

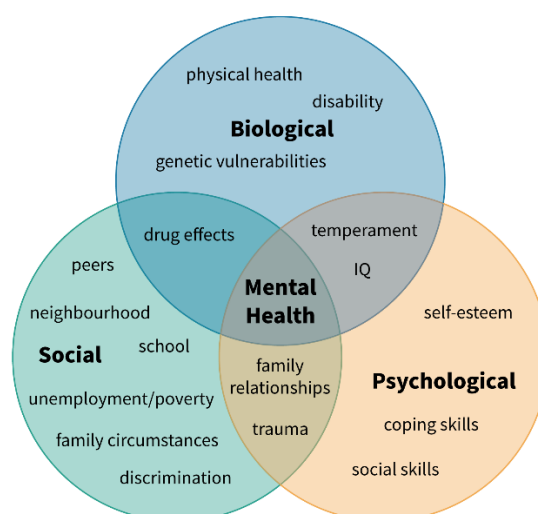
Mental Health – Working with Children and Young People in PSP

Mental health is a state of well-being in which children and young people (child) manage their own abilities, can cope with normal life stresses, can be productive and are able to contribute to their family and community.

The Interaction between Genes and Environment Shapes Mental Health

Mental health issues affect children from all walks of life. The reasons why some children experience mental health issues is complex and occurs as a result of the interaction between a child's genetic makeup and their exposure to significant adversity in their environment. Genes are not destiny. Our genes contain instructions that tell our bodies how to work, but the environment leaves a “signature” on the genes that authorises or prevents those instructions from being carried out—or even speeds up or slows down genetic activity.

The interaction between the child's genetic makeup and continued, stress-inducing experiences early in life can lay an unstable foundation for mental health that lasts well into the adult years by biological, psychological and social factors. Any one of these factors can have either a positive or negative influence on a child's mental health.



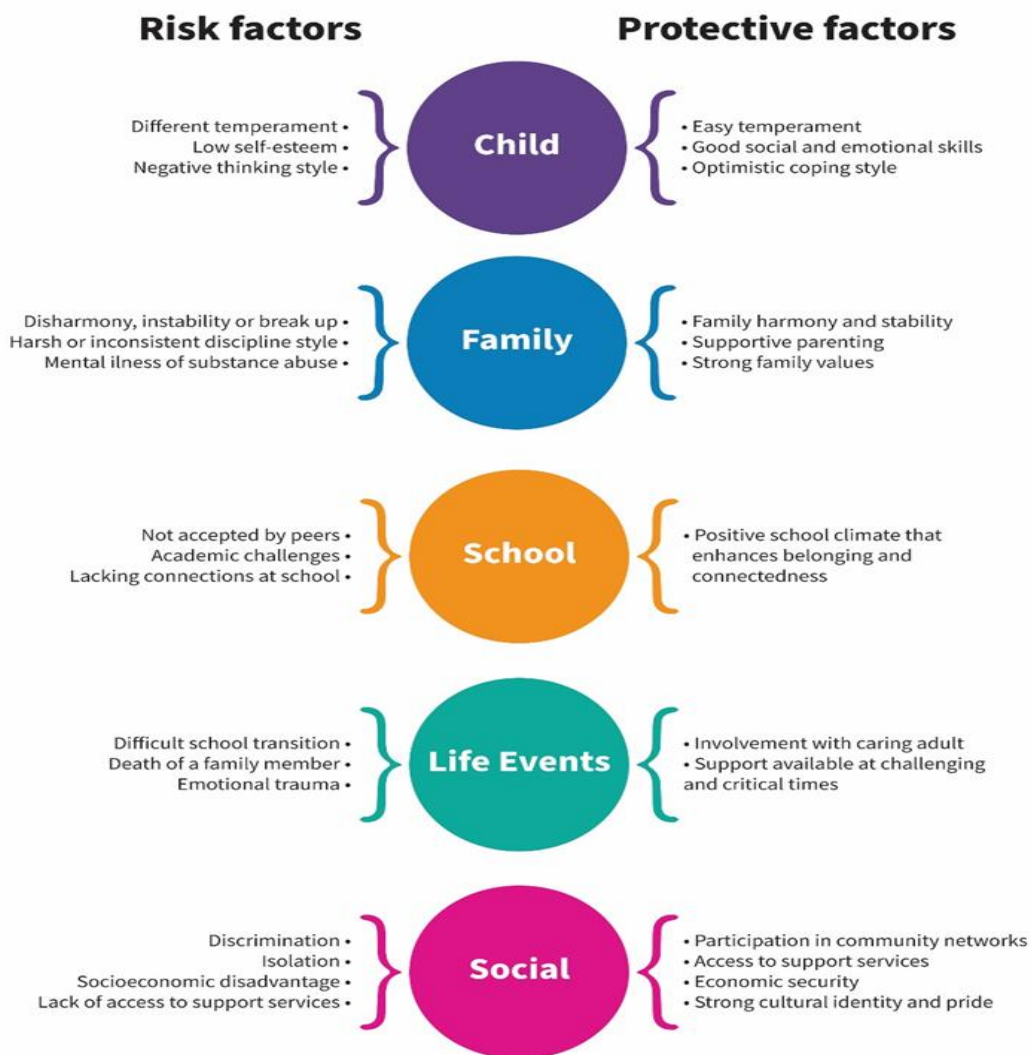
Putting Mental Health in Context

It is essential to treat the child's mental health problems within the context of their families, homes and communities.

