

# Putting the child at the centre....

## A Whole-school approach

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Current reform agendas confronting our schools do little to address the issue of nurturing the social capital of our young people. Schools are facing challenges around standardised curriculum, demanding accountability frameworks, compliance-based funding and differing state and federal agendas. All this set in a world view that sees competition as a means of bringing about best practice in schools.

The development of the whole child is at risk of being moved to the margins of educative policy, rather than being at the centre of it.

Most who work in schools struggle with the paradox this creates. How do they deal with the plethora of political imperatives imposed on them, whilst at the same time, minister to the complex, life-impacting needs of their students and families.

### How do we put the child first?

The KidsMatter Framework, fully funded by the Department of Health and Ageing, provides primary schools with a whole-school approach to the development of the social, emotional and mental health and wellbeing of children. In essence, it is about supporting the school to establish the conditions (culture, ethos, relationships, values, partnerships, social and emotional skills curriculum) which maximise the opportunities for children to flourish. Those who work in schools would be aware that these are also the conditions within which learning is optimised.

KidsMatter pedagogy is grounded in the principles of *promotion, prevention and early intervention*. It takes the view that the child's sense of self is significantly influenced by three domains:

- the family they are part of,
- the school they attend, and
- the community in which they live.

These domains interact with each other and the individual biological and psychological predisposition of the child to create a sense of self.

This sense of self is played out in a range of settings, one of which is school.

KidsMatter takes the view that a whole-school approach to optimising the social, emotional and mental health of children sits at the heart of their development. It looks at factors that increase the risk of children developing poor mental health and, more importantly, the factors that reduce the risk or, so called, Protective Factors. KidsMatter invites schools to look at ways they can surround the child with as many Protective Factors at school, at home and in the community, as possible.

## A Whole-School Approach

One of the cornerstones of KidsMatter is that it recognises the experience, intellect, passion and commitment that thrive in schools. It does not presume to give schools the universal answer, but rather, poses issues for schools to consider in their local context, with their community. This point is significant, given that we know that the notion of universal answers to complex problems does not generally work. Many a staff library is full of discarded one-off programs that, at some time, were seen as the panacea to all manner of needs.

Those who work in schools would know that establishing a genuine whole-school approach to anything is a complex process that takes time and dedication. Effective whole-school approaches consider often competing assumptions about:

- Vision and purpose
- Culture, values and climate
- Mutual and ad-hoc adaptation
- Variability and uniformity
- Shared world views and individuals' mental models

Effective whole-school change is enhanced when it is set within a strategic, process-rich context. This approach considers four elements, which include (1) setting the climate, (2) exploring what could be, (3) implementation, and (4) embedding/sustainability.

### 1. Setting the climate

Here, the focus is around the use of persuasion, influence and dialogue as a means of creating a groundswell of support for exploring KidsMatter as a whole-school framework to support the social, emotional and mental wellbeing of children.

This is an important time to genuinely listen to multiple perspectives and to ensure all voices are heard. It is also a good time to look at any existing data or information the school has. The intent here is to build a picture of the current situation.

This is a time when, so called, 'sewing seeds' is important. This can take the form of occasional articles in pigeon holes, having wellbeing as a discussion point in performance development meetings, having a 10-minute wellbeing component to each staff meeting, and articles for school newsletters, to name a few.

*"We thought it was important to have a philosophy that would fit with the positive ways we worked with children in our classrooms. We wanted to focus on resilience and it was clear that if we introduced KidsMatter, it would be more than buying a kit and using it in the classroom. It would help students to explore and understand their feelings.*

*After attending a Briefing, the Principal introduced the concept of KidsMatter. Staff were enthusiastic about it, and within a short time, time was set aside for training in Components 1 and 2. Parents were informed about KidsMatter through the newsletter. Four parents responded to the invitation to join the Action Team. It was essential to get everyone on board at the start of implementing KidsMatter".*

(A KidsMatter School Principal)

## 2. Picturing what could be

This is when time is spent **exploring the desired situation or vision** for what could be. It is important that this sense of what we are all aiming for is clearly articulated...in such a way that it allows for emergent or unplanned need. Articulating the vision clearly and using this as a focus for change, is essential for embedding the commitment to the social, emotional and mental wellbeing of children in a sustainable manner.

