

(Insert early childhood service name) Supporting Children's Mental Health Through Physical Activity.

Note:

The following information has been provided to assist early childhood education and care services to develop their own policy in relation to promoting children's physical and mental health. Tailor the information in this sample policy to suit the needs of your service – delete sections that are not relevant and add additional points that reflect your practice. Involve staff and families in the policy development and review process and ensure that the final policy is on display and accessible to all staff and families.

This policy aims to:

- Promote children's participation in a range of safe, physically active learning experiences.
- Provide a positive physically active environment, which reflects individual abilities and cultural and family values.
- Promote lifelong enjoyment of physical activity.
- Promote children's social and emotional skills;
- Encourage communication with families about physical activity and social and emotional wellbeing.

Background

Low levels of physical activity, childhood obesity and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression are becoming increasingly common in young children. These child health problems have serious implications for our future. Child development research indicates that children with poor movement skills often perform poorly on cognitive tasks, they have more social and emotional problems such as low self esteem and they often suffer from higher levels of anxiety and depression (Piek et al., 2007; Skinner & Piek. 2001).

Since the introduction of the *Early years Learning Framework* and *My Time Our Place*, there has been increasing emphasis on the importance of promoting children's mental health and overall wellbeing from birth. Our service aims to promote children's wellbeing in a number of ways, primarily through positive relationships with adults and peers, developing a positive self-image and successfully accomplishing physical skills.

Policy Statement

(Insert early childhood service name) recognises the importance of promoting children's overall wellbeing. In achieving this we recognise the important role of physical activity in promoting a positive self-image and confident disposition in young children.

Physical activity is important for young children because it:

- Promotes healthy growth and development
- Builds strong bones and muscles
- Improves cardiovascular fitness
- Assists with the development of gross motor and fine motor skills
- Provides the opportunity to develop fundamental movement skills
- Helps to establish connections between different parts of the brain
- Improves concentration and thinking skills
- Improves confidence and self-esteem
- Relieves stress and promotes relaxation
- Provides opportunities to develop social skills and make friends

- Helps to achieve and maintain a healthy weight

The service is committed to implementing the key physical activity messages within the *Animal Fun* program and supporting the *National Physical Activity Recommendations for Children Birth to 5 years* as outlined below:

National Physical Activity Recommendations for Children Birth to 5 Years

- For healthy development in infants (birth to 1 year), physical activity – particularly supervised floor-based play in safe environments – should be encouraged from birth.
- Toddlers (1 to 3 years of age) and preschoolers (3 to 5 years of age) should be physically active every day for at least three hours, spread throughout the day.

Children's Mental health

Our service adopts the definition of early childhood mental health as stated by *Zero to Three (2002)* where mental health is defined as a young child's ability to 'experience, regulate and express emotions; form close and secure interpersonal relationships; and explore the environment and learn all in the context of family, community and cultural expectations for young children. Infant mental health is synonymous with healthy social and emotional development. In the context of our service, we believe in promoting children's Social and emotional development because;

- Children who have developmentally appropriate social and emotional skills are more likely to have better outcomes than children who are less skilled. For example, children who regulate their emotions are empathic, relate to peers effectively, respect the rights of others, and perform better at school.
- Children who are less skilled tend to have more negative experiences with peers and adults. This can have lifelong impacts. For example, some children may have limited social skills to join in-group play, and that can lead to feelings of isolation or rejection and undermine self-confidence.
- As with other areas of learning, children develop socially and emotionally at different paces. Children have different temperaments, opportunities and experiences, and a variety of risk and protective factors in their lives. Children continue to develop and learn these skills over time.
- High-quality care, that intentionally nurtures children's developing social and emotional skills through children's positive relationships with staff, has been shown to benefit children's mental health and wellbeing, learning, motivation to achieve and cooperate, and the development of values.

Promote children's participation in a range of safe physically active learning experiences.

Note: Physically active learning experiences include planned play (eg, action games/songs, art activities, relaxation and general intentional teaching experiences), spontaneous 'free' play (eg, child initiated, active play in the playground, dancing to music), intentional teaching experiences and everyday physical tasks (eg helping with gardening, setting up experiences, tidying up spaces).