The children you work with will often come from homes where there are multiple complex issues and research (Jeffreys et al., 2011) shows us that the emotional well-being of children is directly tied to the functioning of their caregivers and the families in which they live. When these relationships are abusive, threatening, constantly neglectful, or otherwise psychologically harmful, they can be powerful risk factor for the development of mental health problems. In contrast, when relationships are reliably responsive and supportive, they can actually protect children from the negative effects of other stressors. Therefore, reducing the stressors affecting children requires addressing the stresses on their families.

You will need to understand the child's story and to consider how this might link to the child's mental health concerns. Remember that each child processes experiences in their own unique way, how a child copes is also dependent on protective factors. This tells us that the child's needs will be best met through coordinated services that focus on their full environment of relationships, including parents, extended family members, home visitors, providers of early care and education, and/or mental health professionals. If there are mental health services involved for the parents those services would have a broader impact if they routinely included attention to the needs of the children as well.

Consider the risk and protective factors for childhood mental health issues in the diagram below. The more risk factors that are present, the more likely the child will develop a mental health issue.



Source: Adaption from [KidsMatter](#)

Find out more about the child's strengths

- What is going well for the child?
- Do they have good connections with other people?
- Are they able to talk about what is worrying them?
- Are they doing well at school?
- Do they have a hobby or interest that they are passionate about?
- Do they have friends?

Think about the child's resources

- Can this child ask for help?
- Are there supportive family or community members the child can talk to?
- Does the child have a basic understanding of what it means to live with a mental health issue?
- Does the child understand their parent's illness is not their fault?

Be curious about the child's strategies

- How does the child respond to their parent when they are well?
- How does the child respond to their parent when they are unwell?
- Has the child suddenly becomes really interested in schoolwork or their hobbies because things are hard at home? Are they trying to distract themselves or get some extra attention?
- Are they using alcohol or other drugs to cope with their feelings?
- Have you spoken to the child about why they do the things they do?
- What do they hope to get out of their behaviour?

Children have different strategies for 'managing' their parent's mental health issues or for managing their lives when their parents become unwell. You may notice children taking care of their parents or siblings. This may happen when a parent is unwell — as the child attempts to keep things in order. Or when the parent is well — as the child attempts to keep mum or dad stable.

Children may also look for things to distract them from what is happening at home. Sometimes these will be healthy distractions, such as being passionate about a hobby. Other times their behaviour may be higher risk, such as spending lots of time away from home or taking drugs. Healthy or risky, it is important to understand what motivates their behaviour.

Be curious about any differences for example, Kara appears happy and relaxed at home but is withdrawn and isolated at school.

You will need to consider:

- What is different about home and school? What does Kara say about this?
- How does she feel about her friends and peers?
- Is she worried about her academic performance?
- Is something making it hard for her to focus at school?
- How can I be open to consider what might be happening for Kara at school?
- How can I be open to consider what might be happening for Kara at home?

Develop clear consultation questions to help you think about a child's experience and best plan your approach. Suggested examples:

- How can I best connect with the child to understand their lived experiences of their mental health issue?
- What information does the child need to know about their mental health issue?
How can I best give them this?
- What role does the child play in their family, for example, as part of a sibling group?
Do they take on roles that a parent would hold in most households such as cook meals and/or organise their siblings for school.
- What do they see as their responsibilities within their family?
- How can I help this young person feel supported and stay connected when their mental health issue creates barriers or challenges in their life?
- What risk factors might be contributing to this child's mental health problem?
- How can I find the problems this child is experiencing in their social world, rather than within themselves as a person?
- How can I help the family make changes to reduce the risk of a child developing mental health issues, or issues getting worse?
- What protective factors might be contributing to this child staying well?
- How can I work with the family to build on these protective factors to keep the child well and happy?
- How can I help the child be a 'child' and enjoy the things in life that children their age do?

Use Supervision and Conversations with Colleagues to Explore Grey Areas

This can be a useful way to:

- explore what you already know about a child
- explore what you do not know about the child
- explore what the grey areas are
- share risk and make sure there is integrity in your decision making
- step back from your day-to-day casework and put yourself in the child's shoes.

Talking to Young People About Their Mental Health

Adolescence is a time of growth and change. It is normal for older children to have mood swings, struggle with impulse control, begin to take more risks and experience changes in friendship groups and interests.

