A wellbeing workbook for early years practitioners: an ecological lens



Anna Freud
building the mental wellbeing of the next generation

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About Anna Freud

Anna Freud has developed and delivered pioneering mental health care for over 70 years. We aim to close the gap in children and young people's wellbeing and mental health by delivering and sharing the best practice with everyone who impacts the lives of children and families. We work in partnership with professionals to put children and their families at the heart of the care they receive.

Early Years in Mind is a free online network for early years practitioners. The network provides easy to read and easy to use guidance on supporting the mental health and wellbeing of babies, young children and their families. The network was developed by our mental health experts and shares practical and clinical expertise, alongside advice on using attachment-informed practice. Our resources our co-designed with sector experts. Visit our website for more details about our Early Years in Mind network and resources.

"There is nothing more important than your health...we push and punish, endure, and overwhelm ourselves physically, mentally, emotionally, and maybe even spiritually and live in a world and country that has convinced us we must live to work. Some of us have learnt the hard way that we are not invincible because we eat, sleep, breathe, study our job role".

(Moxley, 2022, p9)



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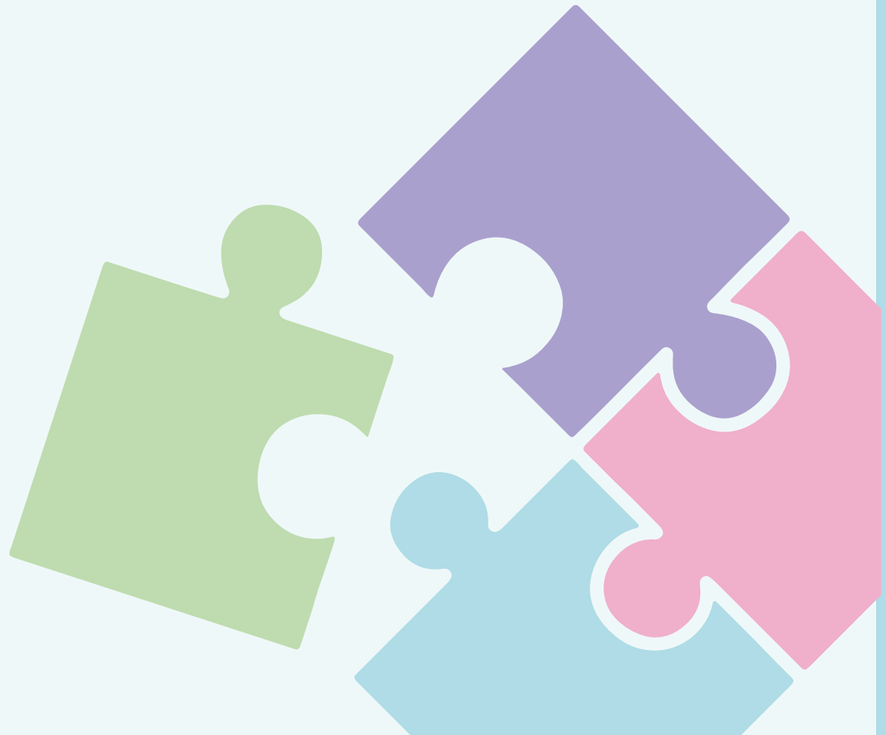
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Executive summary

Early years work can be joyous and fulfilling, but it can also be demanding. This workbook aims to provide practical tips and resources for early years practitioners and leaders to support wellbeing. Early years managers will find the teams and early years settings sections most helpful.

Wellbeing exists in a social context - you can take steps to look after your wellbeing, but environmental factors influence it too. This guide frames these factors using an ecological model: recognising how everything from individual actions, to interpersonal relationships, to public policy impacts health and wellbeing. For this reason, this guide offers insight to policymakers too – the ecological model can inform policy frameworks like the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework and the Family Hubs and Best Start for Life Programme.

Early intervention and prevention is encouraged within public health and social care. Preventative work starts in the early years - supporting families from conception through the child's first years of life can stop poor health outcomes before they develop. These early years are crucial - so the early years workforce needs to be supported to best care for the babies, children and families they work with.

How to use this guide

This resource establishes the importance of wellbeing in a policy and practice context, and guides you through how each of the ecological layers impact wellbeing.

It covers four ecological layers: individual, teams, early years settings and society and culture. Each section provides reflective activities and further resources to continue your learning.

Introduction

What is wellbeing?

