

Early Years Mental Health Improvement Framework



A unified approach to promoting positive mental health and wellbeing in the early years. Underpinned by tackling poverty, disadvantage, and inequalities. Aligned with key policy drivers, including [GIRFEC](#), the [UNCRC](#), and [The Promise](#).

Early Years Mental Health Improvement Framework

This framework has been created as a planning tool to help support those working with parents/carers of babies and young children who are **under 5** to plan and deliver mental health improvement activities. It outlines the range of themes that evidence shows promotes positive mental health in the early years and highlights factors that both threaten and support good mental health.

Evidence shows us that addressing the wider causes of mental health requires a unified, co-ordinated, and ongoing approach from multiple sectors. This framework supports this by providing a consistent structure against which various partners and stakeholders can review their existing approaches and identify any additional opportunities to promote positive mental health and wellbeing. It is not prescriptive - different areas of the framework may be more or less relevant depending on who is using it, their local circumstances, and wider context.

It complements existing NHSGGC Mental Health Improvement Frameworks for Children and Young People and Adults, and recognises that promoting mental health is everyone's business.

If you have any questions about the framework, please get in touch with the Mental Health Improvement Team at ggc.mhead@ggc.scot.nhs.uk.

Framework Element	Description	Examples of approaches
<p>Parent/ Carer Wellbeing and Resilience</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge and protect the mental health and wellbeing of mothers, fathers, partners, co-parents, and significant adults. This includes during pregnancy, the birth of a child, and beyond. • Support parents/carers to access affordable local opportunities and programmes that are based on their needs, sustained over time, and promote increased social connections with peers and the wider community. • Help facilitate access to support services that respond to parents/carers in distress, help mitigate difficult life circumstances, and experience of adversity or trauma, including poverty. • Consider potential barriers parents/carers may experience in engaging with services (e.g. confidence, financial means, stigma). • Dispel myths of perfect parenting which can trigger anxiety, and support parents/carers to be kind to themselves and provide 'good enough' care for their children. • Acknowledge factors that can influence parent/carer wellbeing and resilience such as: physical ill health of either the child or parent/carer, disability, neurodivergence, poverty, inadequate housing, and sleep deprivation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify or develop local programmes to increase social connections with other parents / carers (e.g. peer support groups, new parents groups). • Support parents / carers who are finding things difficult to access assistance, local programmes or specialist services (e.g. asylum seekers and refugees, for stress management or mental health issues, those affected by alcohol and drugs, experience of trauma, domestic abuse, carers support, breastfeeding and infant feeding support). • When discussing an issue relating to the child, always ask the parent / carer how they are feeling, coping, or managing to help identify potential mental health and wellbeing concerns early. • Where required, specialist support can be accessed during pregnancy and up to three years of age via the Wee Minds Matter Infant Mental Health Service. • Access training opportunities that are aligned with your national, local, or organisational professional development pathways (e.g. Working Together to Support Families, relevant equality and diversity training). • Keep up-to-date with the work of the NHSGGC Perinatal and Infant Mental Health network, a collaborative of various partners working together to create pathways of mental health support for new and expectant parents.

Framework Element

Description

Examples of approaches

Positive Caring Relationships

- Provide culturally sensitive support for parents/carers to form secure attachments and bonds with their baby or child and develop healthy loving relationships.
- Listen to, build trust, and provide strengths-based family support so that parents/carers can be open about their relationship with their baby or child and receive help with any difficulties they are facing.
- Listen to the 'Voice of the Infant' via their gaze, body language, and vocalisations to notice their feelings, ideas, and preferences.
- Recognise the value of other safe, nurturing relationships with the child beyond the immediate family unit (e.g. wider relatives, one good adult).
- Acknowledge the potential impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences on child mental health and wellbeing, and support parents/carers to help mitigate exposure where feasible.
- Be mindful of the influence of parents' lived experience (including care experience), and community and cultural norms, on parenting styles and skills.
- Offer parenting support activity that is accessible and acknowledges parent/carer strengths, assets, and readiness to engage.

- Review whether your service or policies are inclusive for all families (e.g. LGBTQ+ people, dads, disabled people, ethnic minorities, those of religious faith, young parents, lone parents, those who are separated, kinship carers, grandparents).
- Refer parents/carers to local family support services and resources to build on their assets, improve parent-child interaction, and help mitigate existing pressures (e.g. via respite, practical coping skills, play therapy, baby massage or art therapy, Wellbeing for Wee Ones, or [Solihull training](#)).
- Support parents/carers to develop children's emotional literacy – challenging gendered assumptions via books and discussion.
- Engage with the [Trauma-Informed Training Framework](#).
- Access training aligned to national, local, or organisational professional development pathways. (e.g. [Solihull course for professionals](#), training opportunities aligned to the [Perinatal Mental Health Curricular Framework](#)).
- Where required, refer to Wee Minds Matter Infant Mental Health Service, specialist support for parents/carers during pregnancy and up to three years.

Framework Element

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Examples of approaches

Child Development and Nurturing

- Support parents/carers to tune in and respond to their child's emotional needs and signals.
- Promote child cognitive, language, and problem-solving development by supporting parents/carers to:
 - Talk, sing, read, listen to, and cuddle their child (tailored to their preferences)
 - Have fun by playing together
 - Offer safe opportunities to move, play, and explore the world
- Acknowledge the assistance that families with children with neurodivergence or additional support needs may require.
- Recognise that it can often be difficult for parents/carers to find the time, energy, or motivation to actively engage or play with children given other life stresses and pressures.
- Assist parents/carers to access resources (e.g. toys and books) and local activities that promote interaction, child development, and the creation of supportive peer networks.

