



MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION

Mental health is at the basis of wellbeing

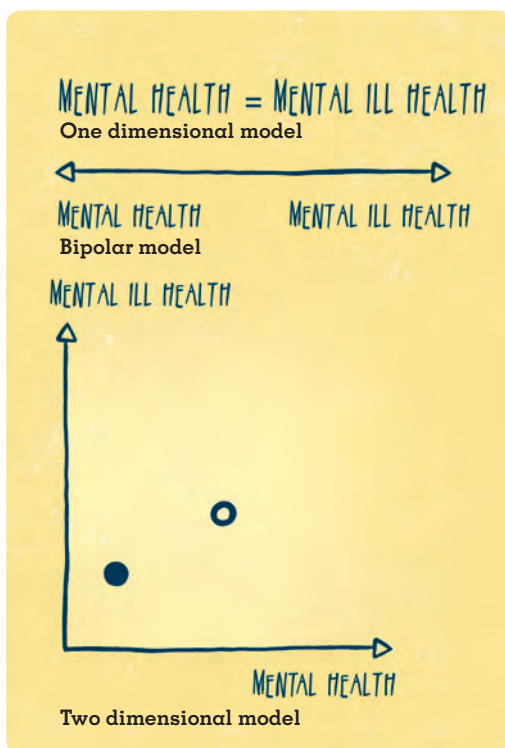
Mental health is an experience of wellbeing and balance. It is knowledge and skills which people use to steer their life. It is a renewable resource which evolves and can be developed throughout life. Mental health is a feeling of joy; it gives a sense of meaning to life and helps with coping; it is emotional intelligence and the ability to establish and maintain relationships. That is a health-oriented approach to mental health. Mental health and mental ill health are two different things.

Mental health provides us skills to find help and discuss our worries and sorrows when needed. It gives us tools to recognise our coping strategies in crisis situations and helps us look after our safety net and rely on the support it provides. Mental health as a life skill means understanding it as a resource which allows us to deal with daily life, work, learn new things and feel well.

By strengthening and increasing mental health skills, we can also cope with occasional anxiety and face the challenges life brings us. Thus, it is important to maintain mental health, learn new things or give up old dysfunctional ways of operating. Mental health skills can always be further developed and strengthened.

According to the World Health Organisation, mental health is a state of wellbeing, which allows individuals to reach their full potential; face the normal challenges of life and cope with them. It enables people to work productively and contribute to their community. (WHO 2013)

Mental health is not only about individual characteristics or daily choices; it is shaped within the interaction between the individual, the environment and the society. The society we live in and our ability to engage, have an impact and become heard within it contribute to our mental health. Cultural values and attitudes also form our understanding of what we perceive as good life and how we talk about mental health.



Mental health models

We can approach the development of the mental health resource aspect by examining historical models and concepts. According to the unipolar model (image 1), the concept of mental health, in fact, referred to mental ill health. Mental health was used as a euphemism for mental ill health.

In the bipolar model (image 2), mental health and mental ill health are seen as the opposite ends of the same continuum, and people have either more of mental health or mental ill health.

Nowadays, mental health is examined using the so called two-dimensional model (image 3). It describes mental health and mental ill health as their own dimensions in people's lives. Thus, health and ill-health can exist in one person simultaneously. People may have plenty of mental health even if they have a mental illness. Respectively, people's mental health can be low, even if they have not been diagnosed with a mental illness. Mental health fluctuates during our life. Mental disorders can be treated medically, with therapy or in peer support, but mental health resources can be strengthened at all stages of life.

Mental health protective factors

Mental wellbeing can also be examined via protective and risk factors. Mental health protective factors strengthen our capacity to function and maintain health. They also help us cope with crises and hardship. Protective factors strengthen our experience of being in control of our life.

The protective factors for children's mental health include safe attachment, a feeling of acceptance and sufficient intimacy at home. By strengthening the protective factors, we can lower the effects of risk factors. The presence of an important adult is known to lower children's stress levels, and emotional support reduces the effects of distressing experiences.

Promoting mental health in ECEC and child health clinics

Equality in discussions and encounters promotes mental health. This material offers more tools for developing a shared understanding of mental health as a resource and a skill and serves as a reminder of the importance of easy access to help and support.