Wellbeing is 'the state of feeling healthy and happy'.[1]

Organisations such as What Works for Wellbeing and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) take into account the impact of our wider context on our wellbeing. What Works for Wellbeing recognises the effect of environmental factors,[2] and the ONS collects data on how economic factors influence our wellbeing.[3] Other research links wellbeing to health, wellness and quality of life.[4] Read more about the socio-economic context for wellbeing in the society and culture section.

Developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model conceptualises how these external factors impact wellbeing in the early years.[5] This model explains how the interplay between an individual and their wider context influences their development and mental health.[6]

An ecological model recognises the social determinants of health and wellbeing, including:

- education
- employment
- healthcare
- housing
- social dynamics
- institutional and state decisions
- oppression
- inequity
- historical injustices.[7]

[1] Cambridge Dictionary/ Available from: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/well-being#google_vignette

[2] What Works for Wellbeing. Available from: https://whatworkswellbeing.org/about-wellbeing/what-is-wellbeing/

[3] Office for National Statistics 'UK measures for national well-being dashboard'. Available from: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/ukmeasuresofnationalwellbeing/dashboard

[4] Simons, G. and Baldwin, D.S. (2021) 'A critical review of the definition of 'wellbeing' for doctors and their patients in a post Covid-19 era', International Journal Soc Psychiatry, 67(8): 984-991. doi: 10.1177/00207640211032259

[5] Piell, P. (2022) 'The Pursuit of Happiness: Leadership Challenges of Recognising and Supporting Child Health and Wellbeing in the Early Years', Education Sciences, 12(2), 113. doi: 10.3390/educsci12020113

[6] Eriksson, M., Ghazinour, M. and Hammarström, A. (2018) 'Different uses of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory in public mental health research: what is their value for guiding public mental health policy and practice?', Social Theory and Health, 16(4), pp. 414–433. doi: 10.1057/s41285-018-0065-6

[7] Golden, T. L. and Wendel, M. L. (2020) 'Public Health's Next Step in Advancing Equity: Re-evaluating Epistemological Assumptions to Move Social Determinants from Theory to Practice', Frontiers in Public Health, 7(8): 131. doi: doi:10.3389/fpubh.2020.00131

Why is early years wellbeing support important?

Babies instinctively form bonds with others to survive and feel safe in the world. These attachment ideas (rooted in the work of John Bowlby) highlight how closeness to caregivers early in life supports babies' and young children's physical and emotional development. This isn't just relevant to parents and carers, but also the early years workforce. Find out more in our Guide for early years workers on using attachment ideas in their day to day practice.

Linked to attachment, supporting a child's Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) aids their cognitive development and enables them to lead healthy and happy lives. Through positive relationships with adults, children learn how to understand and regulate their emotions, and how to form relationships with their peers. These nurturing relationships promote resilience, emotional literacy, positive self-esteem, pro-social behaviour and positive dispositions to learning.[8]

Supporting children's emotional wellbeing also depends on early years practitioners' social and emotional wellbeing.[9] With the right skills and experience, they can model how to express feelings with words and regulate children's emotions non-verbally. Feelings are closely intertwined with physical sensations for babies and toddlers[10] - we might rock babies at the pace of their heartbeat, or slow the rocking down to soothe distress and bring the baby's heart rate down.

Although the early years workforce primarily supports babies' and children's development, they can also help address societal inequalities. For example, practitioners can:

- address the attainment gap in disadvantaged communities by supporting their learning needs[11]
- disrupt practices that favour neurotypical minds and non-disabled bodies[12]
- help children develop a positive racial identity, appreciate the identities of others and encourage them to question the world around them.[13]

[8] Manning-Morton, J (2014) Exploring Wellbeing in the Early Years. Open University Press: Berkshire, p. 55

[9] As above, p. 154

[10] As above, p. 57

[11] Social Mobility Commission (2020) The stability of the early years workforce: an examination of national, regional and organisational barriers

[12] Murphy, K. (2023). A guide to neurodiversity in the early years. Anna Freud Centre

[13] Hamilton, P., Showunmi, B. (2023). Helping young children to think about race in the early years. Anna Freud Centre

Policy and practice context

Statutory guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) was reformed in 2021. Under this guidance, early years providers must ensure:

- children learn and develop well
- children are kept healthy and safe
- children have the knowledge and skills to start school.

The EYFS encourages practitioners to spend more time with children, rather than on paperwork to build important relationships.

