

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS FOR EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE EDUCATORS

WHAT IS YOUR ROLE AS AN EDUCATOR?

As an educator, you hold a very important role in a child's life to support their mental health; however, it is important to remember that it is not your position to diagnose a child with a mental health illness. Your role is ultimately to provide a safe and secure environment in which the well-being, learning and care of children is your foremost responsibility.

Here are some key action items that you can use as an educator to support a child with mental health concerns:

- Build positive relationships with families to allow for open conversations
- Ask the families if their child(ren) have experienced any changes or challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. If the answer is YES, please move forward with the following steps:
 - Discuss the challenges/successes experienced
 - Discuss the strategies that they are using at home and how they can be implemented in the classroom
 - Ask the family if they have connected with any community partners
 - Consider having a “re-entry to child care” interview with all families, not just for first-time families to the centre
- Be familiar with the red flags of a mental health issue (see the “Signs and symptoms” section on page 3 of this resource)
- Observe the child's behaviour in the classroom, keeping note of anything that is problematic or concerning
- Try to identify behaviour triggers and influences
- Bring forward your observations and concerns to the family
- Connect the family to resources
- Collaborate with your co-workers, families and/or community partners

For more information, please consult the [CECE Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice for RECEs in Ontario](#)

Educator's mental health

Similar to parents, early learning and child care educators have had to take on many roles during the pandemic and are likely feeling a range of emotions. In addition, guidelines and regulations keep changing, often very quickly, which makes it difficult to settle into new routines. Educators may also be

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anticipating or dealing with higher anxiety from children, parents, colleagues and, of course, themselves.

The following highlights are adapted from the [Positive Early Childhood Education \(PECE\) Guide: Managing anxiety in early childhood education settings during COVID-19](#). This guide helps educators build on strategies to navigate and manage the challenges they are facing, many of which are listed below:

- Take care of yourself
- Have realistic expectations (for yourself and the children in your care)
- Create a safe and engaging environment
- Keep to predictable routines
- Take notice of behaviours
- Support children when they are stressed
- Be available to talk and answer questions
- Have regular communication with families
- Support your co-workers
- Reach out and seek help

How to support parental mental health

Parents also take on many different roles, especially during a global pandemic. Research indicates that parents' mental health has a significant impact on general family well-being. And yet, parents often put themselves last. Parents and caregivers need to put their own well-being first because we can't help our kids if we aren't coping well ourselves.

Here are some highlights from The CAP Centre's newsletter, [Child and Family Mental Health During COVID-19](#), which demonstrate why parents should prioritize their own mental health before taking care of the rest of the family.

1. Take care of yourself first

- **Develop self-compassion:** Be kind and understanding towards yourself when you are having a difficult time, fail or feel inadequate. With self-compassion, you are giving yourself the same kindness and care you would give to a good friend. Having self-compassion gives you the foundation to be compassionate towards others.
- **Develop a plan for self-care:** Look for areas in your daily, weekly and monthly routines where you can make time for yourself. Explore and determine personal activities and interests that you find most enjoyable and rejuvenating. Create a realistic plan that incorporates these activities and self-care strategies into your daily life. Start with small changes and gradually increase the frequency in a way that works for you. Remember that self-care is meant to enhance your functioning and improve your life, rather than create additional tasks to mark on your calendar.

2. Take care of the rest of your family

- **Compassion for family members:** Once you've started to express compassion towards yourself, try to extend that to your children, your spouse or anyone who lives with you. This can

be demonstrated by taking the time to ensure that each family member feels they are seen, felt, heard and understood.

- **Develop a plan to address your family needs:** Help your family members develop their own plans for self-care. Encourage them to assess their needs and what steps can be taken to incorporate more personal time into their routines. It's important to empathize with family members and give them permission to cut themselves some slack if needed.

For additional information on self-compassion exercises to try, visit self-compassion.org

How to support children's mental health

Signs and symptoms

Children are facing extraordinary circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic. There have been and will continue to be a lot of changes for them to comprehend due to remote learning, missing friends and family, changes in social and recreational activities, and daily norms. Approximately one in five children and youth in Ontario has a mental health challenge. About 70% of mental health challenges have their onset in childhood or youth. We can help protect our children and youth by being familiar with the signs and symptoms of a mental illness. Early identification and intervention are so critical and can lead to improved achievement in school and overall better health outcomes.

Some of the signs and symptoms of a mental illness include:

- Ongoing behaviour problems at child care, school, home or in the community
- Unusual fears or worries
- Sudden outbursts or explosive emotional reactions
- Frequent physical complaints with no apparent cause
- Refusal to go to child care centre or school on a regular basis
- Inability to make decisions
- Feeling hopeless or worthless
- Lacking energy or motivation
- Getting significantly lower marks in school
- Avoiding friends and family
- Deliberate disobedience or aggression
- Inability to cope with problems

The complete list of signs and symptoms to look for can be viewed through the following links to the [Canadian Mental Health Association \(CMHA\), Ontario](#) and [Association for Children's Mental Health](#)

For additional resources, please consult the [York Region Red Flags Guide](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS:

- [Affirmation Cards](#)
- [Anxiety Canada: Educator Resources](#)
- [Child Abuse and Welfare York Region](#)
- [Children's Mental Health 101](#)

- [Conseil scolaire Viamonde Bien-être et Santé mentale](#)
- [Dnaadgawenmag Binnoojiiyag Child and Family Services](#)
- [Everyday Mental Health Classroom Resource – From School Mental Health Ontario and The Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario](#)
- [How to begin positive relationships with families: 8 tips to try](#)
- [Kids Have Stress Too – Classroom Strategies for Educators](#)
- [Mental Health Literacy](#)
- [Mon Avenir Conseil Scolaire Catholique Bien-être et santé mentale pendant la COVID-19](#)
- [School Mental Health Ontario / Sante mentale en milieu scolaire Ontario](#)
- [York Region Children’s Aid Society \(CAS\)](#)
- [York Catholic District School Board Mental Health Supports](#)
- [York Region Early Years Support Services Registry](#)
- [York Region District School Board Mental Health Supports](#)