*“At the beginning of each year..., the Art teacher arranges a large canvas for the representation of the Staff Vision. The staff can draw and write ideas about the agreed vision for the year ahead. This approach to developing a vision is replicated in each classroom and taught alongside a unit about the values and principles that are important in the school.”* (A KidsMatter School Guidance Counsellor)

Time is spent mapping the steps needed to move from the current reality, to the desired scenario. The KidsMatter survey (staff and parent) tools provide a useful part of this needs analysis process. It is also a great time to use an appreciative planning process to look at what is working well and to explore how to use these successes to inform practice in class, cross-curricula and policy domains of the school. KidsMatter has a ‘How do we build upon what we are already doing tool’ to map existing practice and use this to inform strategic planning.

*“Parents were generally positive in their responses to the survey for Component 1. The results confirmed the approach that staff felt they promoted – that students are the centre of their actions. However, the school also identified some areas that would improve the sense of community and belonging. One example was to find a way to present student artwork in the school. Now, in the room where parents are interviewed for enrolment, 11 picture frames line a long wall to exhibit student paintings and drawings, and they are changed every few weeks. Another example is the placement of a tub with toys for smaller children to play with while their parents participate in enrolment interviews.”* (A KidsMatter School Principal)

## 3. Implementing

By now, the rationale for using the KidsMatter Framework as a lens to guide practice is clear and supported. Facilitated shared professional learning, provided by KidsMatter and the School Action Team, is an important part of this phase. It is important that all staff have the opportunity to learn about and engage with new materials and ideas. The role of school leaders in developing a climate for professional learning is vital during this phase. The challenge in this phase is to look at the information learned and to use this as a lens to inform practice.

*“Through Component 1 activities, the staff developed their understanding of how students could feel more connected in the school community. They became more familiar with the vocabulary of wellbeing and ideas about ‘protective factors’.”* (A KidsMatter school Coordinator)

Using a plan-do-review cycle is a useful approach during implementation. KidsMatter takes the view that a low-risk start is important as it will give confidence to staff because it gives them some control over the pace of implementation.

#### 4. Embedding in a sustainable manner

Here the emphasis is on embedding identified good practice into the everyday world of the school and continually reviewing practices in light of the everchanging school community and their needs. It is where the desired scenario and vision becomes reality. The school has undertaken all KidsMatter professional learning, has tried different ideas, analysed what worked and used this to inform future practice. The learning from KidsMatter is used to influence whole-school culture, capacity, systems and governance practices.

Discussions about student social, emotional and mental health is a natural part of classroom and cross-school practices, collegiate activities, performance development, parent-student-teacher meetings, the annual reporting process, and the school professional learning program.

The focus is about KidsMatter becoming a 'way of being' across the whole school.

*"We'll revisit the ideas and make sure our resources are up-to-date. We'll continue to give information through the 'dripping tap' process. We've made KidsMatter Primary our own and we're helping to build up resilience in our students. The Action Team will keep KidsMatter Primary on the agenda even after completing component 4. They view it as a learning continuum in promoting the school role in supporting students' mental health and wellbeing. They will review and evaluate directions as the needs of the staff, students and community change." (A KidsMatter school classroom teacher)*

### Deep Change or Surface Change

The incredibly busy world that is schools can sometimes create a predisposition to leap immediately into *who-what-when* planning. In some instances this can be a highly appropriate and effective strategy to use. However, when it becomes the automatic default planning strategy, then deep meaningful change is at risk.

The KidsMatter Framework acknowledges the time it takes to bring about whole-school change in a meaningful, participatory and sustainable manner. Schools form an Action Team, which guides the process across the school, on behalf of the whole school community. One cycle of the KidsMatter journey takes up to two years as it focuses on allowing schools time to make sense the information provided within their unique context. It is not a 'one size fits all' approach.

*"What's different about KidsMatter? All sorts of materials sit on shelves from previous programs. But the KidsMatter framework allows us to develop an approach to student wellbeing that we can tailor – it is not a one-size fits all. It's not a program but a 'framework' for the purpose of supporting students and their mental health." (Head of Junior School in a KidsMatter school)*

This approach is significant as it allows schools the time to nurture the dispositions and culture of their setting, in order to make child centredness a natural part of all that they do. KidsMatter holds the view that this is the essence of sustainable, deep change.

To find out more, go to [www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au)