25–32 that focus on step 2 ('Conversation') of the Family Partnerships Practice Model. This section of the guide includes:

- a section about conversations with families (that identifies strategies and techniques for these conversations)
- a snapshot about the CHILD domains (evidence-informed domains that help guide the conversation about key areas of a child's life)
- an overview of this tool and how it fits within step 2 of the model (including a helpful checklist to make sure you have covered all the essential elements of this step).

This conversation tool has two parts:

1. A **template** for you to use to structure and lead the overall conversation with the family.

The template is divided into four sections and gives you the opportunity to add your own notes and questions to ask the family. The four parts of the conversation in the template are:

- » Introduction and setting the scene
- » Naming the concern and sharing your observations
- » Exploring both contexts and developing a shared understanding
- » Developing a plan and next steps

Once you have customised the template, save or print these pages to use in your conversation with parents.

2. A **bank of conversation starters** based on the CHILD domains. You can use these to put together a series of relevant questions and prompts to help guide your discussion at point 3 of the template, 'Explore both contexts to develop a shared understanding'.

Choose your prompts and add them to your template in section 3.

The template also provides space to write down any notes to prepare for the conversation. This is optional and how much detail you include is up to you – it is there to help you plan and prepare for the conversation in the way that best works for you.



## Family partnerships conversation tool: Template

The following template provides you with a suggested structure for conducting a conversation with a family about their child's mental health and wellbeing. It helps you to prepare by providing you with some wording to introduce the conversation in a sensitive and respectful manner, and allows you and the family to share your perspectives and observations in order to develop a shared understanding. The final part of the conversation is about making a plan of action to support the child.

Use the 'Your notes' section of the template to plan and prepare for the conversation – this is optional.

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### 1. Introduction and setting the scene

<i>About this step</i>	<i>Your notes</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Start the conversation by welcoming the family and providing a brief explanation of why you are here today (e.g. what has prompted the conversation).</li><li>– This is where you frame the conversation and outline the purpose of the discussion – e.g. that the purpose of the conversation is to establish a shared understanding about the child (how they are going both at home and at early learning), and to identify what steps can be taken to provide further support.</li><li>– Remember to lead with the child's strengths as part of setting the scene.</li></ul>	

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### 2. Naming the concern and sharing your observations

<i>About this step</i>	<i>Your notes</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– This is the process of clearly identifying and outlining the specific concern or issue that you want to discuss.</li><li>– Share your observations about the child and their behaviour, including specific examples of how it is affecting their wellbeing.</li></ul>	

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### 3. Exploring both contexts and developing a shared understanding

<i>About this step</i>	<i>Your notes</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Exploring both contexts involves both you and the family sharing your observations about the child within the education and home contexts.</li><li>- Ask the family to share their observations about the child and what they have been noticing at home, as well as their own perspective on the issue or concern you have presented.</li><li>- A shared understanding sets the scene for deciding next steps for support. Reflect back to the family your understanding of their concerns and summarise your collective shared understanding of the issue.</li></ul>	

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### 4. Developing a plan and next steps

<i>About this step</i>	<i>Your notes</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- The final part of the conversation is about developing a plan of action to support the child.</li><li>- Start by defining shared goals. In collaboration with the family, define common objectives for supporting the child's mental health and wellbeing. Goals can be thought of as broad, overarching objectives or aims that you want to achieve in terms of the child's mental health and wellbeing. They represent a desired end result or outcome (i.e. what you want to achieve).</li><li>- With reference to your shared goals, discuss possible actions to support the child. Actions are specific activities or supports that you implement to achieve your goals.</li><li>- Review your collective understanding of the situation and define next steps, including support and possible referrals for additional professional input.</li></ul>	

## Conversation starters

### The five social and emotional wellbeing domains (CHILD)

Below is a framework for ‘conversation starters’ using the five CHILD social and emotional wellbeing domains. This acronym is designed to help you talk about and explore a child’s mental health and wellbeing. The five domains are all key elements of children’s social and emotional development, which we know are connected to mental health and wellbeing.

These questions have been developed to give you the language to more effectively talk about child mental health. They can be asked in section 3 (‘Exploring both contexts’) of your conversation. You can pick and choose which ones are most relevant to your conversation and adapt them to your context, to help get your conversation started.

The most important aspect of each domain can be found in the ‘What are we curious about?’ column of the following table. This is what will guide your conversation approach with the family. The example questions have been included to give you an idea of how these might translate into questions, but should be contextualised and adapted to your situation. They are a starting point to get you thinking, but they might not be exactly what you end up using.

Take some time to reflect on the questions and consider the appropriate tone, the best framing and how the specific language might need to be changed for each conversation. You can also develop your own questions for each of the domains based on what you already know about the child and their family.

