Early years staff wellbeing:
a resource for managers and teams

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Salford
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- Big Steps Nursery
- Holyrood Nursery, Swinton

Trafford
- St Vincent's Nursery, Trafford
- Juice Nursery, Trafford

Tameside
- Bright Futures Nursery, Stalybridge
- Twinkle Star Pre-School, Droylsden
- Little Leaps Pre-School, Ashton-under-lyne
- Sunflower Children's Centre, Hyde

Bury
- Hoyle Nursery School
- Yesoiday Kindergarten
- Guardian Angels Primary School Nursery
- Kids Adventures Nursery, Radcliffe
- Mulberry Bush Nursery Walmersley
- Chantlers Pre-school
- Fisherfield Nursery, Bury College

Hackney
- Ihsan Children Centre
- Mini Home Nursery
- Tams House
- Grasshoppers Playgroup

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Foreword

This resource came about following a conversation between the Anna Freud Centre and Salford local authority. The Anna Freud Centre had previously written a wellbeing resource for teachers and the call from Salford suggested producing one for staff working in early years settings.

We put together some ideas and were joined by local authorities in Salford, Tameside, Bury, The London Borough of Hackney and Norfolk, as well as the National Day Nurseries Association whose commitment, expertise and belief in the need to support early years staff shaped and informed the project. The work was informed by workshops with early years practitioners from Salford, Tameside, Bury, Trafford and Hackney local authorities. We hope the richness of experience contributed by this partnership is reflected in this resource, and that it serves staff working tirelessly to support children in those vital early years of their lives.



Introduction



Early years practitioners support young children at a significant time in their development. Their contribution to the wellbeing of children, by helping them learn new social, emotional and cognitive skills, and by feeding their incredible appetite for life and learning, is remarkable. Yet, despite this essential work, early years lags far behind other sectors when it comes to pay and recognition from governments and policy makers.

Parents and carers and local communities, on the other hand, recognise the true skills and value of early years professionals, knowing that they provide children a safe and stimulating environment in which to learn, develop and grow.

Perhaps it is this appreciation that is behind our main finding, which is that most early years staff are happy in their work. The sheer joy of working with young children comes over in the responses to this project. On the other hand, staff and managers expressed concern about the amount of administrative work they have to do. This is understandable but there is hope in the new Early Years Framework which pledges to reduce paperwork. It is too early to say how effective this change will be, but given our findings, the intention of the framework will be greatly appreciated by all.

Although early years staff enjoy their work, it is at times stressful. Child protection work, or supporting bereaved children is not easy. Nor is working with parents or carers who may be at the start of understanding a child's special educational needs. This resource aims to put staff wellbeing at the heart of the setting and acknowledges that providing support in difficult moments in other people's lives is demanding. While it cannot relieve some of the issues that contribute to stress, such as low pay, this document offers some practical steps that make a real difference and can be taken forward in your setting.

The early years sector embraces a range of provision, from large chains to small community settings, and across the private, voluntary and independent sectors. All these factors will have an impact on how your setting develops its approach to staff wellbeing. Our aim is to help each individual setting discuss, explore and address staff wellbeing on their own terms by taking a team-based, co-production approach.

However we do it, looking after children in early years settings depends on looking after the staff: nurturing the nurturers. Their commitment is unquestionable; their value to young children and families and their communities is profound. We need to repay this dedication by putting wellbeing at the heart of the workplace.

How to use this resource

This resource is drawn from the experiences of staff. It includes a survey, to give you insight into what others in the early years sectors think, and to start a discussion in your own setting. Each setting is different, but learning from others and reflecting on your own experience are key to improvement.

We then have the more in-depth experiences that people have shared from their workshops. These add richness to the survey findings and we hope they offer useful examples of good practice. We have had thousands of suggestions from almost 1,500 people who contributed to this document, and at the end we have pulled together suggestions about how you might take this work forward.

We have included a number of resources which our findings suggest may be useful to early years staff. These resources can be used separately from the report, and as an aid to encourage discussions.

We suggest that the best way to use this resource is to share it with your team and work with them to co-produce a staff wellbeing plan or policy, if you do not already have one, or to review your current policy. Once you've done that you can look at the practices that you could implement to put your policy into action.

Wellbeing is not a one-off activity. It needs to be placed at the heart of an organisation and be sustained. To achieve this, we have suggested that policy and practice development is:

1. Bespoke: policy and practice needs to fit your setting.

2. Co-produced: the best policies and practices draw on the commitment, skills and experiences of all staff.

3. Embedded: having posters on the walls about where to find help is important, but even more important is that all policies are joined up and useful on a daily basis.



About the consultation

This resource is based on the findings of two pieces of research which aimed to capture the experience of early years staff. A survey was completed by 1,485 practitioners, and we held a series of workshops which 22 staff attended in total.

1,458 people responded to our survey

97% of respondents were female

88% of respondents identified as White

44% were nursery or pre-school workers

33% were managers

16% of respondents identified as 'other' e.g. stay and play workers, family support workers

43% worked with 1-10 members of staff

31% worked with 11-20 members of staff

16% worked with 20-30 members of staff

10% worked with 30+ members of staff

63% worked in the private sector

21% worked in a local authority setting

5% worked in the voluntary sector

9% worked in 'other' settings

The responses to all of the questions were remarkably similar irrespective of the size of the setting and the sector. We did not break down results by gender and ethnicity due to the sample size. There were some differences in responses between managers and other staff, which we will explore in this resource.

What do we know about wellbeing?

In the last two decades there has been progress in public understanding of mental health and wellbeing. There is now greater acceptance and awareness that:

Most people experience mental distress at some point in their lives. This is not just about having a diagnosable mental health problem, but life experiences that produce stress, sadness or anxiety that we're not sure we can cope with.

Negative experiences that can impact on wellbeing are many and various. It's not just major life experiences that can have this effect. So can everyday experiences of discrimination, harassment, or financial worries.

Preventive and promotive health is therefore part of the picture. We should not wait until there's a problem to think about sources of stress and likewise, what makes us feel well.

If we are feeling low or anxious then, as with any problem, a good place to start is to let someone else know. In trying to 'bottle it up' instead, it's common for people to overlook sources of valuable support and advice readily at hand.

Physical health and lifestyle factors impact on mental health. Even simple things like lack of routine, or lack of variety and progression, can make us feel out of touch with ourselves and others.

People diagnosed with mental health problems can and do recover, often by reaching their own decisions about what medical help has worked for them (or not), and with support from friends and family.

There is diversity of opinion, and healthy debate, about what makes life good. No single tradition, institution or profession has all the answers about wellbeing.

Promoting wellbeing among staff is humane and a good thing in itself. Good staff wellbeing can also have a number of benefits for settings including:

- positive impact on children, including stronger relationships with children
- increased productivity of staff members
- reduced absences from work in relation to sickness (both short term and long term)
- staff being able to manage stress better and develop healthier coping strategies
- improved job satisfaction, which can support retention
- staff feeling valued, supported and invested in.