Making adjustments that ensuring that early childhood education and child health clinic procedures and activities support mental is based on having a shared awareness and focus. Mental health promotion can be highlighted in workplace discussion, through daily value choices, attitudes and planning. The Mental Health Skills Annual Wheel (Appendix) facilitates planning.

It is also important to get parents involved in the discussions on mental health promotion. This supports everyone's opportunities to look after their own wellbeing.

Mental health promotion is versatile. In ECEC, it may mean enhancing emotional skills, facilitating grouping and adapting the day care centre's environment in ways that promote mental health. In child health clinics, mental health promotion practices can be introduced during routine appointments and in family counselling and guidance. Mental health protective factors are strengthened through discussions with children and their families.

Children's mental health can be promoted by an adult, who

- is available and engages with the child.
- takes the child's needs into account.
- strengthens the child's self-esteem.
- displays emotional skills.
- teaches skills for finding help.
- teaches friendship skills.
- demonstrates and teaches how to calm down and unwind.
- offers safe attachment and intimacy.
- provides the child with an experience of being valued and a feeling of acceptance.
- builds an accepting atmosphere in a group.
- shows genuine interest in the child.
- uses interactive methods in upbringing.
- provides a safe growing environment.
- recognises the child's temperament and knows how to work with it.
- observes potential illnesses and developmental disorders.
- ensures that a child is accepted by a group.

ADDITIONALLY, A PROFESSIONAL

- supports grouping.
- intervenes immediately with any bullying in a group.
- supports parents with their upbringing duties and, if needed, shows them where to find further support and help.

It is important to examine and aim to reduce any potential risk factors.

Child health clinic nurses meet families on clinic appointments and have contact with 99.6 % of the target group in Finland. Child health clinics reach 400,000 children and 600,000 adults annually, which offers diverse opportunities for supporting families' resources and promoting their mental health. Parents also hope to have more opportunities for discussions on their children's psychosocial development and more support for parenthood.

Resource-oriented work is effective even in financial terms: investments into the promotion of child and adolescent mental health comes back in one to five years up to five-fold compared to the amount invested. (McDaid 2011)

We cannot predict the challenges children will face in the future, but in our daily work, we play a role in the kind of childhood they had yesterday and have today. Mental health promotion provides hope, opportunities and trust in life.

PLAYING, STORIES AND MENTAL HEALTH

Playing and stories are an essential part of children's development. Playing develops body control, intellectual skills, creativity, memory, learning, thinking and social skills. Stories, on the other hand, enforce imagination and strengthen empathy skills, and they teach children to listen to others and to focus on creating mental images.

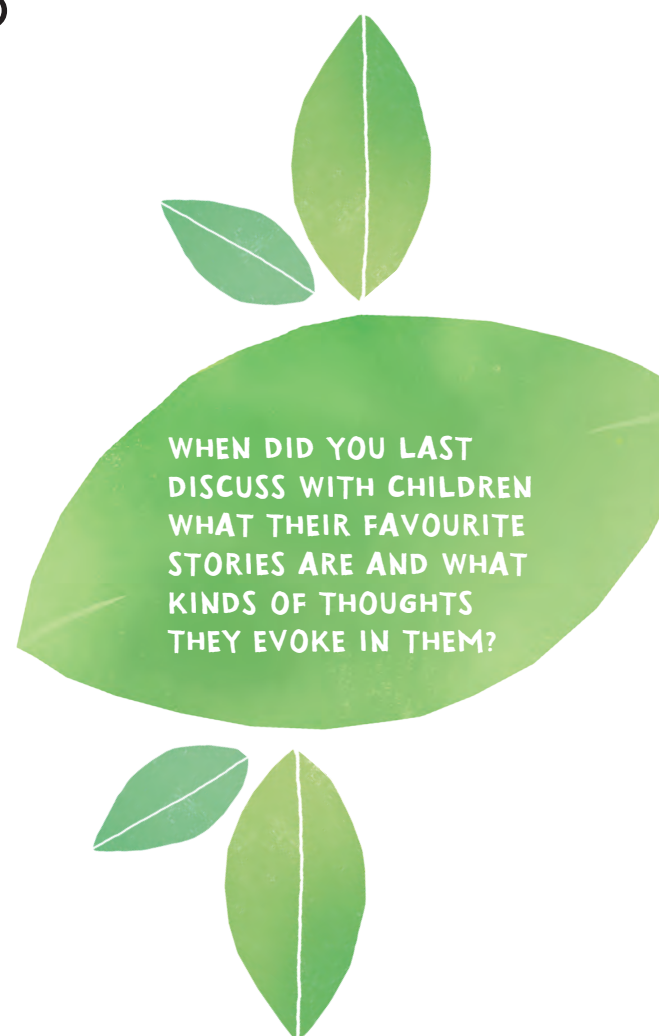
When did you last read a story to a child? Do you enjoy reading stories? What kinds of discussions have the stories generated among the children? What kinds of games do the children in your group like? And how have you helped children join in? How do you utilise toys and games in your work at the child health clinic?