Domain	What are we curious about?	Example questions
<b>[A]bout the [C]hild</b>	Getting a picture of what the child is generally like at home (their interests, habits, strengths, temperament).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– ‘How would you describe what your child is generally like at home?’</li> <li>– ‘What are your child’s interests and hobbies?’</li> <li>– ‘What are your child’s strengths and areas of growth?’</li> </ul>
<b>[H]ome environment and routines</b>	Understanding the family’s home environment and getting a picture of routines and rituals at home.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– ‘Who is in your family?’</li> <li>– ‘What is your family’s cultural background?’</li> <li>– ‘What are some of your child’s favourite activities at home?’</li> <li>– ‘How does your child usually manage daily routines – such as sleep, mealtimes and going to bed?’</li> <li>– ‘Have you observed any changes in your child’s behaviour, sleep patterns, or daily routines that you think might be worth discussing?’</li> <li>– ‘Have there been any life events, transitions or circumstances that may be impacting your child’s overall wellbeing?’</li> </ul>
<b>[I]nteractions and relationships</b>	Understanding the child’s social skills and development, including interactions with others and relationships at early learning and at home.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– ‘Can you tell me about your child’s friendships? How do they generally interact with other children?’</li> <li>– ‘How does your child approach new social situations or unfamiliar environments?’</li> <li>– ‘Have you noticed any changes in how your child communicates or interacts with other children?’</li> </ul>

Domain	What are we curious about?	Example questions
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'Has your child talked about any challenges with friends?'</li> <li>- 'Have you noticed any changes in your child's social behaviour when they're excited, anxious, or upset?'</li> <li>- 'How does your child handle conflicts or disagreements with other children or adults?'</li> <li>- 'Are there any social activities or group situations that your child avoids or is uncomfortable about?'</li> </ul>
<p><b>[L]inks to the community and support networks</b></p>	<p>Understanding and identifying what other support networks the child has outside of their immediate family.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'Are there any extended family members or adults outside the family who play a significant role in your child's life? How do these relationships impact their overall wellbeing?'</li> <li>- 'Are there any regular group activities (such as sports, clubs, cultural or religious activities) that your child participates in outside of the early learning service)? How does your child enjoy these activities?'</li> <li>- 'Are there events, celebrations or gatherings (including social, religious or cultural events) your child looks forward to attending within your community?'</li> <li>- 'Do you have any supports (both individuals or services) in your community that you can turn to for advice or guidance related to your child's development?'</li> </ul>
<p><b>[D]evelopment</b></p>	<p>Understanding the child's social and emotional development and any behavioural concerns either you or the family have.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'How does your child express and manage their emotions? Are there certain emotions or situations where they seem to struggle more?'</li> <li>- 'What happens when your child is upset, worried or angry? How do they show you they're feeling this way? Are there particular strategies you use to manage these emotions?'</li> <li>- 'Have you noticed any changes in your child's emotional wellbeing, such as their mood or reactions to different situations?'</li> <li>- 'Do you have any concerns about your child's self-esteem, self-confidence, or overall emotional wellbeing?'</li> <li>- 'Does your child appear more unsettled than usual?'</li> <li>- 'What do you do to manage any worries that your child might have?'</li> <li>- 'Are there any of your child's behaviours that you find especially difficult to manage? How often is this behaviour an issue or concern for you?'</li> <li>- 'What has helped you to better understand your child's emotions and behaviours?'</li> </ul>



## Tool 4: Referral tool for educators

This tool supports educators working through Step 3 – ‘Action’ of the Family Partnerships Practice Model.

Before you use the tool, make sure you have read the ‘[Step 3 – ‘Action’](#)’ section of the Family Partnerships Guide and most importantly, ‘[Snapshot – Supporting a referral process](#)’. These sections explain when you are likely to need this tool in your family partnerships. They also provide reminders about using the tool in the wider context of your service’s policies and procedures, as well as keeping important principles of consent, confidentiality and collaboration in mind.

This tool has been designed for educators working in a variety of contexts. It can be used to inform your thinking, acknowledging that educators are also guided by local policies, practices and requirements which vary across the many settings in which educators are working.

Use this referral tool after you have completed step 2 of the model (‘Conversation’) and are developing your action plan. This tool can support you to identify whether any referrals will be part of your action plan, and whether there is any other information, links or suggestions that you might be able to provide to the family.

### Supporting referrals checklist

*Use this list to guide the support you offer to an individual child and their family*

1. **Look at your action plan** and think back to the ‘Conversation’ you had at step 2 of the model. Are there any needs for referrals to be made as part of this action plan? Make a note of any areas identified in the box below:

**YES** If you have noted a referral need above – **continue** through this checklist.

**NO** If the action plan does not include any formal referrals, **jump ahead** to items 4 and 5 on the checklist. There may be some online supports and resources or local services that are relevant to the support you are planning for the child, even in cases when there is no formal referral process being undertaken.

2. **Familiarise yourself with your service’s policies** and procedures for referrals, to be clear on what is expected from you in your setting. In some settings, educators may also have access to internal services and supports for children and families. Make sure you are aware of the availability of any such resources that might be applicable in your context.

3. **Is there any action you need to take** to facilitate a referral in this situation?