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Activity one

Planning meetings on mental health and wellbeing

Discussing mental health and wellbeing in a meeting can be daunting and it is important that all staff feel safe. Some ground rules and structure will help.

Let people know in advance that you are planning the meeting. Invite people to talk to you about it in advance in case they have any questions or are worried about their wellbeing. Make sure that people have access to information about where to go if they want outside help.

Establish ground rules with the group e.g. *"We are going to have a meeting to talk about mental health and wellbeing, but we all need to follow some rules so we can all contribute safely and in confidence."*

Setting the tone

Say why wellbeing and mental health at work is important, e.g.:

- because it's important that people feel good about work and life
- because you value and care for your team
- because early years work is enjoyable and fulfilling, but it can also be stressful
- because you want this setting to be the best possible setting for staff
- because happy staff work better, and we all want this setting to be the best possible setting for our children.

If you are leading the discussion, acknowledge that improving standards for staff means identifying areas where you could do better and set an example by confidently taking ownership for mistakes. For example: *"I've always wanted to have more discussion about wellbeing, but it's so busy running this nursery that I haven't found time. But I think that's a mistake, because your work is at the heart of everything we do here, and I want put that right now."*

Some questions in this document may feel personal. Make sure that you create a safe space to discuss them, constructively, without apportioning blame. Focus on *what* caused the problem, not *who*.

Focus on learning- how can we do things even better?

Be appreciative - input and engagement are great resources. Value them.

Let people know that there is a purpose to this- that changes will happen (for example, writing or reviewing your staff wellbeing policy).

Structure

Structure brings clarity to everyone. Make sure:

- you give a clear introduction
- you explain the purpose of the meeting
- you are clear about actions, who is doing them and by when.

Ground rules:

- invite ground rules from others
- allow people to speak
- all ideas are welcome.

Remind people at the end that if they need support, they can talk to their line manager or can be signposted to other services.

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Part one: the survey

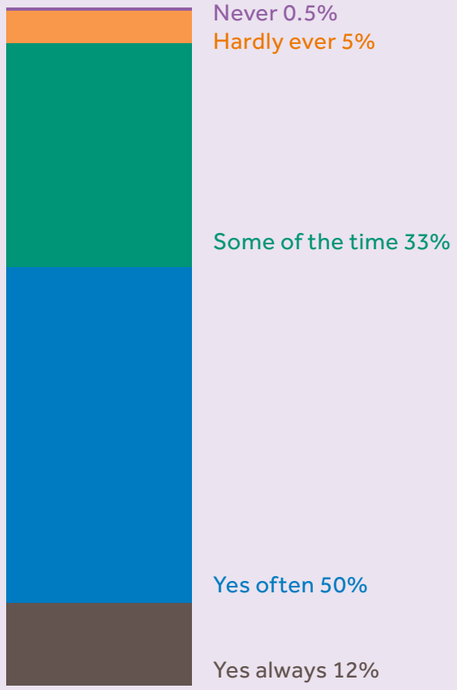
Are you happy in your work?

The good news is that most early years practitioners are happy in their work. You told us that your work has a positive impact on your wellbeing. This was consistently true whatever the size of the setting, and for managers and staff alike. Almost two thirds (62%) said that work always or often had a positive impact on wellbeing.

However, there is always room for improvement: one third of you said that work only sometimes had a positive impact on your mental health and wellbeing, and 5% said that it hardly ever did. This tells us that although many members of staff feel supported, there is still more work to be done.

Although you told us that you enjoyed your work, almost exactly half reported having felt unwell as a result of work-related stress in the last year.

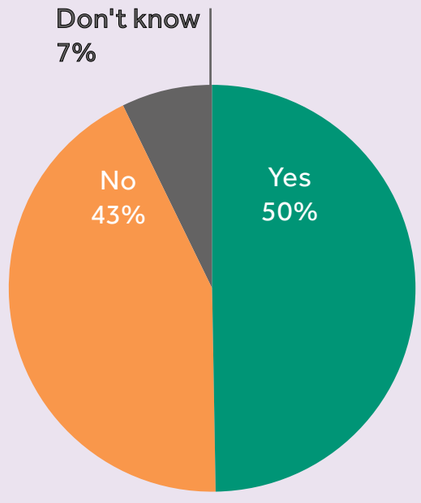
Figure 1 - Does your work generally have a positive impact on your mental health and wellbeing? (By this we mean whether your job generally had a good effect on your feelings, emotions and state of mind.) (1456 respondents)



What makes you feel stressed?

We then we asked which of the following caused you to feel stressed or unhappy at work over the last two weeks. Just over half (52%) identified workload and work-life balance. 38% mentioned administration and paperwork; 33% identified business pressures, meeting work targets; and 27% mentioned Ofsted inspections. It is worth noting that only 15% reported not having felt stressed or unhappy at work during the previous two weeks.

Figure 2 - During the last twelve months have you felt unwell as a result of work-related stress? (1458 respondents)



The new EYFS, which comes into force in September 2021, may help staff through its reduced emphasis on paperwork and its focus on professional judgement. This may also reduce the pressures of Ofsted inspections as they focus more on observing practice than monitoring paperwork and administrative processes.



Figure 3 - Have any of the following caused you to feel stressed or unhappy at work over the last two weeks? (select as many as apply) (1427 responses)



What you said:

What you like about your work...

"No two days are ever the same. The things the children do and say make me laugh every day."

"Being an early years teacher is as busy, tiring, exhausting and frustrating as it is joyous, rewarding, fun and fulfilling. You get the rough with the smooth, so to speak."

"In 'normal times' I love my work and feel huge pride in my role supporting children and parents in their early years. The worthwhile nature of my work motivates me."

What you find stressful...

"The amount of information needed for planning and assessments, SEND, safeguarding and multi-agency working increases pressure on time and pressure on staff."

"At present we do feel forgotten in this sector and I feel we are being treated as glorified babysitters."

"It spills out into every moment of my life somehow. I never feel like I'm properly away from it."

What do you think?

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Do you feel supported at work?

Almost 70% of you (Figure 4) agreed or strongly agreed that senior staff care about staff mental health and wellbeing. 63% (Figure 2) also said senior staff take proactive steps to support mental health. Moreover, 61% felt generally encouraged to talk about mental health and wellbeing at work. These findings were broadly consistent whatever the size of the setting.

However, only 40% of you said that there is a regular slot allotted to discussing mental health and wellbeing, and two thirds said that the impact of the pandemic has affected your mental health and wellbeing.

What helps reduce stress at work?

We also asked respondents to rank a list of potential interventions to improve mental health and wellbeing at work (Figure 5). We collated your responses by identifying your first three choices. From this it is clear that you wanted access to improved information about mental health and wellbeing more than anything else, followed by better support from colleagues and access to mental health support.