The Department for Education recognises that ensuring practitioners' wellbeing creates a more positive environment for both practitioners and children. This in turn reduces staff absences, increases effectiveness at work and improves employee retention. Guidance for initiatives like the Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme promotes the importance of a healthy, supported and integrated workforce.

The reality of this is often harder. Despite initiatives to improve and support the early years workforce, it remains undervalued and underfunded. This negatively impacts workers' wellbeing and by extension the outcomes of the children they support. The high workload, low pay and the demanding nature of the job lead to stress, mental ill-health and poor work-life balance.[14]



[14] Social Mobility Commission,The stability of the early years workforce



Practitioners often report working outside of paid working hours too.[15]

Social and economic inequalities also affect the wellbeing of the early years workforce. Poverty is a key determinant of health inequalities, and as early years work is typically low paid, practitioners are more likely to experience poor mental health than other sectors.[17]

Representation is also an issue in the workforce. Senior staff are less likely to be from a minoritised ethnic group, and more needs to be done to make sure workers represent the communities they serve.[18] Gendered social norms also lead to early years work being undervalued.

> "Working in EY is still considered women's work and is undervalued because of gender stereotyping. In all sorts of ways, the world reinforces that caregiving roles are not for boys."
>
> **Kate Moxley**
> *A Guide to Mental Health for Early Years Educators*

[15] Pre-School Alliance (2018) Mind Matters: The impact of working in the early years sector on practitioners' mental health and wellbeing

[16] Goddard, C. (2021) Staff Health & Well-Being: Part 1 - The state we're in, Nursey World https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/features/article/staff-health-well-being-part-1-the-state-we-re-in

[18] BERA (2022) Ethnicity & the early years workforce: A census of staff in maintained nursery schools in England; Social Mobility Commission (2020) The stability of the early years workforce: an examination of national, regional and organisational barriers

[18] Moxley, K. (2022) A Guide to Mental Health for Early Years Educators. 1st edition. Milton: Taylor and Francis, p.8

Wellbeing through the ecological layers



Individual

Caring for young children can be emotionally demanding. Two- to four-year-olds experience powerful emotions – feelings which those who work with them often absorb. This can lead to increased stress, which is compounded by other pressures in practitioners' work and personal life. For example, a majority female workforce tends to take on caring responsibilities outside of work, making it harder to switch off.

When under pressure, it's normal to have thoughts about feeling overwhelmed, worried or struggling to manage your responsibilities. These thoughts can make us feel irritable, anxious or angry, and cause physical responses like headaches, sweating or a faster pulse. They can also cause behaviours like shouting or arguing, eating or drinking more, or struggling with sleep.

Even if you haven't experienced the thoughts, sensations and behaviours listed, you may still be stressed - everyone experiences it differently.

Being aware of your background and values can help you manage any difficult emotions your work brings up. Specifically, emotional challenges may arise when you develop an attachment to children you're working with.

> "For the privilege of being seen as experts in children's learning and development, early years practitioners need to also engage with the darker side of children's learning and developing, with their distress, their defiance, their dependency and their inherent mess and chaos."[19]
> **(Manning-Morton, 2014, p152)**

These experiences can prompt emotional responses rooted in your own upbringing, culture, identity, values and lifestyle choices. These personal experiences can be hard to talk about - particularly if you've experienced discrimination. But by creating a supportive team and organisation, early years settings can encourage practitioners to reflect on their own values, beliefs and biases.

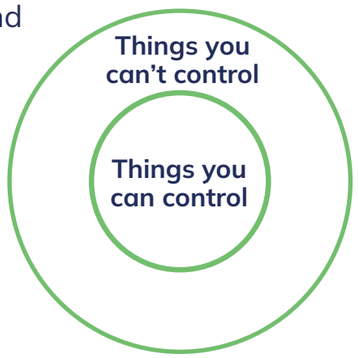
[19] Manning-Morton, J (2014) Exploring Wellbeing in the Early Years. Open University Press: Berkshire, p152

Reflection activities

1) Circle of control

Feeling anxious at work can impact your wellbeing. And when you feel like you have little control over a situation, it's harder to do things that may help. You can use circles of control to separate what you can and can't control and focus on the things you can change.

1. Write down what you're worried about now, and what might worry you in the future.
2. Draw two circles on a piece of paper.
3. In the central circle, write what you have control over and in the outer circle, write everything you can't control.
4. Choose one of the worries in the inner circle to focus on.



2) Stress mapping and self-care strategies

Being able to recognise you're stressed and understanding why this might be can help lower your stress levels. Try this activity to understand how you respond to stress, and therefore what self-care strategies will work for you.