**YES** I am making a direct referral to: (note the internal or external service).

**NO** The family will follow up a GP or other referral pathway.

## **Common referral pathways**

### ***Family seeks referrals through a general practitioner***

Within the primary health care system in Australia, the recommended pathway is that a family's first port of call when seeking advice and treatment for their child's health concerns is through their general practitioner (GP), including seeking referrals. In addition to treating physical health concerns, GPs can provide important support to families dealing with mental health challenges. Families can also talk to their GP about what Medicare rebates are available to support them.

Learn more about [the role of GPs in supporting families](#) in this podcast:

- [A GP's role in supporting the family](#)

### ***Family seeks care by approaching practitioner directly***

Some practitioners can be accessed by families directly without the need for a referral from a GP. Private mental health practitioners and other allied health professionals can often be accessed directly. Families should be aware of any costs associated with the providers they are seeking to access and whether there are currently waitlists to access services.

### ***Educator makes a referral directly to an external allied health practitioner***

In some settings, there may be allied health practitioners who accept referrals from early learning services to see families. An example of this might be services such as speech pathologists or occupational therapists working within non-profit agencies that have a relationship with your service. In these situations, ensure that the family has given consent for the referral to occur and that they genuinely understand the process and likely next steps. Make sure you work with your service leaders to follow local procedures to make this referral. If you're unsure whether this option is relevant in your workplace, ask your leaders.

### ***Educator makes a referral internally at their service***

Some early learning services may have access to internal support services such as psychologists and other practitioners. The process for making referrals in these situations is likely very specific to your local context. Work with your leaders to be aware of these services and know how to make referrals. Regardless of the process you follow, make sure to keep the family informed and ensure you have their consent to follow any referral pathways.

#### 4. What **online supports** and/or resources would be beneficial in this situation?

### **Online support alongside referrals to practitioners**

Online supports and services can help to support families in situations where they are working through a referral process. At times, accessing these services involves lengthy waitlists or the costs of accessing specialist services are prohibitive for families. Online supports can provide several benefits in these situations:

- Building mental health literacy and providing language for families to use that can help increase agency and confidence for the family as they seek support through their GP and other practitioners
- Providing support while families are waiting to access face-to-face or telehealth practitioners
- Providing free supports and information for families who are not able to access care through more expensive services

### ***Using online support as a preventative approach***

Online supports and services can be helpful in many situations as a preventative approach to child mental health challenges. They can build mental health literacy, language and understanding for families that can be helpful in supporting children through a range of challenges. Consider linking families to online supports, programs and networks as part of your action plan in a wide range of situations.

### ***Online support services and resources***

These links provide connections to a range of online supports and resources from Emerging Minds and many other organisations. You might like to make a list of any relevant options for your service to use and add all the other online supports and resources you and your colleagues are aware of.

- [Emerging Minds Families](#)
- [Other online supports for children and families](#)

5. What **local community** supports, services, programs or groups would be beneficial in this situation?

*Local community supports, services, programs and groups alongside referrals to practitioners*

In the same way that online services can layer with referrals to provide a range of support for families, local community services, programs or groups can also add to your existing plans to support a child and their family. By linking families to local programs, you can encourage the family to build their support network and their mental health literacy.

*Local community supports, services and programs as a preventative approach*

In situations that do not require referrals to practitioners, children and families can still find benefit in the preventative and early support that can often be found in local community services. The benefits for the child and the family include increased knowledge, understanding and confidence to keep working through their challenges. Seek out opportunities to link families to relevant supports that you're aware of, and make a note of any programs that you hear about from families to add to your list of local options.

**Local community support ideas**

This list is general in nature and may not include options that are relevant to your situation. You can add to this list or make your own for your school to use.

- Local playgroups and supported playgroups
- Local health services
- Maternal and child health services
- Non-profit organisations providing programs in your area
- Local youth services
- [headspace youth counselling](#)
- Sporting and community clubs



## 6. Would you like to **learn more about the practitioners** who work with children?

This section can guide your thinking regarding the specific family partnership you are working on today, and you can revisit this resource to build your knowledge in this area more generally.

**General practitioners** are often the first port of call for parents seeking advice and treatment for their child's health concerns. The following podcast provides an overview of the role of a GP working with a family:

- [A GP's role in supporting the family](#)

General practitioners may refer to **paediatricians** as part of a process of exploring the child's needs. Learn more about the role of a paediatrician in the following video:

- [What is a paediatrician?](#)

### **Mental health nurses**

A mental health nurse is a registered nurse who specialises in providing mental health support services. Learn more about the role of a mental health nurse in the following video:

- [What is a mental health nurse?](#)

### **Allied health practitioners**

Many of the other practitioners that children are referred to come under the banner of 'allied health'. There are many roles that sit within this group; some of those commonly working with children include:

- Occupational therapists
- Speech pathologists
- Psychologists
- Social workers
- Physiotherapists

As an educator you might like to learn more about practitioners to help you understand their role and feel confident working in family partnerships alongside them. The Emerging Minds Families 'Practitioners speak' series features various allied health practitioners explaining their role and how they can support children and families:

- [Watch the Practitioners speak videos](#)

You might also find this podcast on professional roles in child mental health support helpful:

- [Professional roles in child mental health support](#)

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