It is important to unpack what some of these responses mean. For example, wanting better support from colleagues does not necessarily mean a lack of willingness on their part. It might instead mean that busy work routines make it difficult to find the necessary time or space to offer support.

Figure 4 - To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

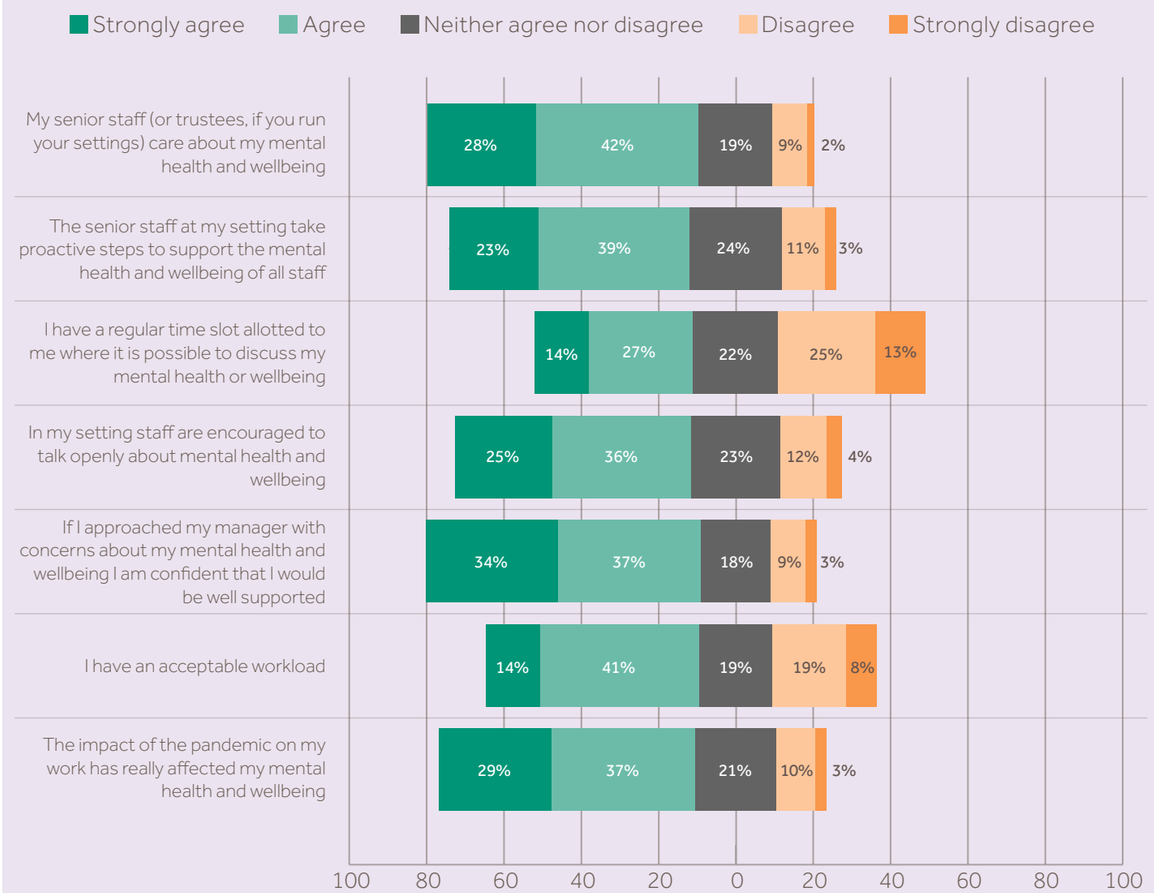


Figure 5 - Which of the following do you feel would be most valuable to improving your mental health and wellbeing at work? Please rank from most valuable to least valuable:

63% more information about mental health

57% better support from other members of staff such as friendly moral support or practical advice and guidance on how to manage stressful incidents

49% access to occupational health/professional mental health support

35% time off and flexible working schemes

31% fun or wellbeing activities that can be enjoyed together

23% reduction in workload, such as reducing the number of children in groups, or reducing admin or daily tasks

15% more help with managing challenging situations involving children

9% access to supervision from outside agencies

13% more support from senior staff – such as practical advice and guidance, an open office policy, or further supervision from my senior staff or colleagues

5% more support from other professionals working in the setting

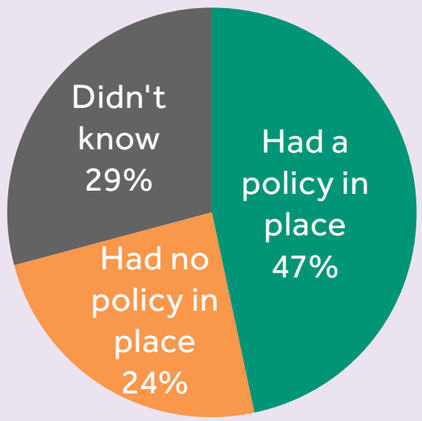
Is there a wellbeing policy?

There are many ways of developing a whole-setting approach to staff wellbeing. But one of the important principles is being open and having a clear policy. Do staff know what the processes are and what support is available? The place where most staff would expect to find this information is in a wellbeing policy.

We asked if there was a wellbeing policy in your setting which included the mental health and wellbeing of staff (Figure 6). 47% said they had a policy in place, compared with 53% who said there was no policy, or that if there was one, they didn't know about it. When we examined this question further, we found that more managers (59%) said there was a mental health and wellbeing policy in place than staff (37%). This is similar to responses we found elsewhere, where managers were more aware of wellbeing policies than staff – suggesting that where policies are in place they could be made more visible.

Interestingly, staff working in a setting without a policy were more likely to say they had felt unwell as a result of work-related stress (61% compared to 50%). This shows how important it is for policies not only to be written, but to be openly communicated.