Physical Sensations
- Heart racing
- Breathing faster
- Tense muscles
- Hot or sweaty
- Difficulty concentrating

Feelings
- Irritable, bad tempered
- Anxious
- Impatient
- Angry
- Depressed, hopeless

Thoughts
- This is too much - I can't cope!
- It's unfair. Someone should be helping me
- I haven't got enough time
- I'll never finish
- I must get this done

Behaviour
- Unable to settle, constantly rushing, always busy
- Lots of things on the go that are left unfinished
- Sleep disturbances
- Shouting, arguing
- Eating more (or less)

Example self-care strategies:

Reframe your negative or critical thoughts as if you are talking to a friend. We tend to be kinder to others than we are to ourselves.

Go back to basics - treat yourself as if you are the children you care for. Are you eating the right food? Are you in a routine? Are you moving your body? Are you going to bed early enough?

Play. Just as children thrive when they play, so do adults. This will be personal to you – maybe something creative, an outdoor activity, a quick doodle while you have a coffee or making time for non-work chats with colleagues.

What happens to you when you get stressed?

Try to think back to a time in where you felt stressed. This could be your personal life or at work. Do you remember what thoughts went through your mind?

Thoughts I have when I'm feeling stressed:

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Feelings I experience when I'm feeling stressed:

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Physical sensations I experience when I'm feeling stressed:

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Behaviours I engage in when I'm feeling stressed:

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.....

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Additional resources

Seek help from your GP or Employee Assistance Programme if you feel unable to cope with workplace stress.

For more advice and strategies to maintain wellbeing and reduce stress, take a look at these resources:

Hub of Hope signposts local, regional and national services offering support on topics including bereavement, anxiety and loneliness.

Education Support offers a free emotional support helpline. It's open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and you can speak to a qualified counsellor by phone, text, live chat or email.

Education Support's guide to the building blocks of good mental wellbeing includes advice on exercise, eating well and healthy sleep habits.

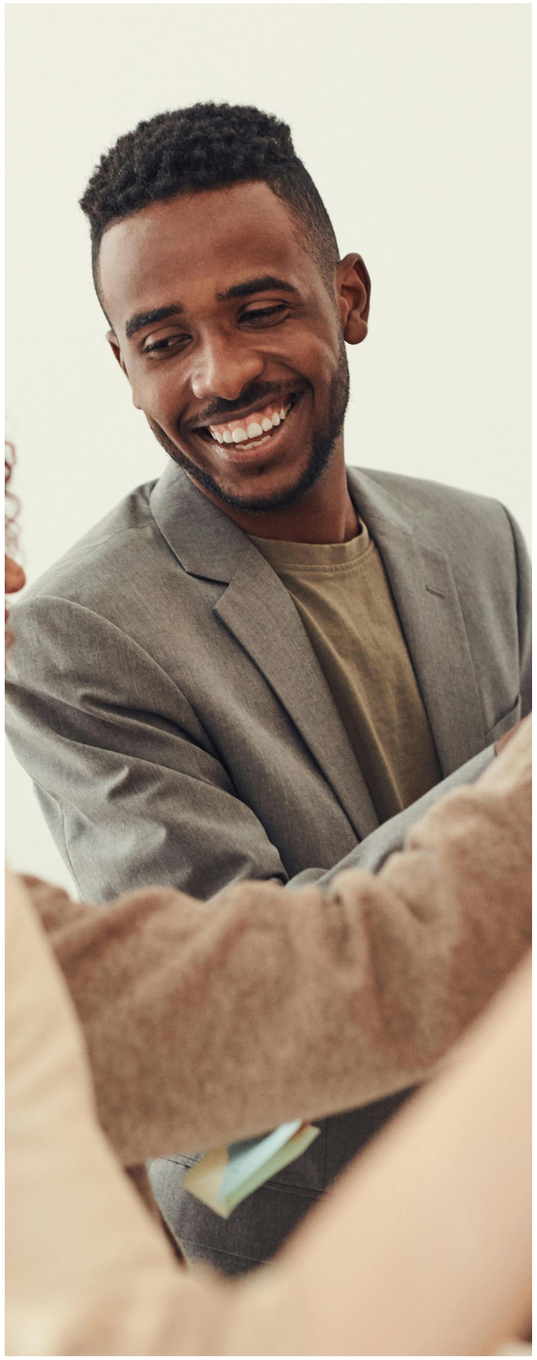
Every Mind Matters provides expert advice to help you and your staff look after your mental health. This includes practical tips to build into your daily routine and a tool to create a personalised self-care action plan.

