

Notice the early signs of mental health issues

As an educator, you have a unique perspective and opportunity to observe where the children and young people in your care might sit along the Mental Health Continuum. You may notice behaviours or expressed emotions that aren't typical for a particular child or young person, which may indicate signs of an emerging mental health issue.

Early Support

This module is the first of the three Be You Professional Learning modules within the Early Support domain.

The **Notice**, **Inquire** and **Provide** modules are designed to be completed in order as the information in the later ones builds on your learning from the earlier ones.

- **Inquire** elaborates on how educators can use their observations to talk to children, young people and their families about their concerns.
- **Provide** explores how educators can support a child or young person with a mental health issue.

Be You recommends you complete this module before proceeding to the Inquire and Provide modules.

Understanding the continuum of mental health

Mental health can be thought of as existing on a continuum; with a child or young person flourishing at one end, going OK or feeling unsettled in the middle, and mental health conditions at the other end.

The Be You Mental Health Continuum can help you recognise specific behaviour and impacts on daily functioning in children and young people. This may indicate the need for further assistance.

Mental health changes over time in response to different stresses and experiences. There are many factors, both internal and external, that affect where someone generally sits on the continuum.

Most children and young people will sit at the flourishing end of the continuum most of the time.

You're in a position to observe changes in behaviour, emotional responses, expressed thoughts, learning, social relationships and physical symptoms, which might indicate that a child or young person may be



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moving toward the other end of the continuum. The earlier they obtain support, the better the chance they have of overcoming difficulties and of reducing the risk of more serious mental health issues.

Understanding your role

Educators are uniquely positioned to notice early signs of mental health issues or conditions in children.

Your support, alongside families, can be enough to help children and young people work through their feelings and learn to respond to situations in positive ways. But sometimes, they'll need extra support, and you play an important role in helping them access it.

You don't need to be a mental health expert, and you're not responsible for providing mental health diagnoses, assessment or treatment. Your main role is to:

- approach your work in a way that supports positive mental health and wellbeing
- notice when something's not right, and check in with colleagues, the child or young person or their family
- know your school or early learning service's policies for responding to mental health issues and conditions.

Observing signs

Identifying when a child or young person needs extra support comes down to noticing.

Sometimes changes may be easily explained. For example, a teary child may be hungry or tired, or strong emotions may be how a young person typically reacts to a challenge). But in another child or young person, these reactions might be out of character, or there's no apparent reason for the change.

Sometimes, these changes aren't cause for concern. Remember, we move along the Mental Health Continuum all the time. It's prolonged, significant or disruptive change that can signal the development of a mental health issue or condition.

Behaviour and emotions can be difficult to interpret. If you notice and record, you should have accurate information if you need to talk to families, colleagues or other professionals.

The module explores the BETLS (behaviour, emotions, thoughts, learning and social relationships) Observation Tool, which can help you document your observations in an objective way.

If you're not sure what to do, it's OK to say so.

Remember, it's not your role to diagnose, label or treat mental health issues or conditions.

As an educator, you are in a position to notice changes that could be cause for concern and act appropriately. Talk to colleagues and families about what you have noticed. You aren't alone in choosing the next steps. The more collaboration and reflection, the better. Consider confidentiality, risk, self-care and mandatory reporting. Knowing who to go to for support is key.

By completing the Notice module, you will be able to:

- appreciate how educators are uniquely positioned to notice early signs of mental health issues in children and young people
- understand the educator's role in noticing early signs of mental health issues in children and young people
- identify the tools you need as an educator to observe and record the early signs of mental health issues in children and young people
- equip yourself with the tools to record your observations of mental health issues within the boundaries of your role.