- Contact your local Bookbug co-ordinator about bags and sessions, and undertake training to deliver Bookbug.
- Signpost families to free resources: '[Ready, Steady, Baby/ Toddler!](#)', '[Play@Home](#)', '[Tiny Happy People](#)'.
- Identify local organisations that offer free book gifting programmes for families (e.g. Dolly Parton Imagination Library).
- Consider whether language or literacy issues might impact parents/carers' ability to use available books or resources. Reflect on whether there are opportunities for all parents/carers (e.g. ethnic minority and LGBTQ+ families) to see aspects of their culture and family composition reflected in books, songs, and games (e.g. Bookbug app includes songs in different languages).
- Promote child development and nurturing in all Health Visiting Universal Pathway contacts. For example, information and support around breastfeeding and infant feeding could be provided, including how it supports attachment and bonding.
- Specialist support can be accessed during pregnancy and up to three years of age via the Wee Minds Matter Infant Mental Health Service.
- Support child nurturing and development by accessing training opportunities aligned with national, local, or organisational professional development pathways (e.g. Promoting Positive Behaviour, Toddler Play & Learning).

Framework Element

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Examples of approaches

Financial Wellbeing

- Support parents/carers to maximise income from employment and/or social security, and reduce their costs of living.
- Assist parents/carers to access available financial supports and grants, including statutory and third-sector provisions. Help with overcoming perceived barriers in accessing these supports (e.g. stigma).
- Recognise the additional costs and potential drop in income experienced when becoming a parent/carer, and the financial difficulties they may experience as a result.
- Acknowledge priority family groups at higher risk of experiencing poverty (e.g. lone parent families, minority ethnic families, families with a disabled person, families with mothers under 25 years old, families with a child under one, families with three or more children).
- Promote cash-first approaches when families experience financial crises (e.g. food insecurity).

- Identify any cost barriers that may limit families from fully accessing or participating in the services and activities offered by your organisation (e.g. in relation to transport, or childcare).
- Find out what financial inclusion, income maximisation and debt management services are available to your local community and how to refer to them.
- Develop awareness of Social Security Scotland's five payments for eligible families: Best Start Grants (x3), Best Start Foods, and Scottish Child Payment.
- Signpost or refer families to organisations and services which offer support to help mitigate increasing living costs, such as food pantries, money advice services, emergency financial assistance, fuel voucher schemes, or baby banks.
- Consider setting up a swap shop for uniforms, clothing, toys, or books. This could include specific ones at certain times of the year, such as Halloween or Christmas.

Framework Element

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Examples of approaches

Early Learning and Childcare

- Offer Early Learning & Childcare which:
 - Is high quality, trauma-informed, child-centred, affordable, and accessible to all babies and children.
 - Helps parents/carers to support learning and development at home.
 - Promotes attunement, the development of cognitive and social skills, and emotional literacy.
 - Enables parents/carers to work flexibly and develop new skills, study, or volunteer.
 - Is mindful of barriers that may limit access (e.g. cost, timings, transport).
 - Tackles inequalities by supporting babies and children from all backgrounds.

- Review your policies and practices to ensure your organisation/service is inclusive of the needs of all families (e.g. LGBTQ+ people, dads, parents with a disability, ethnic minorities, those of religious faith, young parents, lone parents, those who are separated, kinship carers, grandparents), and reduces barriers to access/participation (e.g. via Cost of the Nursery Day training).
- Access guidance for Early Learning and Childcare settings and practitioners on how to access outdoor spaces to create safe, nurturing, and inspiring outdoor learning experiences (e.g. [Out to Play: Practical Guidance](#)).
- Utilise Relationships, Sexual Health, and Parenthood resources and consider applying the learning from the [Gender Friendly Nursery](#) and Early Protective Messages programmes.
- Review the [Voice of the Infant Best Practice Guidelines and Infant Pledge](#) and incorporate guidance into practice to notice, facilitate, and share the infant's feelings, ideas, and preferences.
- Consider implementing the [Do-BeMindful](#) approach to support staff to improve the social and emotional wellbeing of children.
- Use '[Realising the Ambition: Being Me](#)' guidance to deliver high-quality early learning and childcare.
- Consider adopting a nurture approach and principles to meet the holistic needs of children and their families.

Framework Element	Description	Examples of approaches
<p>Active & Connected Communities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer safe, affordable, and inclusive access to good quality outdoor spaces, recreational facilities/programmes, and community services which: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase opportunities for play, physical activity, and learning. - Enable social connections to grow between children; children and their parents/carers; between parents/carers and across generations. - Meet the needs of all local families, including children with physical illness, disability, sensory impairment, or neurodivergence. - Remove barriers that limit access (e.g. cost, transport), or diversity of participation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organise a local litter pick or community clean-up for outdoor spaces. • Undertake Walk Leader training and start a walking group or buggy walk for families. • Access local growing initiatives/allotments, or seek small pots of funding to create raised beds. • Advocate for safety measures that will allow parents/carers to access outdoor spaces. This could be better lighting or traffic calming measures. • Help families to access resources that could help them be outside for longer. This could include high-vis armbands, welly boots, and warm clothes. • Access training opportunities that are aligned with national, local, or organisational professional development pathways (e.g. Stramash, EcoDrama, FUNdamental Outdoor Skills Training, or Outdoor and Risky Play).