Recognising emotions through stories

Stories allow children to safely practise experiencing different emotions, whilst helping them connect with their own emotional life. Stories offer a way to deal with difficult emotions, such as shame, isolation, envy, hatred and rage. As children listen to stories, they can form images of a variety of different situation, whilst being aware of the fact that the stories are fiction – and that is precisely what makes listening to stories soothing and safe. Reading stories increases the experience of intimacy between an adult and a child. Different survival stories demonstrate to children that you can cope with challenging emotions and get over difficulties you may face. When children identify with stories and the lives of the characters, they learn life skills, empathy and compassion, which are very important protective factors for mental health.

Storycrafting

Storycrafting allows builds intimacy between adults and children. The idea behind storycrafting is that everyone has their own unique thoughts, knowledge and stories. In a storycrafting session, children get a chance to decide which story they want to tell. Storycrafting offers a chance to find out about the children's world and what they consider important. This means that children get to feel that their perceptions are important and valuable. When storycrafting has been done a few times, even those who take a bit longer to warm up notice that



Storycrafting also provides an opportunity to turn even a more difficult issue into a story. Things that may be weighing on the mind are put into a story form, which makes them easier to tell another person. (Karlsson 2005)

their thoughts are important too. Children who are used to storycrafting, are more prepared to share their thoughts and ideas or ask questions.

Storycrafting broadens adults' mind and gives rise to a more playful attitude. It combines listening skills and respect for others, provides a shared activity and experience, allows you to work things out and learn and enjoy the moment. Everyone's thoughts are valuable and worth listening to. A story-crafting session leaves children feeling that the story was produced together and that it was a great success.

Children at play

For growing children, playing is a value in itself, and playing supports children's development and mental health comprehensively. Small adventures and mishaps are an important part of growth for developing children. Playing can be divided, for example, into imaginative play and physical play, and both play an important role in supporting children's mental health and growth.

Children's inner world becomes richer through imaginative play, whilst also strengthening their capacity to identify with others and to experience empathy. Physical play, such as wrestling, hiding and playful tickling also develop children in many ways, and every child should gain enough of these experiences. Physical play alternates between excitement and good-natured competing. It is essential that playing comes to an end just when it is suitably frenzied leaving room for calming down. An adult can either participate in the games or safeguard their success, thus, ensuring that physical play does not result in hostile emotions or tantrums.

Creative chaos

Sometimes children's play activities may appear disorderly and boisterous to adults, even though the space and activity are well organised for the players themselves.

Boisterousness, physicality and laughter are important elements of play. The length of the game is not a relevant measure of its significance; even a short moment of play may be valuable to children.

Playing stems from children. Available adults and other children, playing equipment and the environment provide a variety of outcomes for games. However, certain safety factors put some limits to children's activities.

Playing offers an opportunity to share thoughts, things and ideas and a way to practice cooperation. Whilst they play, children also practice interactive skills, experiencing emotions and emotional skills and realising creativity. Playing is a way to handle difficult issues and cope with crises.

By playing, children learn about flexible thinking, creativity and coming up with their own ideas. Children's games give them important experiences of success and skill. During play, children can explore the world safely adopting different roles: how would it feel like to be an almighty superman or a kitten needing tenderness and care. Playing provides children with experiences and skills, which strengthen their self-esteem, self-image and emotional skills. Emotional experiences brought on by playing allow empathy to develop. All these are skills that each child will need in future for their own wellbeing.



HOW DO YOU PARTICIPATE IN CHILDREN'S GAMES AND GIVE THEM SPACE?

