

Team Wellbeing in Early Learning and Care

In early learning and care settings, we invest time and resources in meeting children's needs and interests, but it is just as important to plan for ways to ensure the needs and interests of the staff team are met.

Staff working in early learning and care love working with children and families, but it can be emotionally demanding and stressful. Even the most skilled and experienced educators, as well as other staff such as drivers and cooks, can find their role challenging. To avoid staff members feeling overwhelmed, to buffer any stress they might be feeling and to build their resilience, it is important that early learning and care settings engage in team wellbeing. This means creating lasting strategies to help prevent burnout and finding ways to resource and replenish the whole team.

The first important step for team wellbeing is to acknowledge stress as a reality and an occupational hazard on an organisational level. To do this, settings must build awareness among the team about the impact that stress can have, encouraging open discussion about issues that arise and intentionally integrating self-care into policies and procedures.

Everyone in the early learning and care setting has a role to play in promoting wellbeing. As manager, you can encourage the involvement of staff in contributing, engaging with and owning a whole-setting approach to promoting mental health and wellbeing.

You will have heard the saying, 'You can't pour from an empty cup.' As a manager in an early learning and care setting, looking after your own wellbeing is crucial. Providing emotional and practical support in difficult moments in other people's lives is challenging. You will, at times, be absorbing the stress of your team as well as acting as a buffer against external factors that threaten to lower staff morale. You will need to ensure you are able to handle stress well yourself and take time to consider your own wellbeing before you can support others.



Build Relationships Within the Team

You can build relationships within the team by promoting ways for staff to connect with, get to know and support one another. When team members know each other well, they are more likely to notice if someone is perhaps struggling, as well as the most appropriate way to show support.

By acknowledging the potential stress that staff might be feeling and encouraging open communication, you can establish a sense of trust and create feelings of safety between all team members. This will encourage team members to ask for help when needed.

Transparency and clarity over managing difficulties, including stress, is very important. In a busy setting it is essential that we take the time to notice and support each other.

Having regular team meetings provides a forum to discuss, share problem solving and reflect on practice, and offers a chance for all present to listen and learn from one another. Team meetings also offer an opportunity to establish peer support and feedback among the group and discuss ways to make the setting a workplace in which everyone thrives. Include staff wellbeing on the agenda of all team meetings and encourage your team to be open about any fears and worries they might have. Staff members can identify with one another as to how situations have affected them and offer emotional support.

- Encourage opportunities for team activities for those who would like to be involved such as a team WhatsApp group, wellbeing activities, social events or working on a project together.
- Put up a staff wellbeing board and keep it up to date.
- Hold regular offsite activities and wellbeing days.
- Encourage staff to share their interests and favourite wellbeing activities, perhaps on a shared mood board.
- Value each other's qualities and interests, and provide opportunities for peer support and feedback.
- Encourage feedback from staff about management procedures and working relationships. This might be through discussion, a staff survey or a feedback box.
- Review and develop policies and practices as a team, including a staff wellbeing policy.



Provide Management Support

Managers have specific responsibilities in prioritising staff wellbeing to ensure that all staff feel valued, listened to and supported. You can support team wellbeing across many different areas such as support and supervision, team meetings, training, induction, leadership, policies and procedures, and reflective practice.

It is equally important to find informal opportunities to connect with and get to know the team. Regular check-ins, open communication and an 'open door policy' are ways of assuring that team members know they can always come to you for support.

Providing opportunities to discuss any issues or problems as they arise can prevent them from escalating.

- Ensure all staff are involved in the development and/or review of a staff wellbeing policy, include a copy in the staff induction process and display the policy somewhere everyone can access it easily.
- Think about how new staff members are welcomed into the team, for example, offer a welcome pack or set up a buddy system.
- Promote training opportunities and peer networks to ensure that the team feel competent and confident to meet the challenges that arise in practice.
- Provide regular supervision to allow team members to check in and express their needs in a supportive environment. Make sure these needs are followed up on.
- Encourage staff to leave work on time, have an out-of-hours policy to reduce workload and, if possible, provide opportunities for flexible working.
- Ensure staff have enough breaks throughout the working day and are supported to take time off for important events.
- Acknowledge the strengths and achievements in the team and each individual's contribution. This sends the message that the setting appreciates and values staff members, which helps to create a positive atmosphere and a good working culture, and raises morale.
- Make time for the team to acknowledge and reflect on situations that went well. Encourage positive feedback, praise and encouragement.
- At the end of the day, create space for team members to debrief to help them leave all the difficulties of the day behind them.. Finish the day with what went well and what the children enjoyed.
- Provide support for staff who experience mental or physical health issues or other challenges such as bereavement.
- Include staff wellbeing on the agenda of meetings with the Board or owners of the setting.



Create a Supportive Environment

You can create a physical environment that promotes wellbeing by providing access to spaces and resources that allow for staff to relieve moments of stress and enable them to have some time for themselves. Small gestures can demonstrate to the team that their wellbeing is important and that others are thinking of their comfort, while the ready availability of wellbeing information and advice can help to reduce stigma around mental health.

- Display clear, visible information about staff mental health and wellbeing, including how to access local mental health services and wellbeing support, such as mindfulness sessions or counselling. Ensure this information is kept up to date.
- Provide a quiet, safe space that staff can go to when they are feeling stressed or overwhelmed.
- Think about ways to make areas such as the break room calming and inviting - ensure seating is comfortable, offer healthy snacks and add natural materials.
- Provide an appreciation box or message board for staff to share positive messages with each other.
- Consider the role that smells can play in creating wellness environments. Fresh flowers or an essential oils electronic dehumidifier in the welcome area can provide a nice aroma.
- Provide treats to help everyone feel valued.
- Put up posters with positive messages and artwork on the wall.
- Create opportunities during the day to build in feel-good moments. These might be short meditation or yoga exercises during break times or with children. Supply posters and resources to help guide these activities.
- Encourage the team to be involved in the children's sensory play, with playdough, water, sand etc. These activities can be regulating and calming.
- Provide a variety of materials to promote relaxation such as adult colouring books, painting activities, puzzles or other activities that team members can enjoy at break times or at home.
- Individual fidget toys or stress balls may be helpful for some to use for relaxation. A piece of playdough will provide a similar benefit.

While wellbeing activities that can be enjoyed together as a staff team can be helpful, remember that each person is an individual and what might be self-care to one person may be a source of stress to others. Ask people about activities they find soothing or regulating, and ensure that any activities provided reflect a diversity of practices.