Figure 6 - In my early years setting, we have a mental health/wellbeing policy in place which includes supporting the mental health and wellbeing of staff

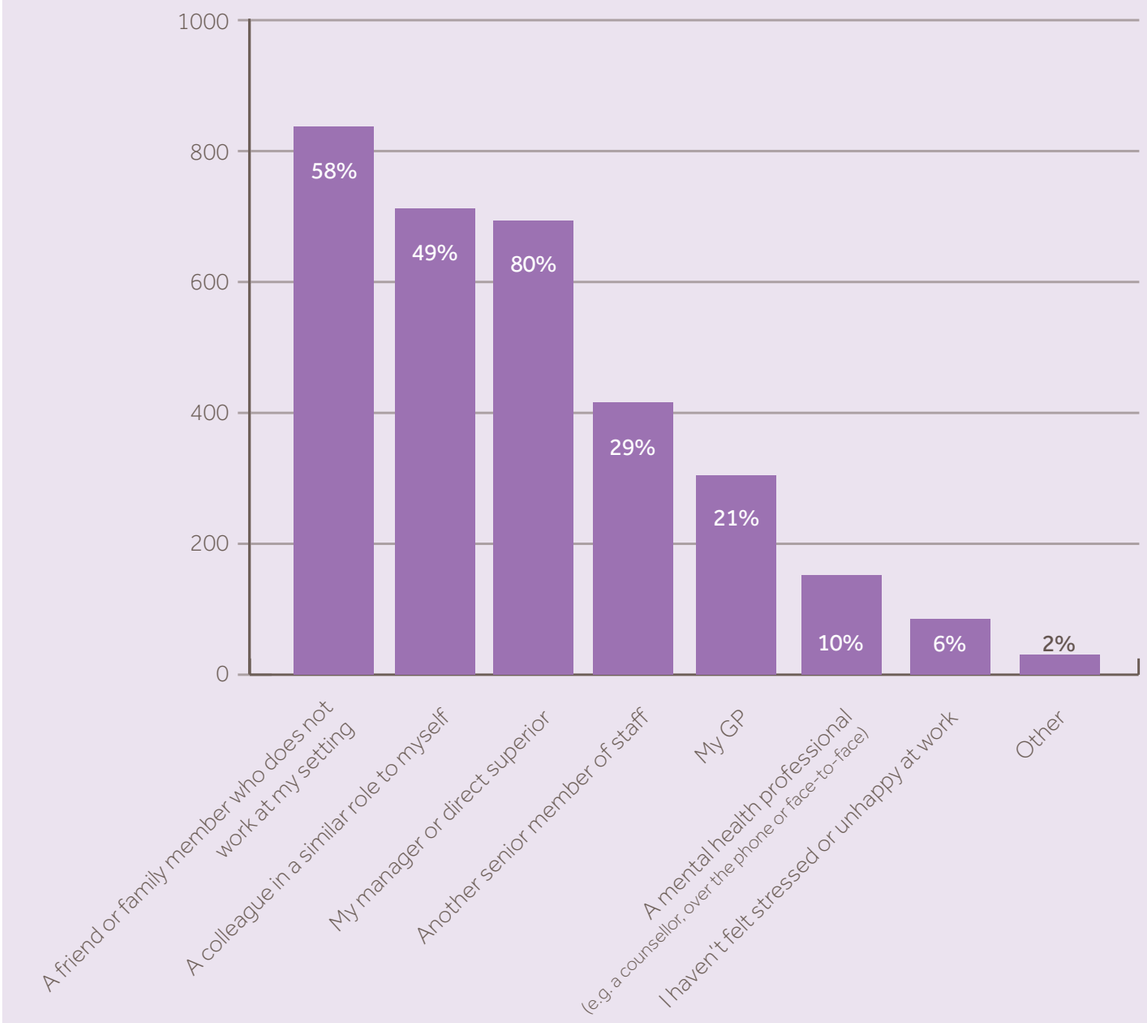


Who do you turn to for help?



You told us that help can come from different sources (Figure 7). Top of the list of support was friends and families. This is similar to our research with schools. Very often people turn to those outside the sources of their stress for support. Within the setting, respondents were almost equally likely to seek support from a colleague in a similar role (49%) as from a manager (48%). Fewer were likely to seek help from a health or mental health professional.

Figure 7 - If I felt stressed or worried at work, I would be most likely to seek help from (select as many as apply):



Activity two

Team reflection on the survey

After reading the results of our survey, have a team discussion and ask the following questions:

Happiness:

- What makes you happy about your work?
- What would improve your levels of happiness at work?

Support at work:

- What mental health and wellbeing support is available for practitioners?
- How is mental health and wellbeing support promoted in your setting?
- What additional support do you think your setting could offer?

Mental health and wellbeing policy:

- Do you have a wellbeing policy? If you do:
- Does everyone know about it?
- Have the practitioners contributed to the wellbeing policy?
- How visible is it?

Stress at work:

- What causes you stress in your setting?
- What could reduce stress in your setting?

At the end of the discussion decide what actions you will take, remember, your actions should be in **RATIO**!

Realistic – can you do it in your setting?

Achievable – is it a sensible and practical idea?

Time-bound – what time frame will the action take place?

Implementable – what will be your first step to getting this done?

Observable – what will practitioners see that is different?

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Part two: workshop findings



Alongside our survey we ran a series of workshops with practitioners across a number of settings and local authorities to find out in more depth what practices help promote wellbeing at work.

You said there were four main areas that promote and support wellbeing:

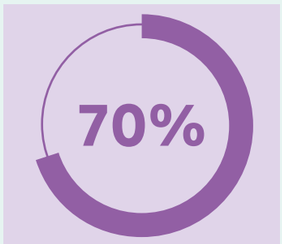
1. supporting each other
2. supportive management
3. the physical environment
4. outside support

Each of these are explored in this next section.

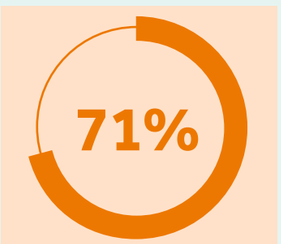
1. Supporting each other

In the workshops, practitioners told us that finding support among colleagues was highly valued. They talked about attuning to each other (noticing colleagues' feelings and checking in about how they were doing), showing an interest in others (getting to know people as individuals with personal interests), the need to prioritise staff wellbeing and being open and honest with each other to share difficult experiences. Practitioners said it was important to value and recognise themselves as a team and to reflect and learn together, to appreciate each other's work and to be positive.

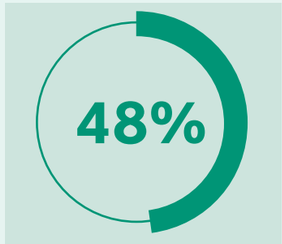
Our survey found



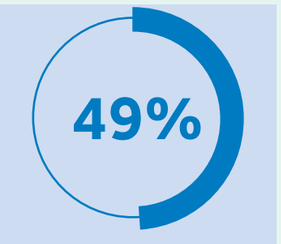
felt their senior management cared about staff wellbeing (Figure 4)



felt confident that their manager would help if they approached them about mental health (Figure 4)



would like to have better support from staff such as better practical advice and guidance (Figure 6)



said that they would turn to a colleague for support if they felt stressed or worried at work. (Figure 7)

1.1 Being open

Managers and staff alike emphasised the importance of good communication, transparency and clarity over managing difficulties, including stress. In the workshops, many practitioners referred to the importance of sharing information in a timely way to create a sense of unity: "...everyone's story is different, but we are all in the same boat".

Practitioners said that a culture of open-mindedness was more likely to facilitate communication, and other practical support it can lead to "being able to talk to somebody and knowing that they will actually listen....[that] they will take it seriously and do their best to help".