The box breathing technique can help to calm feelings of anxiety and stress.

Happify produced a short animation introducing mindfulness as a way to process your emotions.

Mind has advice about the connection between physical activity and mental health.

Teams



Team dynamics have a huge impact on staff wellbeing. Working with young children is challenging and at times traumatic, and it is important for staff to feel supported.

Just as parents and carers 'holding' babies creates an environment of trust and self-reliance, the same concept applies in early years workplaces. By creating a holding environment within the team, staff feel supported and can 'hold' each other in times of difficulty, reducing feelings of anxiety at work.[20]

A lot of time is spent at work, and positive relationships within teams can make that time more enjoyable, improving staff wellbeing. Creating high quality connections through small acts of kindness, like making someone a cup of tea, strengthens connection and feelings of support between colleagues.[21]

And when these connections grow into friendships, staff report higher levels of wellbeing and job satisfaction. Existing connections at work can also make it easier for staff to return to work after significant periods of absence.[22]

[20] Kahn, W. A. (2001) 'Holding Environments at Work', The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 37(3), pp. 260–279. doi: 10.1177/0021886301373001

[21] Dutton, J. (2017) Let's Bet on High Quality Connecting as a Path for Fostering Well-Being at Work in White, M. A., Slemp, G. R. and Murray, A. S. (2017) Future Directions in Well-Being. Cham: Springer International Publishing 111-115

[22] Greco, S., Holmes, M. and McKenzie, J. (2015) 'Friendship and Happiness from a Sociological Perspective' in Demir, M. Friendship and happiness: Across the life-span and cultures. Springer, pp: 19-35

Improving wellbeing in early years teams also requires building connections across marginalised communities. Early years teams are diverse, and it's useful to consider your own background and identity in relation to others in your team and wider community. This builds understanding and empathy, enabling teams to better support one another and the babies and children they work with.

The role of team leaders

Team leaders have a crucial impact on the wellbeing of their team members and their team as a whole. But few managers have the skills and confidence to address issues of staff wellbeing.[24] Only 30% of organisations offer training to line managers to help them manage their team's wellbeing, and 4 in 10 employees consider their line manager's lack of skills the top challenge to wellbeing in their workplace. To mitigate this, team leaders should create an open environment where employees feel safe to talk about their wellbeing and mental health.

> "If we want to address wellbeing within our EY workplaces, we must seek to understand and represent marginalized communities who experience prejudice and discrimination - such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex (LGBTQI) persons, Black people, and South Asian, and East and Southeast Asian people, neurodivergent people, people with disabilities, learning differences, and physical and mental health conditions."[23] (Moxley 2022, p17)



[23] Moxley, K. (2022) A Guide to Mental Health for Early Years Educators. 1st edition. Milton: Taylor and Francis p.17

[24] CIPD (2023) Health and Wellbeing at Work https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/knowledge/knowledge-hub/reports/2023-pdfs/8436-health-and-wellbeing-report-2023.pdf

Reflection activities

These activities are designed for managers and team leaders within early years settings.

1) Wellbeing team meeting

As a team, you need to know each other to be able to support each other. Dedicate a team meeting to talking about staff wellbeing. If you are leading the session, make staff aware of what the meeting will entail and if they need to prepare anything beforehand. You could ask team members to complete the control circle from the 'individual' section of this workbook to discuss in the meeting.

During the meeting, acknowledge that improving standards for staff means identifying areas for improvement, and set an example by taking ownership for mistakes. For example: *"Your wellbeing is important to me, and I'm so busy running this nursery that I haven't made time to have that conversation. I want to put that right now because your work is at the heart of everything we do."*

Focus on learning – how can we do things even better? You might suggest a focus for each meeting, such as using empathetic language in your setting.

Be appreciative – input and engagement are great resources. Make it clear that you value them

Let staff know your intentions – that changes will happen, for example writing or reviewing your staff wellbeing policy.

Review – make sure you have a review process in place and share this with staff.

Assess – adapt familiar tools such as the Leuven scale to assess the wellbeing and involvement of your team.

