A Healthy Start: Mental health promotion in early childhood settings

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Abstract

Childcare services are an important part of life for many families. Childcare workers have a vital role in the development of a child’s mental health, and yet are often under-trained in this area. This paper describes the implementation, evaluation and sustainability of the Healthy Start program in regional Western Australia, with particular attention to outcomes for childcare workers. Healthy Start aimed to build the capacity of the childcare workforce to promote the mental health of children attending childcare, their families and those working in the childcare sector. A range of strategies was developed and implemented, including mental health literacy training and communication skills training which were delivered to over thirty-five childcare workers. Pre and post-training questionnaires showed that awareness of risk factors, protective factors and referral sources, as well as levels of confidence in discussing mental health issues with parents, increased immediately after training. Baseline and follow-up telephone surveys showed however that the childcare workers’ awareness of risk and protective factors was not sustained over a twelve month period. The findings suggested that messages need to be reinforced post-training to retain new knowledge and confidence. As a result, agency partnerships have grown to include a range of early childhood professionals and provide annual training.

Keywords

child care, settings approach, mental health literacy, mental health promotion, evaluation

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