Practitioners told us that support could come from anyone within the workplace, not only management. What mattered was that "there is always someone that we can turn to in a time of need, who will offer good advice".

The workshops highlighted the importance of helping others to feel valued and the need to take time to notice and support each other: "We spend 15 minutes before the session starts with a cup of tea and chatting together about the stresses of life in this current situation." Practitioners said that speaking openly about feelings was a way that staff can stay connected and support each other – not least during the stresses of the pandemic.

What you said: being open

"A mental health and wellbeing board with information such as the policy, access to services and encouraging staff to talk more openly about mental health."

"One member of staff has started a motivation board and other staff members write positive things about their colleagues to encourage them."

"More information and how to be open and honest about mental health. People to talk to each other about how they are feeling. Staff also listening to each other. Practising empathising. I have a culture of 'just survive it' from before I started. I want to change it to improve...I want staff to thrive."

"More support and opportunities to discuss mental health, without judgement."



1.2 Trusting each other

Practitioners also shared the importance of trusting each other and working closely together: "...we...sort of pride ourselves on being a family." Being open and honest means having to show vulnerability, and for this to happen staff needed to be able trust in their management teams and colleagues. This, in turn, depends on having the right policies and practices in place, and developing a supportive culture. Practitioners wanted to acknowledge the emotional impact of their work and feel safe in expressing it: "it's OK to be angry and it's OK to be sad and having that... moment where they can feel secure, that they can disclose here." Practitioners raised the importance of being able to trust in colleagues, especially management, in order to ask for help and access support.

1.3 Knowing each other

Practitioners said they were better able to communicate openly when they know each other well. Taking an interest in other members of the team and getting to know one another as individuals was highlighted as important in all the workshops. It was seen as a good thing generally, but also as a way of noticing and knowing when others might be having a difficult time.

As well as helping each other emotionally by providing peer support, practitioners told us they were interested in developing their own professional practice by learning from one another and being aware of team members' strengths, and talked about the importance of reflection and peer feedback. It was rewarding to give and receive compliments about individual strengths and qualities, either spontaneously or on a regular basis as part of a team activity.

1.4 Making time for each other

As we have seen from the survey (Figure 5), for 31% of respondents fun or wellbeing activities - enjoyed together as a staff team - are among the top preferred ways to promote mental health and wellbeing.

None of this can happen unless colleagues can make the time to listen, attune and adjust. One practitioner highlighted that this time should be seen as an investment – and many said team-building had become even more important during the pandemic than previously. Time spent together could be anything from a daily check-in meeting to a gathering off-site. It is important to make time for both formal and informal meetings such as "exercise classes, anything like that where you are all in it together." The workshops raised the importance of making time for each other by having regular events, such as exercise classes or social events. Even during the pandemic, staff had found alternative ways to hold events such as zoom bingo/drinks in the evening.



2. Supportive management

Everyone has a role to play in promoting wellbeing and managers can help by encouraging the involvement of staff in contributing, engaging with and owning a whole-setting approach to promoting mental health and wellbeing. During the workshop practitioners said they valued managemers who were approachable, a culture in which staff contribution was recognised and openly valued and flexibility around work.

2.1. Making staff wellbeing a strategic priority

All practitioners, including managers, have a central role to play in promoting and maintaining a culture of peer support (1.1–1.4 above). In addition, managers have specific responsibilities in determining how far staff wellbeing is a strategic priority, that is, something supported by policies, procedures and resources. During the workshop discussions, wellbeing policies and guidance included practical basics like having enough breaks throughout the working day, alongside processes for accessing external support (see section 4). One setting had developed a no emails policy (except for emergencies) in the evening.

What we found



said that they felt senior staff take proactive steps to support mental health (Figure 4)



said if they felt stressed or worried at work, they would be most likely to seek help from their manger (Figure 7)

- However, levels of stress can impact on physical health. 50% of participants reported feeling unwell as a result of work-related stress in the last 12 months. (Figure 2).
- People working in a setting without a wellbeing policy in place which included staff were more likely to say they had felt unwell as a result of work-related stress (61% compared to 50%).

2.2. Being available and approachable

Practitioners in the workshops also highlighted the value they place on managers having an approachable management style. Regular check-ins and supervision, open communication, and an 'open door policy' were mentioned as ways of assuring practitioners they can always go to management for support.

In the survey, one-to-one supervisions and safe spaces in which to talk about personal issues were identified as a useful way to support staff. Practitioners in the workshops noted that the absence of these spaces can have a detrimental effect on mental health.



Image courtesy of Lytham Lodge Nursery c/o NDNA

Early years practitioners indicated that wellbeing support is not necessarily top-down or timetabled, but can also be flexible and personalised. In other words, checking in with each other, was highly valued: Just having our manager checking in on us: *how are you* goes a long way...but sometimes management also needs to go above and beyond.

2.3 Recognising and appreciating contribution

Practitioners highlighted the importance of receiving praise for work well done from managers, and on a consistent basis: "our head will always feedback with an email...email feedback regularly to the full staff team and thanking them and being specific as well...which is always really nice."

Practitioners said they valued managers "who are able to see the bigger picture and are sensitive about the demands on practitioners". A supportive management team was described as one that recognises an individual's contribution, communicates this well, and does not apply excessive pressure to perform. Ensuring that people are regularly thanked and appreciated - and encouraging colleagues to celebrate and share their own and others' achievements - helps create a good working culture and raises morale.

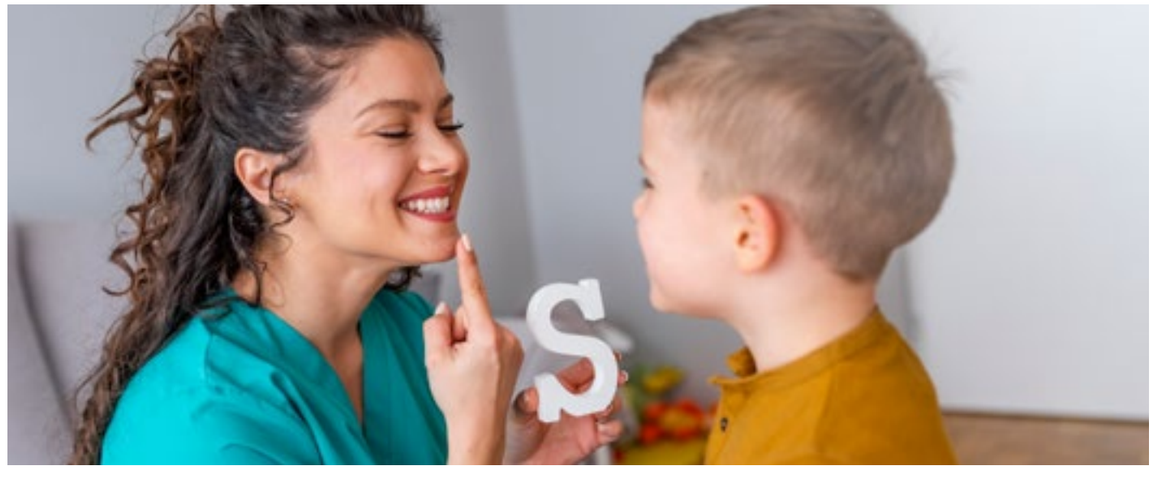
Many practitioners said that flexible working schemes and the opportunity to take time off for important events helped their mental health and wellbeing.