These changes make it difficult for parents, carers and professionals to understand what is within the range of normal adolescent development and what might be more concerning. Anxiety and depression are commonly experienced by young people. But adolescence may also be a time when other mental health issues begin to emerge. Many adults with mental health issues experience the onset of their illness in late adolescence.

The following links will provide you with general information about mental health issues young people may be experiencing:

- Eating Disorders — [The Butterfly Foundation](#)
- Anxiety — [Youth Beyondblue](#)
- Depression — [Youth Beyondblue](#)
- Understanding psychosis — [Headspace](#)
- Borderline Personality Disorder — [Headspace](#)
- Bullying and cyberbullying — [Youth Beyondblue](#)

Part of a young person's risk-taking behaviour may include experimenting with drugs and alcohol. Some adolescents may start to use alcohol and other drugs as a way of managing their mood. There is also a link between some drugs, such as cannabis and Ice, and anxiety, depression and psychosis.

Help Prevent Misdiagnosis, Share What You Know

You can help the child get the treatment they need by providing as much information as you can to their mental health professional. Their caregiver and your observations about the child can reduce the likelihood of misdiagnosis and unnecessary treatment. Think about information that may be helpful for a health professional to know and be aware that some symptoms of a mental illness can overlap with symptoms of child trauma.

When a child is seen by their mental health professional, give them written information about your role with the child as well as relevant previous and current treatments by other clinicians, including relevant previous reports. Similarly, obtain written information from the clinician regarding their diagnosis and recommendations. Have them send you reports about each session with the child.

See [Dignity Driven Practice – Recognising Resistance Practice Tips](#) for more information.

Be Open to Other Possibilities

Be open to the possibility that the child may be experiencing something that you cannot yet see. If you are worried a child may be showing signs of a mental health issue, start by looking for acts of resistance in a child's behaviour.

Ask yourself:

- How can I best understand the child's behaviour?
- Should I see the behaviour as oppositional, aggressive, anxious or dissociative?
- Or is the child trying to hold onto some control or dignity when someone else is threatening to take it?
- Could this behaviour be a response or act of resistance to violence, oppression or marginalisation?

Always check with all your analysis of the child and their circumstances that your own assumptions, biases and judgements are not affecting your picture of what is happening for the child or your interaction with them.

Avoid using language that pathologises, stigmatises or labels a child. A diagnosis of a mental health issue can be useful in getting services and supports for children, but make sure that a child's capacity, strengths and resources are also recognised.

A child needs the opportunity to be young and carefree. Enjoy everyday experiences of childhood. Your role in supporting a child find opportunities to connect to their family and community is incredibly beneficial.

Overcoming Reluctance to Get Help

The more you understand what is getting in the way of a child seeking help, the more you will be able to help them. Talk to them about any previous times they turned to a friend, family member or professional for help with their mental health issues, what was the outcome?

Try to answer the following questions through talking with the child:

- What was their experience of trying to get help in the past?
- Did they feel judged or understood?
- Were there negative consequences for them?

Ask about a time they did something that scared them:

- What helped them follow through, even if they were worried?
- What did they learn from the experience that could be helpful now?
- What can you learn about what they've told you?
- What can you do to get them help?
- Can you help them make a call or go with them to an appointment?

Where Can You Find Help for a Child?

You can link or refer a parent to the following services:

- Emergency 000 (someone in immediate danger) – call 000
- their GP, psychologist, psychiatrist or other health professional
- [Kids Helpline](#) (counselling support child 5-25, 24/7) – call 1800 551 800
- [beyondblue](#) (anyone feeling depressed or anxious) – call 1300 22 4636 or chat online
- [Black Dog Institute](#) (people affected by mood disorders) – online help
- [SANE Australia](#) (people living with a mental illness) – call 1800 187 263
- [Mental Health Line](#) (talk to a mental health professional) – call 1800 011 511
- [Suicide Call Back Service](#) (anyone thinking about suicide) – call 1300 659 467
- [Thirrili](#) (Aboriginal community, National Indigenous Critical Response Service, provides emotional and practical support to bereaved families and individuals impacted by suicide or other traumatic loss, 24/7) – call 1800 805 801.

References:

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020). Australia's children. DOI: 10.25816/5ebca4d0fa7dd. Available: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/health/children-with-mental-illness>

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020). Mental Health Services in Australia. Available: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/health/children-with-mental-illness>

Jeffreys, H., Rogers, N., Hirte, C. (2011). Keeping the child in mind: Child protection practices and parental mental health. Available: <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/pacra/keeping-child-mind-child-protection-practice-and-parental-mental-health>

Raising Children Network (2006-2020). Child development: the first five years. Available: <https://raisingchildren.net.au/newborns/development/understanding-development/development-first-five-years>

World Health Organization (2003). Mental Illness, 7. Available: https://www.who.int/mental_health/media/investing_mnh.pdf