2) Develop a 'listening culture':

It's up to everyone to develop a 'listening culture' within your setting. You can do this verbally through open-ended questions, paraphrasing and leaving silences, non-verbal techniques such as eye contact, and open and relaxed body language. Listening is important because:

- It nurtures respectful and confident relationships between colleagues, and creates positive environments that staff want to work in.
- It may reveal inequalities. It helps practitioners to find out and understand the realities that others face and can help them to reflect on their own practice to make sure settings are fully inclusive.
- It contributes to improvement and provides opportunities for ongoing evaluation and responsiveness.

Additional resources

These resources offer further guidance and support for leaders in early years settings:

- Our Early Years Staff Wellbeing resource for managers and teams contains information and activities to inform wellbeing initiatives.
- The Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD) and Mind developed joint guidance to help managers support employee mental health.



Early years settings

Effective wellbeing policies support your employees and enable them to perform at their best. Sixty per cent of employees say they'd feel more motivated and more likely to recommend working at their organisation if their employer took action to support their mental wellbeing.[25] And the coronavirus pandemic has brought about increased awareness of the value of prioritising employee health and wellbeing – 53% of organisations had a stand-alone wellbeing strategy in 2023, compared to 50% in 2021.[26]

Organisations should take a systemic and preventative approach to wellbeing. Policies need to extend beyond standard packages of support, and adapt to individual staff needs. As children's social care has moved towards strength-based and relationship-based approaches, this should also extend to the internal workings of early years organisations.[27]

Developing a systemic approach to wellbeing means integrating it with other organisational strategies and policies, particularly in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion.

For example, you may want to support staff to manage conversations about race they may have with children and parents:

> "Staff may be hesitant in talking about race and racism due to their own inexperience or anxieties about parental responses. It is important to establish clear anti-racist values and goals which are aligned with your racial socialisation teaching practices. These goals should be developed with contributions from parents, carers and staff. It may be helpful for the setting to think about and prepare responses to questions and concerns that they feel parents and carers may share."[28]
> **(Hamilton and Showunmi, 2023)**

It's important to note that not all early years practitioners work in a setting with others. Many individuals such as childminders work alone, and don't have contact with colleagues for others to notice changes in their behaviour or mood. When this is the case, it can be helpful to build up professional support networks, for example Early Years in Mind or early years membership organisations like PACEY (the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years).

[25] Mind (2023) How to promote wellbeing and tackle the causes of work related mental health problems https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/4808/how-to-promote-wellbeing-and-tackle-the-causes-of-work-related-mh-problems_walesv2.pdf

[26] CIPD (2023) Health and Wellbeing at Work https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/knowledge/knowledge-hub/reports/2023-pdfs/8436-health-and-wellbeing-report-2023.pdf

[27] Howe, D (2014) The Compleat Social Worker. Red Globe

[28] Hamilton, P., Showunmi, B. (2023). Helping young children to think about race in the early years. Anna Freud Centre

Reflection activities

These activities are designed for senior leaders within organisations.

1) Review your wellbeing policies

- Why is this policy important?
- Which of your setting's values underpin this policy?
- What are your aims for this policy?
- How will the policy help you to achieve these?
- What action will this policy take?
- How will you review this policy?
- How does this policy feed into your equality, diversity and inclusion policy?

2) Measure staff wellbeing

The simplest way to understand what early years staff need to support their mental health is to ask them. However, many early years settings do not regularly survey staff to establish their levels of wellbeing.

The wellbeing measurement for early years settings was developed by the Child Outcomes Research Consortium (CORC) and the Evidence Based Practice Unit (EBPU) at Anna Freud. It provides sets of questions to help early years settings better understand their staff and provide the support their teams need. It also includes tools that can be used to measure wellbeing robustly and consistently.

Additional resources

- Research in Practice have workbooks and online tools to develop your organisational resilience.
- Our Early Years Staff Wellbeing resource contains guidance and support for managers in early years settings.

Society and culture

Definitions of wellbeing vary across the world. Through a WEIRD (western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic)[29] lens, wellbeing is often seen as individualistic: governments link wellbeing to productivity and economic prosperity. But in cultures based on social interdependence and collectivist values, balance and emotional moderation are favoured over positively or negatively-valued states like happiness or misery.[30]

> "In many collectivistic cultures, finding a balance between happiness and unhappiness rather than pursuing happiness and avoiding unhappiness is a preferable strategy for achieving wellbeing. A single-minded pursuit of positivity is viewed with caution, if not suspicion."[31] **(Joshanloo et al 2021)**

Socio-economic and cultural context can influence workforce stability. A recent study looking at the common barriers to stability in the early years workforce found that pay, work demands, demographic characteristics, training, and the organisation of the early years provider all impacted staff wellbeing.[32]

