

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@nhs.scot**.

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.

Framework Element	Description	Examples of approaches
Parent/ Carer Wellbeing and Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. • Facilitate access to support services that respond to parent / carer distress, mitigate difficult life circumstances, and experience of adversity or trauma, including poverty. • Consider barriers parents/carers experience in engaging with services (e.g. confidence, financial means, stigma). • Dispel myths of perfect parenting which 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: physical ill health, disability, neurodivergence, poverty, housing, sleep deprivation etc. 	<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. for stress management, mental health, alcohol and drugs, experience of trauma, domestic abuse). • When discussing an issue relating to the child, always ask the parent / carer how they are feeling, coping or managing to help identify potential MH&WB concerns early. • Access training opportunities that are aligned with your organisational professional development pathways. • 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide culturally sensitive support for parents/carers to form secure attachments and bonds with their child. • Listen to, build trust, and provide strengths-based support so that parents/carers can be open about their relationship with their child and receive help with any difficulties. • Recognise the value of other safe, nurturing relationships with the child beyond the immediate family unit (e.g. wider relatives, one good adult). • Acknowledge potential impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences on child MH&WB, 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review if your service or policies are inclusive for all families (e.g. LGBTQ+, dads, disabled people, ethnic minorities, those of religious faith, young parents etc). • Refer parents/carers to local family support services and resources to build on assets, improve parent-child interaction, and help mitigate existing life pressures (e.g. via respite, practical coping skills, play therapy). • Support parents/carers to develop children's emotional literacy, challenging gendered assumptions via discussion. • Access training aligned to organisational professional development pathways. (e.g. Solihull, Trauma Informed Practice, 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	Description	Examples of approaches
<p>Child Development and Nurturing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Talk, sing, read, listen to, and cuddle their child - Have fun by playing together - Offer safe opportunities to move, play, and explore • 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. • Assist parents/carers to access resources (e.g. toys and books) and local activities that promote interaction, child development, and creation of supportive peer networks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 (e.g. Dolly Parton Imagination Library). • Consider if language or literacy issues might impact ability to use available books or resources, and if there are opportunities for all parents/carers to see aspects of their culture and family composition reflected. • Promote child development and nurturing in all Health Visiting Universal Pathway contacts. • Access training opportunities aligned with organisational professional development pathways (e.g. Promoting Positive Behaviour, Toddler Play & Learning).

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Financial Wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	Description	Examples of approaches
<p>Early Learning and Childcare</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer Early Learning & Childcare which: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review policies and practices to ensure your service is inclusive of the needs of all families (e.g. LGBTQ+ people, parents with a disability, ethnic minorities, kinship carers, grandparents etc), and reduces barriers to access / participation (e.g. via Cost of the Nursery Day training). • Use guidance for ELC 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. • Incorporate the Voice of the Infant Best Practice Guidelines and Infant Pledge. • Implement 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).