Why focus on wellbeing?

A growing body of research has highlighted the important role played by social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) as an underlying determinant of individual and community health. Let’s Start aims to build and strengthen the SEWB of Aboriginal children and their parents by promoting positive parent-child interaction in a welcoming, safe and structured environment. The Let’s Start final evaluation report shows that this improves children's social and emotional competencies and helps build their capacity to negotiate the transition to school.

Key issues

National and international research has shown that:

- In Australia, 24 per cent of Aboriginal children aged 4-17 years are at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties, significantly higher than the rate for non-Aboriginal children (Zubrick et al. 2005).

- Early intervention reduces the risk of later mental health disorders and social difficulties and improves performance at school (Wise et al. 2005; Halfon & Hochstein 2002).

- There is a lack of assessment of children for early socio-emotional difficulties and related issues such as parenting, parental mental health and family wellbeing during routine child health reviews (Bailie & Robinson 2007; Williams & Holmes 2004/05).

- As few as 11 per cent of children undergoing child health assessments in Aboriginal communities in Australia have any record of enquiries regarding social conditions (Bailie et al. 2008).

- Parents’ concerns about children's socio-emotional development are highly predictive of later difficulty; proactive practitioner inquiry can encourage parents to express their concerns.

- There is a need to develop appropriate assessment methods and screening tools (Glascoe 1999) to support the integration of SEWB assessments in routine child health checks (Talen et al. 2007).

- The use of appropriate strategies of inquiry, assessment and referral can provide a framework linking the work of primary healthcare practitioners and wellbeing workers.

- Improvement of early assessment in primary health care will enable better referral to, and use of, early intervention services like Let’s Start.

Evaluation findings: the sustainability of early intervention

- The limited capacity for Aboriginal primary health care services to assess socio-emotional and behavioural development and to make referrals to supportive SEWB programs like Let’s Start is one reason for the low levels of collaboration between medical and socio-emotional care.

- The sustainability of early intervention programs would be greatly enhanced by the building of referral pathways and networks to support collaboration between these programs and Aboriginal primary health care services, and supportive programs for parents and children from childcare through to early primary school.
Policy implications

In partnership with the Brisbane-based One21seventy Centre—the new National Centre for Quality Improvement in Indigenous Primary Health Care—the Let’s Start research team aims to create a system for integrating SEWB screening into health checks and providing Aboriginal families with pathways for referral to suitable programs. This involves developing and implementing robust child developmental assessment guidelines for identifying social-emotional problems early, but also developing additional resources so that these tasks are not simply added to existing demands on practitioners. This will follow a number of steps:

1. Designing and developing screening tools that are validated and easy to use.
2. Developing guidelines for clinicians to use these screening tools and to clarify referral pathways to appropriate SEWB services.
3. Training for health and community wellbeing workers in SEWB assessment and referral, and to support the effective implementation of SEWB screening.
4. Mapping of appropriate links between those health/parenting/psychological services that are available to Aboriginal families. This will assist health and wellbeing services to develop effective systems of management and collaboration in their communities; it will also inform government about models for development of integrated services to improve the SEWB of Aboriginal children, families and communities as a whole.
5. Participation in the review of CQI audit protocols to be adopted by One21seventy. This will be the final component of an integrated SEWB system for Aboriginal children and families. Future Let’s Start participants will be engaged in pilots of the child health audit process.

The integration of SEWB programs in child health care will provide a framework for collaboration between the Northern Territory’s health, education and community sectors.

REFERENCES

For all the references listed in ‘Key Issues’, please refer to the references contained in the Policy Brief Improving Developmental Outcomes for Aboriginal Children in Urban and Remote Communities.

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Find the Let’s Start evaluation report at: www.cdu.edu.au/letsstart