Self-care strategies can help groups who experience oppression improve their mental health and wellbeing.[33] The concept of radical self-care – popularised by intersectional feminist scholars bell hooks, Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa - involves freedom to have creativity in the workplace, setting boundaries, and implementing non-linear and non-hierarchical structures. This approach promotes social justice and the wellbeing of those in marginalised communities.[34] Situating wellbeing and mental health within cultural competency frameworks can help your work in diverse communities. Though these can ignore issues of power dynamics[35] - taking a relational approach to developing community-based partnerships is a more deliberate practice to shift power dynamics

You may not always be familiar with the cultures of those you work with, and you won't always have the right answers. This is understandable - it's more important to be culturally responsive, open, respectful and willing to learn. Ask open questions, listen actively and avoid making assumptions.

[29] Henrich, J., Heine, S. J. and Norenzayan, A. (2010) 'The weirdest people in the world?', The Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 33(2-3), pp. 61–83. doi: 10.1017/S0140525X0999152X

[30] Joshanloo et al (2021) 'Four Fundamental Distinctions in Conceptions of Wellbeing Across Cultures' in Kern, M. L. and Wehmeyer, M. L. (2021) The Palgrave Handbook of Positive Education, Springer

[31] As above

[32] Social Mobility Commission (2020) The stability of the early years workforce: an examination of national, regional and organisational barriers

[33] Wyatt, J. P. and Ampadu, G. G. (2022) 'Reclaiming Self-care: Self-care as a Social Justice Tool for Black Wellness', Community mental health journal, 58(2), pp. 213–221. doi: 10.1007/s10597-021-00884-9

[34] As above, p.214

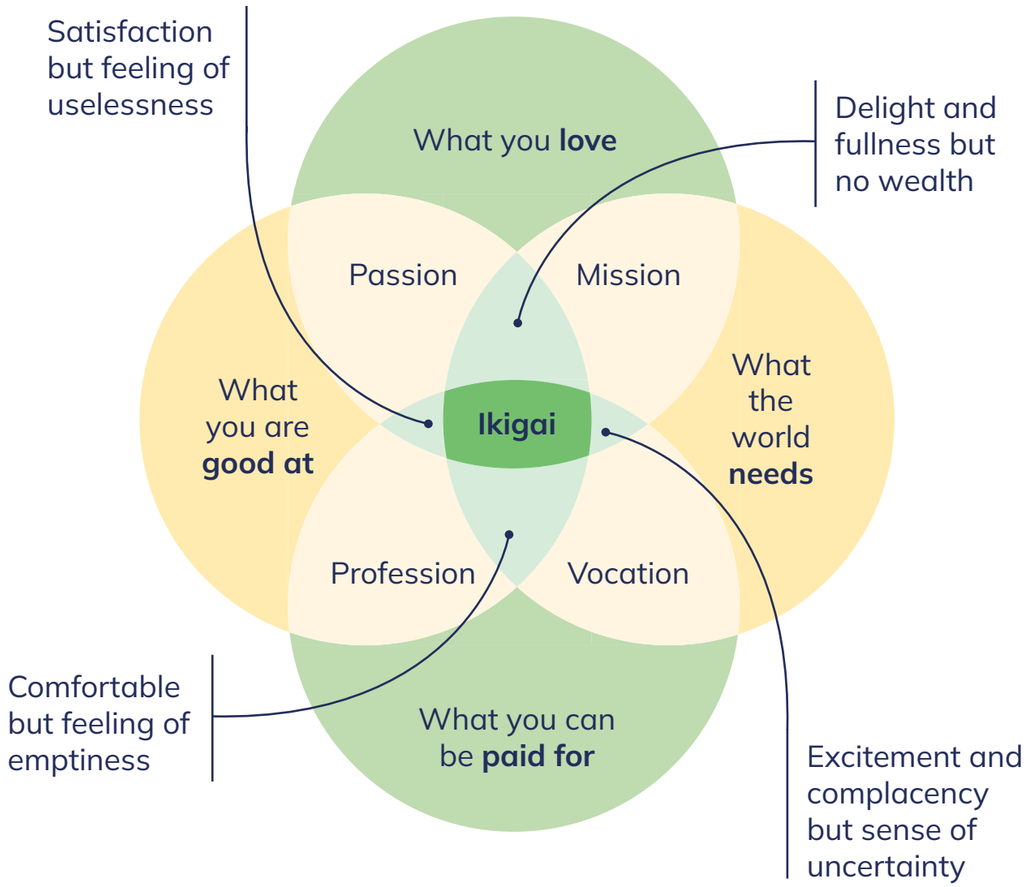
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Reflection activities

1) Ikigai is a Japanese psychological concept defined as “what makes life worth living”. It bridges ideas of the individual and the collective, and contributes to enhanced wellbeing. Reflect on:

- What you love
- What you are good at
- What you can be paid for
- What the world needs

Where all those components intersect, that’s your Ikigai: your reason for being.