What you said: flexible working

"Senior staff members being aware of and taking an interest in staff's mental health in a real and practical way by providing support, flexibility, reducing workload, taking into consideration individual circumstances and anxiety levels."

"Time to be listened too. Time off if their child is doing something special i.e narrating in an assembly. Letting them have time off, with full pay, to support family members to attend hospital appointments."

"The best thing my Deputy and I did for my staff was give them some time back - staff can leave early if the ratios allow it and we are as flexible as possible with their shifts so they can have time to look after themselves and their families. We do a lot of little things for them, but this is the one thing they all said has made a positive impact."





2.4. Wellbeing support for managers

Most practitioners experienced stress in their work, but the cause of the stress was sometimes different for managers. For example, managers sometimes act as a 'container' for the stress of others, and a 'buffer' against external factors that threaten to lower staff morale. This is part of why managers, too, needed others to turn to: both within and outside the workplace. Managers shared how openness was vital to build trust and reduce stigma: "I'm honest about my struggles and things that I worry about and things and I think that it does make [management] more approachable to [staff]." Managers spoke of the need to build their own peer connections with other managers, as a valuable source of support: "We might then speak to one of our other managers ...we've got a good network around that. They know where they can go and so it's picking up the phone."

For managers who are responsible for the wellbeing of others, ensuring they are able to look after themselves is key.

Some practitioners reported some of the challenges could only be effectively tackled by networking with others in the sector. There was a desire for "support from the government and being valued as a professional" and a conviction that this would both directly and indirectly improve staff wellbeing.

3. Physical environment

Having access to a physical environment that promotes wellbeing and a safe space was highlighted in the workshops as an important resource for staff to recover from stressful situations. The impact of COVID-19 also had a major impact on stress, with some respondents highlighting the lack of protective clothing and the impact that had on their own feelings of safety.

3.1 Access to safe spaces

Some staff said they wanted access to a safe space to relieve moments of stress. Many highlighted the importance of quiet spaces at work, including for the purposes of meditation breaks. Practitioners noted that the absence of these spaces in some settings can have a detrimental effect on their mental health. Workshop discussions also raised the need to have somewhere to go, whether an office, staff room or outdoor green space to enable staff to have some time for themselves.

What we found

Early years practitioners were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement "The impact of the pandemic on my work has really affected my mental health and wellbeing".

66%

Two thirds either strongly agreed or agreed (29% and 37%, respectively)

12%

while only 12% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

3.2 Access to wellbeing information

Responses to the survey ranked "more information about staff mental health and wellbeing" as the most valuable way to make improvements to support wellbeing. 31% rated this as their top choice (Figure 5). In the workshops, as well, many practitioners shared the importance of knowing where to go for help, and how to get mental health support.

Through posters, leaflets, newsletters, office stationery and other means, workplaces represent a point of contact between staff and access to public health and wellbeing information they can access without staff having to go out of their way. This is particularly important for those struggling with their wellbeing, as they may feel less motivated or confident to reach out than usual. Ready availability of wellbeing information and advice also reduces stigma around mental health, particularly in a setting where there are proactive measures in place to promote mental health and wellbeing.

Some mentioned that signposting information should be available on bulletin boards and in staffrooms. Others emphasised the importance of being able to get access to support lines confidentially, without having to make requests of their colleagues. Wellbeing awareness and information was also boosted periodically through 'wellbeing weeks' – and combined with activities. (see 3.4).

"I think the most important thing is actually knowing where to signpost that person if they are struggling, and knowing what is available in the area and what is going to help them."

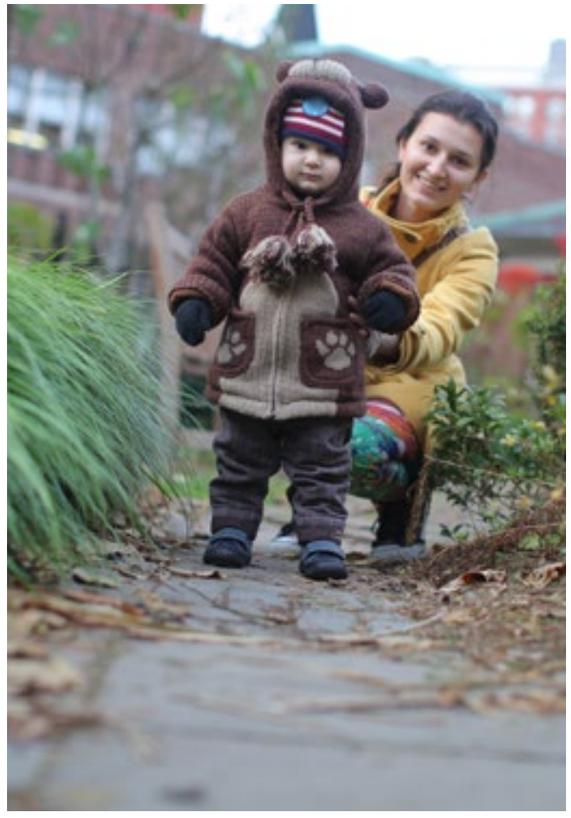
"One member of staff has started a motivation board and other staff members write positive things about their colleagues to encourage them."

3.3 Small touches and creature comforts

Small touches and gestures can demonstrate to the team that their wellbeing is important and that others are thinking of their comfort. Practitioners talked about having tea and coffee facilities, a box of chocolates or a bowl of fruit available, or even cooking together. Another example included a wellbeing box in the bathrooms "that's got little pamper things in like vouchers and toiletries".

Practitioners described acts of kindness from managers which helped offset the strain of the pandemic: "Management made up an appreciation box with lots of goodies that we can help ourselves to"; "Work have also sent us care packages in the post which include things like bath salts/ tea/chocolate which is a great morale boost!"

All these were reported as ways to make a real and welcome difference to the mental health and wellbeing of staff.



3.4 Regular wellbeing activities

Fun or wellbeing activities that can be enjoyed together as a staff team were ranked in the top three options by many (31%, Figure 5) in the survey.

As mentioned, access to social and recreational facilities on-site is a plus for wellbeing – especially where staff have long commutes or juggle their own childcare responsibilities, and during the winter months. This might involve having dedicated or adapted space available for yoga, other exercise or social get-togethers, where feasible. However, staff wellbeing days and off-site events were also highly valued. Green spaces, sports facilities and cafes all provide a change of environment in which to celebrate and recharge connections between team members. One practitioner shared that "for World Mental Health Day, we had an event in our field'.

