CASE STUDY

Trauma-informed and mental health support for mealtimes in long day care services

Exposure to adverse experiences including housing insecurity, poverty, parental mental health issues, family violence and trauma have impacts on young children's brain development. This can impact their learning and emotional regulation, including their interactions with food and the ECEC mealtime environment.

ECEC staff can provide children and families with some support with this challenge. They can also provide contact details for support services and partner with medical and allied health professionals to ensure wrap-around support is available where needed.

Background

Taylor is a shy three-year-old who has attended Butterflies Day Care for over two and a half years.

At mealtimes, educators have recently noticed the following new behaviours:

- Taylor becomes visibly stressed just before mealtimes.
  - About 10 minutes before mealtimes, her body starts to move fast – she flits from one experience to another and has difficulty concentrating.
- During mealtimes she has difficulty sitting at the table with other children, continually getting up and down.
- When the meal is served, she will ask for more even if her bowl is full.
- She will often empty the contents of her bowl into the bin before asking for more.
- While eating she will break her food into tiny pieces, shovelling it into her mouth.

Staff reflections, discussions and actions

At the next staff meeting, educators first reflect on their practice, asking themselves:

- How might Taylor be feeling in these moments, and what actions can I take to help her right now?
- What may be happening in the mealtime environment that may be triggering this reaction in Taylor?
- What may be happening in Taylor's life that may be contributing to this reaction?

After some discussion, staff agree on the following actions to try and help Taylor:

- Have food available during the day for Taylor to access at any time.
- In the moments where she appears anxious about the food, reassure her that she can ask for extra if she is hungry at any time of the day.
- Use statements such as 'there is plenty for everyone'.
- Ask her if she would like to see the food on the trolley when the cook comes out, so she can see there is enough.
- Pile her bowl high with food so she feels a sense of abundance rather than scarcity.

The staff will monitor the effect of these actions over the next two weeks and discuss them again at the next meeting.

They also ask their director, Matt, to speak with Taylor's mother, Bobby, to find out about what might be happening at home that may be contributing to this behaviour.

Connecting with the family

While speaking with Bobby, Matt finds out the following:

- Bobby has been experiencing ongoing family violence.
- As a result, two months ago Bobby lost her job.
- Currently, Bobby and Taylor are staying with friends as they no longer feel safe at home and cannot afford alternative accommodation.
- Their friends are also struggling financially and there are difficulties with food provision.

Bobby thinks that the combination of these ongoing stressors may be why Taylor is feeling stressed around mealtimes and is displaying these behaviours.

Providing support options

Matt feels that Taylor and Bobby may benefit from some additional support:

- First, he asks Bobby if they would like any contacts to support services.
  - Bobby says they are fine for now, and she has a job interview the next day, but will get in touch if it doesn't work out.
- Next, he lets her know that there are flyers in the reception area related to domestic violence support, and she is free to take one if she likes.
- Finally, he sets up another meeting with Bobby in two weeks where they can discuss the staff actions and monitor Taylor's progress.

In the meantime, he also collates some support options in case they are needed, such as:

- Contact details for:
  - Domestic violence support services.
  - Refuge and housing support services.
  - Intensive family support organisations.
  - Food relief support.
- Suggestions for general practitioners, child and youth mental health services and allied health practitioners for assistance in dealing with mental health concerns and relational trauma.
  - The service can also help families prepare referrals if needed.

Final thoughts

Dealing with instances of mental health concerns and trauma in ECEC services is delicate and important work.

Remember:

- Be thoughtful
  - Consider your priorities for the children in your care and each family's resources and capacity.
  - Consider undertaking professional learning in this space.
  - Ensure you also look after your own mental health and wellbeing.
- Build a deep sense of trust and respect with children and families
  - Often an ECEC service can relieve the pressure for struggling families – having a trusting relationship between families and the service is essential for families to know that their children are safe and will be well cared for, even when it may not be possible at home.
- Remember that each situation is unique and contextual
  - There is no one way of being or doing, and solutions must be created together with families to ensure the best fit for each situation.
- Timeframes for change or improvement can differ
  - The ECEC service may be the place where the initial steps of developing change in a child's brain architecture occurs, and educators may not see the fruits of their efforts while a child is in care – trust that what you are doing to help the child in these early years of life matters and will make a difference in the child's development and wellbeing.
- Take the wins
  - Celebrate a child's achievements through these times of adversity.
  - Celebrate the important work you and your team are doing to help children and families heal and grow.