

Promoting child and parental mental health in Family day care settings in Australia: Knowledge, strategies, facilitators and barriers

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Background

Increasingly more children and families are using family day care services in Australia as an alternative option to centre based care. These family day care services have a vital role to play in the development and promotion of mental health for both children and families. Family day care services in Australia do not have specific curriculum and many carers have minimal, if any, qualifications. Despite this, there is little research exploring mental health promotion knowledge and strategies in these settings.

Methods

An exploratory study was conducted with family day care staff from a local government area in south western Melbourne, Australia. This is one of the most disadvantaged areas of the city. Family day care staff were recruited through service managers and participated in semi-structured interviews with researchers. Participants were asked to describe their understandings of child and parental mental health, early signs of mental health problems for children and parents, strategies they felt they used to promote mental health of children and parents, as well as identify facilitators and barriers to implementing mental health promotion strategies. These interviews were recorded and thematically analysed.

Results

Participants described concepts of mental health for both children and parents in general terms related to happiness, confidence, self esteem and emotional regulation. They were able to identify some potential causes of mental health difficulties, although these were often the more extreme risk factors. Participants found identifying early signs of child mental health difficulties quite difficult, though in comparison found it much easier to identify early signs of parental mental health difficulties. Many described personal strategies they used to promote the mental health of children in their care, including physical affection, provision of stimulating activities, and providing encouragement and support. Some family day care workers felt comfortable raising issues surrounding child or parental mental health with children's parents, while others feared how parents might respond and so referred the matter to their supervisor.

Discussion

With children spending such a large amount of time in family day care, workers need to be equipped with the knowledge of how to foster an environment conducive to positive mental health outcomes for both the children in their care and their parents. Further

training is required for family day care workers to how to identify and address mental health issues. Development of an intervention to build capacity of family day care services to promote the mental health of children and parents is currently underway and this will also be discussed in this presentation.