Another participant said, ''More reflective time with colleagues - perhaps whilst doing an activity, like walking for instance.''

What you said: what helps

"Staff wellbeing days"

"Once a week we used to have lunch with our wellbeing lead where we could talk about anything whether work related or not. I found this really beneficial and a great way to build on our team friendships."

''We are going to have a 'wear your glad rags' day. No one has been anywhere, or dressed up nice for a long time, so we are going to come to work glamorous for a day for charity. We are involving children and parents too.''

4. Support from outside the setting

Practitioners said they valued training opportunities and using peer networks. Signposting to locally available health services and paying for specific support, such as mindfulness sessions for the staff team, or counselling services, were also raised as examples of good practice.

At the same time, it is important to understand the impact of wages and the cost of living on wellbeing. Early years practitioners felt that some of the challenges could only be effectively tackled by networking with others in the sector. There was a desire for "support from the government and being valued as a professional" and a conviction that this would both directly and indirectly improve staff wellbeing.

4.1 Staff training

Respondents talked about how training can improve wellbeing and relationships at work, whether or not it directly addresses mental health. For example, better training to support equity, diversity and inclusion in the setting and support for practitioners from minority communities was mentioned, as was respecting all gender identities.

Better access to mental health first aid training was mentioned as a "whole team issue" and "of equal importance to paediatric first aid." Staff training was identified as a way to enable team members to support each other effectively: "training for all staff to identify when others are struggling." Practitioners shared the value of connections with other settings, such as having a local network or buddy settings, to share ideas.

Managers expressed that they may not always be confident in making every judgement call about wellbeing, or know what questions to ask in getting there. One manager described completing a wellbeing course in order to up-skill themselves, others identified the need to build their own peer

What we found

When we asked staff what had caused them stress over the previous two weeks:



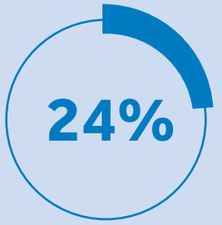
identified concerns over business pressures, such as lack of funds



identified Ofsted inspections



identified work conditions



identified concerns over pay (Figure 3)

The survey found that when they felt stressed or worried at work, early years practitioners were most likely to seek help from: friends and family (58%), colleagues in a similar role (49%), and GPs (21%).



connections with other managers as a valuable source of support (3.4). Better understanding is often likely to be passed on informally, adding to the skills pool of the whole team:

"Our setting has had two members of staff attend a training on infant mental health... I myself have PTSD from an incident in my childhood and the staff in my setting now understand my 'triggers' much, much more."

4.2 Signposting

Workshop discussions also raised the importance of managers being able to signpost staff to further support: "I think the most important thing is actually knowing where to signpost that person to if they are struggling ...Sometimes I've made that first call, because they say that they feel silly phoning in. They don't want to admit that they need that help."

Having this information freely available for all to be aware of and access was important to practitioners (see 3.2, Access to wellbeing information).

Some staff described how they had brought in external trainers to provide information about locally available support and guide whole-staff discussions.



What you said: signposting

"Practical support and guidance from an independent source (other than supervisors and managers whose role it is to assess performance)."

"Having mental health and wellbeing contacts; emails and phone numbers available in the staff room for those who might need it."

"More support from trained people who are qualified to help with mental health and wellbeing."



4.3 Access to external support

As well as signposting to services, having direct access to external support (e.g. counselling services) was a clear theme. For almost half of survey respondents (49%), access to occupational health or mental health professionals was among their top three choices when considering *What is the most valuable asset in improving their mental health and wellbeing at work?* (Figure 5)

Some settings are doing this already. As one manager explained: "I enrolled all my employees in a mental health and wellbeing programme with 24hr 7 days a week free advice and help from professionals for all aspects of life."

4.4 Self-care

Across the survey and workshops, practitioners placed emphasis on caring for one another; and accessing professional mental healthcare – not each being left to fend for themselves.

Nevertheless, many of the suggestions about access to information, physical space and social experiences are also about wanting to maintain healthy individual choices. Yoga, mindfulness, meditation and exercise generally all have positive effects on our ability to make active choices rather than fall into unhelpful patterns.

What you said: outside support

"We had six sessions of mindfulness which was great".

"A counselling service, confidential telephone counselling service and wellbeing sessions at supervisions."

"Our settings offer support through an outside agency if you are struggling with mental wellbeing."



Activity three

Offering support wherever it's needed

To help think about how to promote wellbeing, it can be helpful to divide support into three commonly adopted categories: universal, targeted and specialist support services, all of which can be incorporated into a staff wellbeing strategy. Which do you have available in your setting? It may not be possible to provide them all, but what could you do more of?

Are there others you could add. Have a look at the discussions you had about the survey questions. Are there any you could add?

Specialist support:

- employee assistance programmes
- crisis support
- referrals to mental health support

Targeted support:

- supervision
- training around mental health
- regular mandatory wellbeing check-in meetings for all staff using a personal or peer support model
- wellbeing events for staff

Universal support:

- staff wellbeing policy
- dedicated staff space
- drop-in sessions for any concerns
- staff wellbeing leads or teams to offer regular events
- open culture towards supporting mental health
- feedback boxes where staff can anonymously share ideas for improving practice and wellbeing

Reflections on workshops

Make a list of what is working in your setting using the following headings from the workshops:

1. supporting each other
2. supportive management
3. physical environment
4. finding help outside the setting

Celebrate your achievements and consider what you can do more of.

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Ideas to build on

This resource is based on the views of early years practitioners. As we have emphasised, no two settings are the same and while the principles of wellbeing apply to all, how you make them work is up to you and your setting.

At the same time, helping staff in early years settings to work together to either write or review a mental health and wellbeing policy, and to put it into practice, has emerged as a key objective during the course of the project.
The aim is for policies and action-planning to be co-produced, with input and commitment from all staff.

A wellbeing approach won't resolve everything. There will still be disputes, tensions and differences, as there is any place of work, particularly when people believe so strongly in the work they are doing. However, failing to address wellbeing can have a severe impact on people's lives and conversely, as we have seen, supporting wellbeing in the early years workplace improves not only the lives of team members themselves, but also the children and families they work with.

So some of the steps to creating a whole-setting approach to staff wellbeing will include:

- supporting each other
- supportive management
- the physical environment
- finding support outside your setting



Supporting each other

Write or review your staff wellbeing policy

You can do this as a team. Go through the findings here and some of the ideas that are shared. If you have a policy in place, what can you improve? Have an open team discussion about how you can reasonably make your workplace somewhere that everyone thrives in.

Display your staff wellbeing policy publicly so that everyone - parents and carers, staff and children - can see it

Parents and carers will love it. Everyone wants their child to go to a setting which has strong and caring values. It sets the tone.

