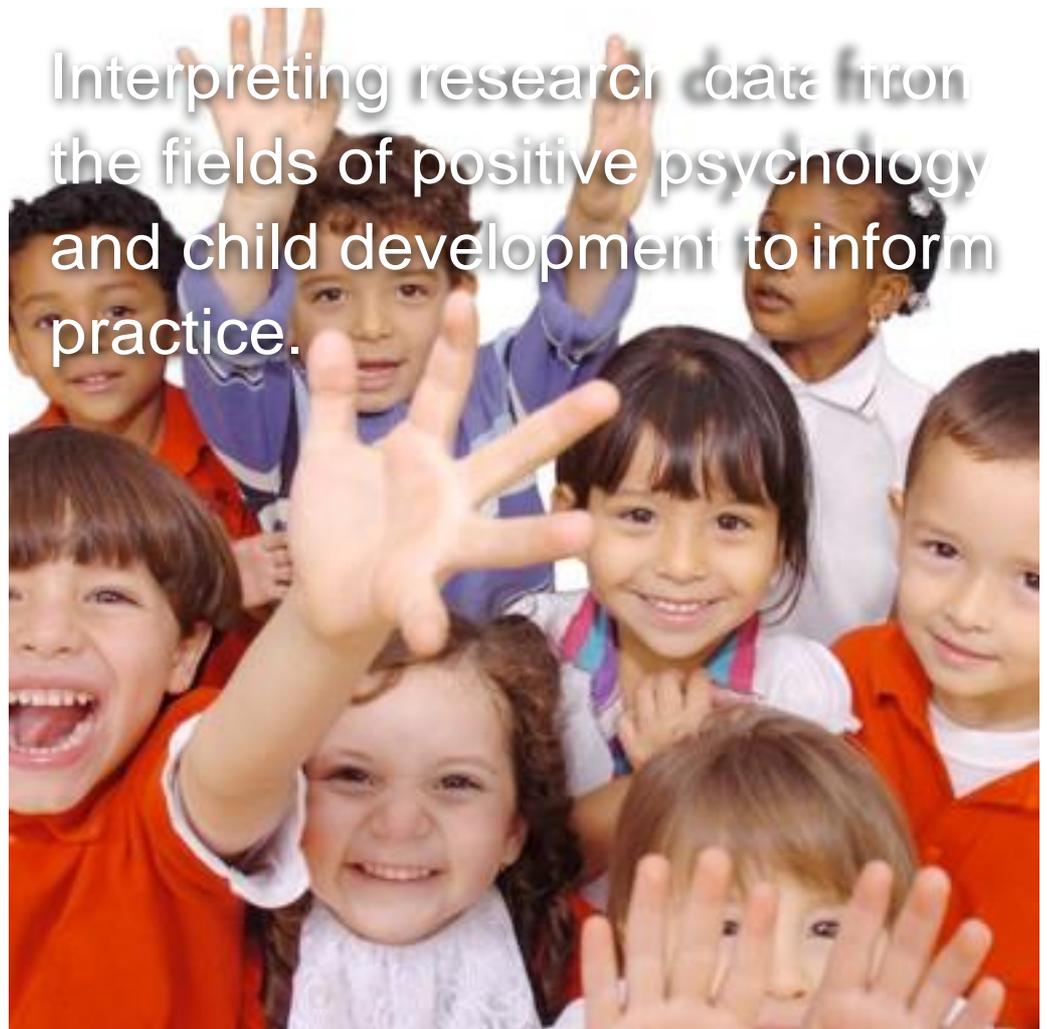


White Paper



Interpreting research data from the fields of positive psychology and child development to inform practice.

Promoting Children's Good Mental Health and Well Being

Good mental health and well being are vital for children in order to develop positive self esteem, resilience and coping skills, which in turn promote social and emotional development and learning throughout their life span. In 2006 the Council of Australian Government (COAG) identified mental health as a priority area and developed a National Action Plan on Mental Health 2006-2011. Within the Action Plan COAG documented that "building resilience and coping skills of children, young people

and families are critical to enhancing productivity, participation and the well being of all Australians."

Why this is important.

Children and young people who have poor mental health and well being frequently experience a variety of social problems and learning difficulties and "have the most significant rates of school failure" Flaspohler et al (2005).

Research into current population trends has shown that 14% of

Australian children and young people have mental health problems and the rate of increase of depression among children is a startling 23% per annum (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 1998; Harvard University 2002; Sawyer, Arney, Baghurst, Clark, Graetz, Kosky, 2001).

If these mental health problems persist into adolescence and adulthood there are poor long term outcomes for individuals, families and society as a whole (Campbell et al, 2001, Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH),



What The Research Reveals

During the past decade a framework of risk and protective factors that are the precursors of mental health has been identified by several research groups (Hoagwood & Johnson, 2003; Strein et al, 2003). This framework documented protective factors which reduce the chances that a child will develop poor mental health.

Mrazek and Hagerty (1994) and the Centre for Community Child Health (2006) maintain that mental health promotion and prevention programs are crucial to establish and strengthen early mental health and well being.

Goleman (1995) Ravens-Sieberer et al (2008) acknowledge that children can develop many self limiting beliefs and a predisposition towards pessimistic thoughts before the age of six, which will then have

a significant effect on the rest of their lives.

However research undertaken over the past two decades has revealed that these beliefs and thinking styles can be changed and that children can learn skills that enhance their mental health and well being (Zubrick, Silburn, Burton, & Blair, 2000; Gable & Haidt, 2005).

Therefore people who have a significant influence on children's mental health and well being – parents, care givers, extended family, teachers and other community members, need to promote positive behaviours and strengthen children's social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural skills and attitudes that play a vital role in developing good mental health and well being (CCCH, 2006).

In Summary:

The Research Indicates

There are protective factors that can assist children to develop good mental health and well being and these can be learnt/ developed in early childhood.

Parents, and significant others in children's lives, need to be cognizant of what behaviours, attitudes and skills they are passing on to their children.

Mental health promotion programs are crucial to establish and strengthen children's early mental health and well being.

Implications Of The Research



- Many adolescent and adult mental health problems have their roots in early childhood and create a significant financial burden for our society therefore effective early mental health promotion programs are vital.
- Both risk and protective factors come into play during early childhood which can fundamentally impact on a child's mental health and well being. Promotion of positive behaviours and strengthening of children's social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural skills and attitudes aim at preventing poor mental health developing in the first place.
- Strategies need to be investigated that encourage families to develop positive qualities and habits that allow individuals to flourish and build resilience (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; COAG, 2006).
- The mental health promotion interventions need to be evidence based(APS, 2005)
- Parents and other care givers need to receive appropriate training to be able to support and enhance children's good mental health and well being.
- More innovative research in evidence based positive psychology mental health promotion in early childhood is needed

Good mental health promotion starts at home, therefore we need to ensure that clear research-backed messages about what young children need to develop good mental health and well being are made available to parents and professionals. As Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) state "raising children is vastly more than fixing what is wrong with them, it is about identifying and nurturing their strongest qualities and developing their habits that allow them to flourish".

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