2) Pearce and Pearce’s LUUUTT model (1990) helps us reflect on the stories we tell. The LUUUTT model categorises our stories as:

- lived
- untold
- unknown
- unheard
- told
- telling

While ‘lived’ stories refer to things which happen to us, the untold, unknown and unheard stories may not be conscious. Making space for these stories to be heard can create collective meaning.

Reflect on the following questions in relation to your co-workers. If you are a supervisor, you may wish to make space for these questions in supervision sessions.

What stories do you have as a supervisor, about your early year practitioner?

What stories does the early years practitioner have about the child or family?

What are you curious about that you never dared to ask?

How does the early years practitioner tell these stories, with certainty or curiosity?

Are they positive or negative, empowering or constraining?

What stories are not being heard?

What might be useful to explore which has not been talked about?

Questions adapted from Research in Practice

Additional resources

- Learn more about how to incorporate the LUUUTT model into your work.
- Read our guide to working with diverse communities in early years settings.

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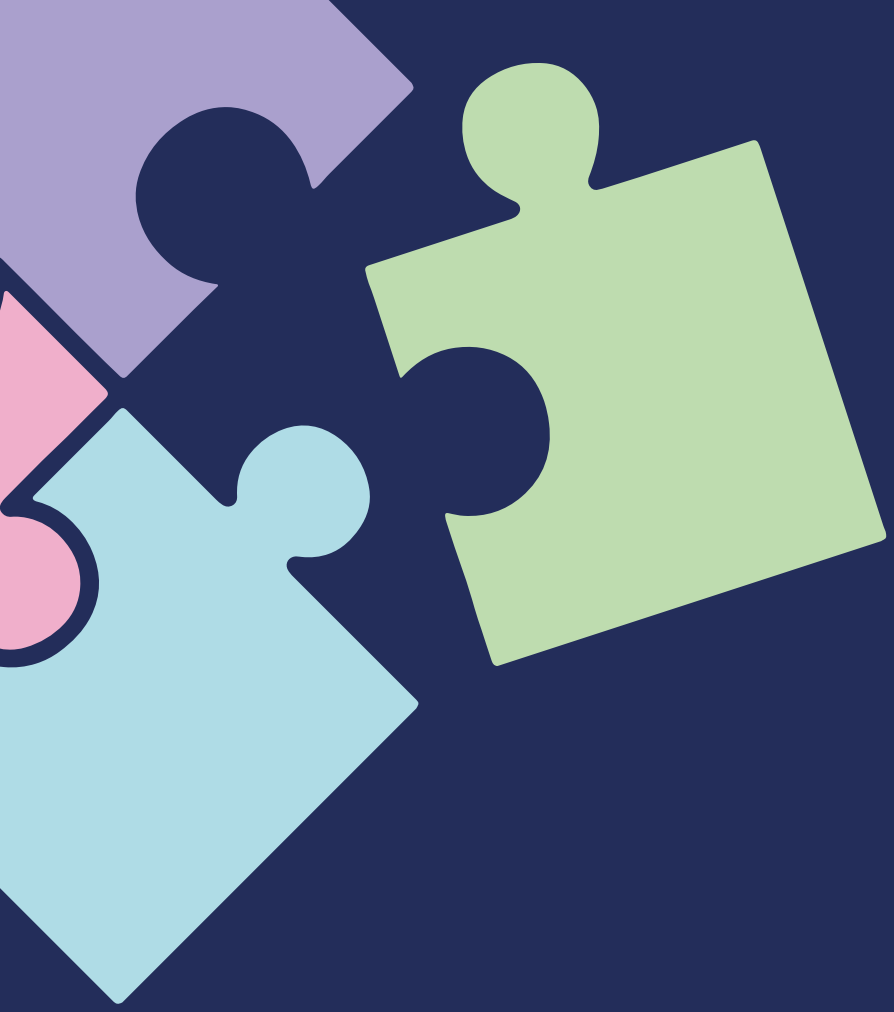
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