The service will:

- Provide the opportunity for children to be active every day through a balance of planned and spontaneous physically active experiences (including everyday physical tasks), in the indoor and outdoor environments.
- Plan daily intentional *Animal Fun* experiences to support children's gross and fine motor skills. For example, introduce new movements, games and day-to-day exercises.
- Foster the development of a range of fundamental movement skills- including running, galloping, hopping, jumping, leaping, side-sliding, throwing, catching, striking, kicking, underarm rolling and stationary dribbling.
- Ensure physically active experiences are play based, fun, developmentally appropriate and cater to a range of abilities and interests.
- Ensure all physically active experiences are safe by providing an appropriate environment - ensuring all equipment is developmentally appropriate and well maintained and supervision is constant.
- Encourage children's participation in physical activity of varying intensity (eg. lighter through to more energetic activity).
- Provide time, space and resources for children to revisit and practice *Animal Fun* activities and engage in active play.
- Where possible, educators will involve children in the planning of physically active experiences.
- Incorporate a range of relaxation techniques to support the children in managing their own behaviour and developing appropriate self-regulation skills.
- Encourage educators to actively role model to children appropriate physical activity behaviours.
- Encourage children and educators to drink water before, during and after physically active experiences.
- Provide opportunities for educators to undertake professional learning to maintain and enhance their knowledge about early childhood physical activity and mental health.
- For the purpose of program planning, use the *Animal Fun* assessment tool (entitled *Individual Progress Report* available for photocopying from program book).

Provide a positive physically active environment, which reflects individual abilities and cultural and family values.

The service will:

- Positively encourage children to participate in a range of active play and physically active experiences.
- Provide children with encouragement and positive reinforcement.
- Provide positive instruction and constructive feedback to children to assist them in developing and refining their FMS.
- Use the *Animal Fun* activities to provide a range of open ended and easily adapted movements to suit children's varying abilities including those with additional needs.
- Offer inclusive physical activity opportunities, which cater for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
- Adopt a participatory approach to physically active experiences offered to children and emphasise fun and participation rather than competition.
- Invite and engage families and the wider community to participate in promoting physical activity with the children.
- Encourage children to be understanding and accepting of the different physical skills and abilities of other children.

Promote lifelong enjoyment of physical activity.

The service will:

- Offer a range of physically active learning experiences, which are fun for children.
- Encourage children to be as active as possible during daily active play times.
- Encourage all children to participate in physically active experiences to the best of their ability.
- Assist children to develop daily habits, understandings and skills that support health and wellbeing.

Develop children's social and emotional skills;

The service will:

- Promote children's well being by providing appropriate activities and interactions to develop their understanding of feelings and emotions. (E.G., Using Module 9 of the *Animal Fun* program).
- Provide regular opportunities for children to relax and rest and develop appropriate self-regulation skills.
- Provide open-ended experiences to suit each child's ability to give them opportunity to be successful regularly and build their confidence and self-esteem.
- Ensure educators develop positive relationships with children and support each child's disposition, skills and learning.
- Support children to develop a positive self - image by providing opportunities to recognise their talents, abilities and strengths.
- Support children in identifying their feelings and emotions and through play based activities support children to acknowledge their feelings and provide them with strategies to manage them appropriately.

Encourage communication with families about physical activity and social and emotional wellbeing.

The service will:

- Share possible activities with families to develop children's skills at home using the *Animal Fun at Home* resource.
- Share relevant information with families about their child's progress or areas for concern, support families in accessing information about appropriate support and intervention if needed.
- Make available the *Supporting Children's Mental Health Through Physical Activity* policy.
- Families will be provided with opportunities to contribute to the review and development of the policy.
- Request that any details of children's additional needs in relation to physical activity participation be provided to the service.
- Encourage families to share with the service links between cultural backgrounds and physical activity.
- Communicate regularly with families and provide information and support on ways to develop children's physical, social and emotional skills through everyday fun activities. This information may be provided to families in a variety of ways including newsletters, noticeboards, during orientation, information sessions and informal discussion.

References

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, (2011). *The Guide to Education and Care Services National Law and National Regulations*. Australia.

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Web references

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