Adult as the enabler of play

Adults can inspire, support or offer tips for playing and get the game started. Playing and joining in can activate adults' own playfulness. We do not always realise we are playing, but it must not be forgotten that adults too are homo ludens, playing humans – we love games, exercise and creative activities. At times it is necessary for adults to provide an example and spend time and effort to get a game going. In their efforts to support a group of children to play, adults need to sometimes give individual children a boost to help them join in. It is the duty of adults to ensure that children have an opportunity to play age-appropriate games. There should be enough time for free play to ensure that children's mutual relationships are reinforced. Through the choices they make, adults can affect the content of children's games and steer the direction they take.

When adults throw themselves into the world of play and assume a role that fits that world, they reinforce the relationship between themselves and the children participating in the game. Playing together strengthens the mutual trust between those playing and provides adults a way to safely engage with children in their world. It also gives adults a chance to find easy ways to encourage individual children and support their self-esteem or for the whole group to practice interactive skills. Adults' presence and observation also give children a chance to play in peace which increases the feeling of safety among children.

It is also important to ensure that all children get to join in in shared games, manage to keep up with the game and experience joy and gain feelings of success. Furthermore, adults must support grouping and guide the group, especially when new children join. Adults can lead the way on how new participants are included into activities.

There are many ways for child health clinics and ECEC to encourage parents to participate in their children's play. It is important that parents participate in children's games and spend time playing with them. Valuing, respecting and cherishing play strengthen the mental health of children and adults.

Play supporting children's mental health

Play allows children to

- try new behavioural models.
- safely get to know other children, because playing happens on children's terms and no one needs to fear failure.
- get to know themselves.
- mimic familiar rules for adults' life, attitudes, values and living together.
- express their emotions through roleplay or imaginary characters.
- find their emotions and deal with difficult issues.
- practise new situations.
- identify with the feelings of others.
- relax, enjoy themselves and delve into the laughter-inducing, joyous and humorous world of roleplay.
- be creative.

Playing increases the amount of endorphins in the brain, thus making it particularly rewarding. The increased endorphins make playing an excellent counterforce for melancholy and depression. The old saying "healthy children play" is not without a foundation. (Sajaniemi & Mäkelä 2014)

CAN ADULTS CHOOSE THE PLACE FOR CHILDREN'S GAMES?

HOW TO REMIND PARENTS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF STORIES AND PLAY AT CHILD HEALTH CLINICS?

HOW DOES YOUR NURSERY HELP CHILDREN TO JOIN IN GAMES AND STAYING IN THE GAME?

Strengthening children's mental health through play

- Create a playful environment.
- Ensure that there is time and space for playing.
- Make sure all children have a chance to participate.
- Encourage and praise.
- Help solve conflicts.
- Learn to put up with chaos.
- Help children get started.
- Be present.
- Remember humour.

Stories supporting children's mental health

- Enrich children's imaginative world.
- Encourage children to identify with the feelings of others.
- Help children feel empathy.
- Teach children coping strategies.
- Enable children to experience different emotions.
- Increase intimacy between adults and children.

Storycrafting

- Child decides the topic for storycrafting.
- Adult writes the story down word by word as the child watches.
- Adult does not change or correct the child's "mistakes".
- Adult shows interest in what the child is saying.
- Child can be asked to wait a moment to allow the adult to write everything down.
- The activity gives the child a chance to watch as the spoken word turns into written language.
- In the end, the story is shared together, and the adult reads the story to the child.
- The adult makes any change the child requests.
- The story should include the child's first and last name, age, place and date.
- Often children want to draw a picture of the story. Sometimes children want to draw first and then tell the story.
- It is nice to read the story out loud to other children, grandparents or maybe godparents, if the child gives permission for it.
- The stories can be collected into the child's own storybook.
- Adults may find it rewarding to write down their own thoughts on the storycrafting session.

(Sources: Karlsson, Liisa: Sadutus. Avain osallistavaan toimintakulttuuriin and edu.helsinki.fi/lapsetkertovat/Sadutus/sadutusohje.htm)

Cooperation with parents

Encourage parents to have shared playing and story sessions with their child. Inspire parents to use storycrafting with their child and to bring their creation to day care for others to take delight in.