Include a section on staff wellbeing as a standing item at all staff meetings and at meetings with trustees or owners of the setting

Discussing mental health and wellbeing at staff meetings must be a priority. It is too easily bumped off the list by other concerns. Make sure people always have a chance to discuss how wellbeing can be improved and share your ideas.

Consider putting up a board about staff interests: what you like doing and your hobbies, for staff and for parents and carers

The better we know each other, the more we understand. You might want to include a mood board about what individual staff like doing. This is something that opens up conversations and builds relationships in your teams as well as with parents and carers.

Supportive management

Consider running a staff wellbeing survey

Annual staff surveys can be a good way of monitoring the impact of wellbeing interventions in your setting. They should be completed anonymously, to protect staff, so you will want to ask your team first. This is only recommended for settings with more than 10 staff.

How about a limit on after hours texting, emailing or calling unless in an emergency?

If you can't switch off, you won't recharge. Do you text after work hours? Is this always necessary? Of course, you have to respond to emergencies. But would a policy restricting work emails and texts after 6pm be valuable?

Make a list of some of the 'lighter' things to improve wellbeing, like treats and special compliments

It is striking the efforts that people have put into looking after each other. Our respondents are full of kindness and a sense of fun. Social activities, dressing up days, treats for staff, unexpected compliments given to people all highlight the appreciation that we have for each other.

The physical environment

Think how you can offer space and support or how staff can signal a need for it

For example, this might be after dealing with a complex safeguarding issue or perhaps a difficult conversation with parents or carers. Some conversations are difficult and upsetting; rushing straight back to look after children can be difficult. How can you meet the emotional needs of staff at these times and offer them a safe space to recover?

Think how you can build flexible working into your setting

This is not always easy when you have to be in ratio, especially in a small setting, but several people gave good examples of how flexible working improved their wellbeing? Could this work for you?

Finding support outside your setting

Set up a buddying system for staff or managers to provide support

Not every conversation with colleagues is easy, whether for managers or co-workers. But there is often a special quality to exchanging shared experiences with those at slightly greater distance. Buddying staff up with other settings can be a helpful way to get fresh insights and reflections about ways of working which you can bring back, safely, to your own setting.

Signpost to services: there are a number of organisations that can help staff who are struggling with their mental health and wellbeing

Some people find it easier than others to confide in people they know. Promoting sources of support are really important.



Writing a policy

You may already have a policy. If you do, you may wish to review it as a team. If you don't, now is the time to start.

There are no hard and fast rules about how to set out a policy, but we have some examples below, some from other professions, here which might give you some ideas.

National Day Nurseries Association

St John's Ambulance

Focused solutions wellbeing policy template

The most important thing about a policy is that you write it with you audience in mind. Keep it simple and direct. The procedures should be clear and the rules fair. Make sure it is displayed prominently and that staff have contributed to it, know it well and share it with each other. It is a live document and should be regularly updated, and reviewed once a year.

Some of the headings you will need:

- Why is this policy important?
- What are the values of your settings that underpin this policy?
- What is the aim of your policy?
- What are your objectives?
- How will you achieve them? What actions will you take?
- How will you review this policy?

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Activity four

Putting your ideas into action

Points to consider:

In this resource, we've highlighted some examples of good practice that early years practitioners have shared with us. We have put these together in a chart below for you think how you could apply them to your setting.

- We suggest you do this as a team using this resource as a starting point.
- You don't have to do everything at once. Think about what would be most valuable in your setting. As a team, identify what you think are the most important issues and prioritise your actions accordingly.
- Write your actions in the middle column.
- You can grade your priorities using the right hand column of the table below as follows:
    - 1= essential – we need to act now
    - 2 = important – we need to schedule these actions
    - 3 = desirable – we'll get there, but this might take longer
    - 4 = we already do this
    - NA = this is something we can't do at the moment
- You may find it helpful to put some dates or timelines on the actions.
- Mental health and wellbeing is everyone's responsibility – share out actions so you all have an opportunity to put your ideas into practice.
- Remember all actions should be in RATIO! So be realistic and think what is achievable.

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Putting staff mental health and wellbeing into action

Intent: ideas for good practice	Implementation: how can you make this work in your setting?	Priority

1. Supporting each other

- Put up a staff wellbeing board and keep it up to date.
- Make time to talk about mental health and wellbeing in team meetings.
- Hold regular staff social or team building events, including regular wellbeing activities.
- Help staff to recognise when a colleague is experience a mental health difficulty and to know how to support them.
- Value each other's qualities and interests.
- Provide staff with a space to have private and confidential conversations about their mental health and wellbeing.
- Provide opportunities for peer support and feedback.
- Encourage feedback from staff about management procedures and working relationships.
- Review and develop policies and practices as a team (for example, ensuring that your setting is free from bullying and harassment, discrimination and racism).

Intent: ideas for good practice	Implementation: how can you make this work in your setting?	Priority

2. Supportive management

- Ensure all staff have the opportunities to contribute to the mental health and wellbeing policy.
- Share the mental health and wellbeing policy and include it in the staff induction process.
- Provide support for staff who experience mental health difficulties at work, including for those returning to work after absence due to a mental health issue.
- Include a positive statement and information about mental health and wellbeing in the recruitment process.
- Have an out-of-hours policy to reduce workload.
- Have a management open door policy.
- Hold regular supervisions where staff feel confident and comfortable to discuss their mental health and wellbeing needs.
- Have processes to encourage positive feedback, praise and encouragement, between staff member, managers and parents and carers.
- Provide opportunities for flexible working.
- Provide the opportunities for staff to take regular breaks.
- Provide the opportunities for managers to access support.

3. Physical environment

- Display clear, visible information about accessing mental health and wellbeing support, including helplines and access to confidential services.
- Provide a space for staff when they are feeling stressed, overwhelmed or needing some time out.
- Provide an appreciation box for staff to share positive messages with each other.
- Provide treats to help everyone feel valued.
- Hold regular offsite activities.
- Hold wellbeing days.

4. Support from outside your setting

- Offer training to support mental health and wellbeing, to help spot the signs and symptoms of mental health difficulties and to promote wellbeing.
- Provide training to support minoritised groups.
- Signpost to external and local support, such as counselling services.
- Link up managers from different settings or having a peer support scheme for managers.

About the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families

Who we are

Anna Freud National Centre aims to support the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and their families The Centre runs the Early Years in Mind free online network for early years practitioners.

Our network provides easy to read and easy to use guidance on supporting the mental health of babies, young children and their families and supports staff with information and resources.

The network was developed by mental health experts and shares practical and clinical expertise, and advice on using attachment-informed practice.

Join our free Early Years in Mind learning network today.

Our Patron: Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Cambridge

The Anna Freud Centre, operating as the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, is a registered charity, number 1077106, and a company limited by guarantee, company number 03819888.

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