

Sowing the seeds – of healthy social and emotional wellbeing

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This is the first of two articles detailing the Queensland Health Social and Emotional Early Development Strategy (SEEDS) initiative. The first article offers an insight into how the SEEDS Mental Health Promotion Framework and resources were developed. The second article, which will appear in next year's EYC journal, will provide some information and examples of how the SEEDS Framework was and can be implemented within early childhood education and care settings.

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Introduction

Parents and staff in the early years sector are using their 'head, heart and hands' to learn, love and live well. This has come about as people explore the use of the *Social and Emotional Early Development Strategy (SEEDS)* – 'head, heart and hands' mental health promotion framework which aims to enhance the social and emotional wellbeing of infants, children, parents and staff. The framework was developed by Queensland Health's Southern Area Population Health Services in collaboration with parents and staff in child care centres, and with professionals in the early years sector.

SEEDS framework

The SEEDS framework (head, heart and hands) proposes that the social and emotional wellbeing of children, staff, parents and families, and the wider community develops through nurturing and valuing relationships. Just as there is 'no health without mental health' – there is no social and emotional wellbeing without the heart. The heart is the key to quality relationships. Life experiences shape your values and who you become (heart) and those experiences influence what knowledge (head) you take in, and how you apply your skills (hands) in practice. The framework provides caregivers with a way to reflect on their own combination of knowledge

(head), values (heart) and skills (hands) and how their particular combination supports the social and emotional wellbeing of the children and adults in their lives.

Background

The SEEDS project is grounded in an expanding evidence base in biological and social sciences which attests to the significant benefits of investment in early childhood mental health. The importance of early development, particularly early attachment experiences, brain development and emotional development has been well documented over decades of independent research in economics, neuroscience and developmental psychology (Farrell & Travers, 2005; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Tsiantis, Smith, Dragonis & Cox, 2000; Heckman, 2000; McCain & Mustard, 1999; Mustard, 2006). A recent review of interventions to promote evidence in early childhood recommended adoption of centre-based programs that focus on building capacity through professional development (Armstrong et al., 2007).

Within Southern Area Population Health Services, a mental health resource audit conducted by an earlier Queensland Health project (Promoting Health in Early Childhood Environments, 2002-05)

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SEEDS mental health promotion framework

Social and Emotional Early Development Strategy

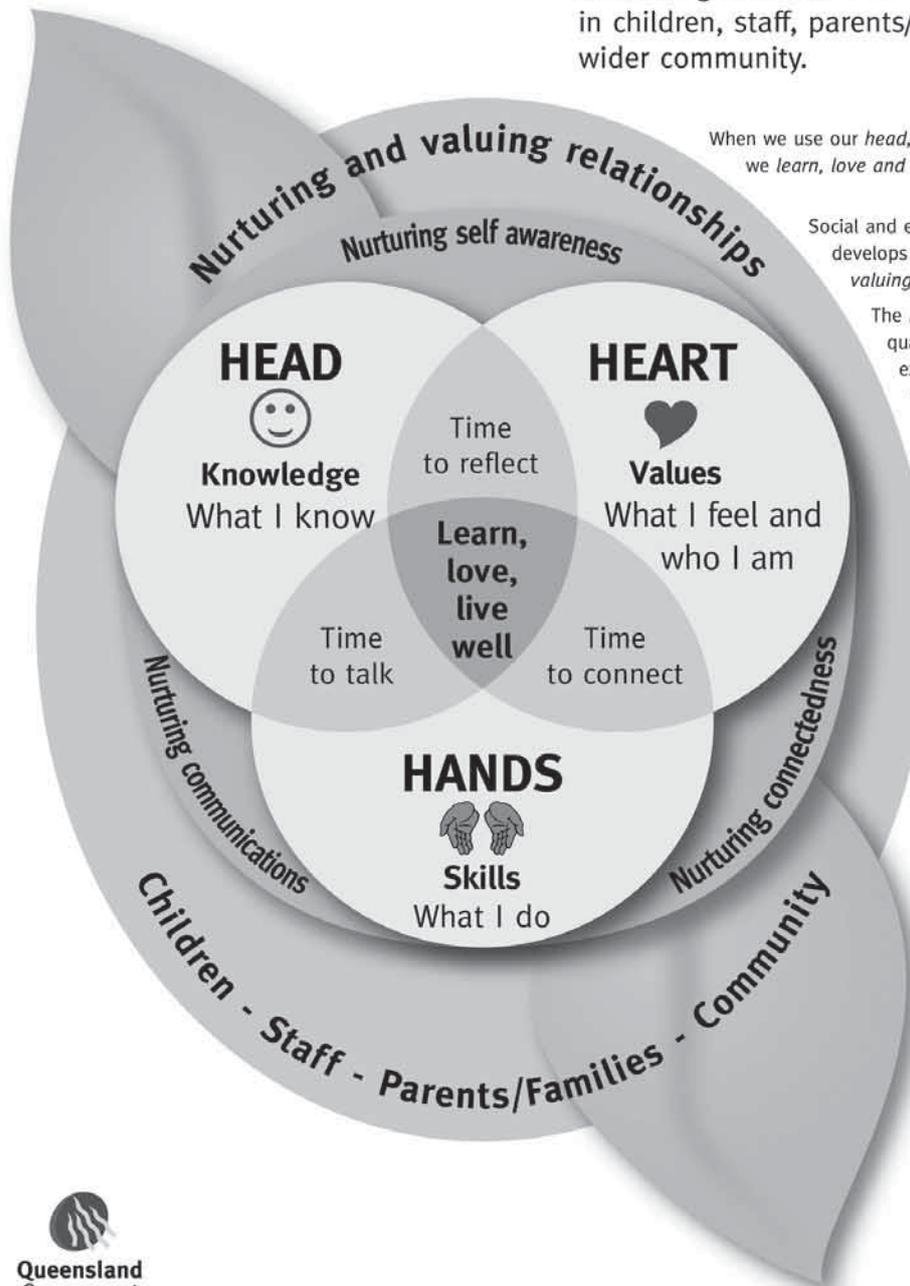
Enhancing social and emotional well-being in children, staff, parents/families and the wider community.

When we use our *head, heart and hands* wisely, we learn, love and live well.

Social and emotional well-being develops through *nurturing and valuing relationships*.

The *heart* is the key to quality relationships – life experiences shape your *values* and who you become ... and filter what *knowledge* you take in and ... how you use your *skills* in your practice.

Give yourself *time* to talk, to reflect and to connect ... this nurtures *communication, self awareness and connectedness* to enhance social and emotional well-being.



health • care • people

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found child care centres had few mental health resources and the understanding of mental health by staff was restricted to the concept of mental illness. Available programs were not holistic and did not simultaneously address the mental health needs of staff, children, families and communities. The SEEDS project was funded to develop, and pilot, an evidence-based comprehensive mental health promotion framework for child care services to enhance the social and emotional wellbeing of children, their parents and staff.

While best practice knowledge is widely available in the early childhood education and care sector, there are circumstances which can create barriers to providing the consistent, warm, responsive caregiving that young children need. These circumstances include: high staff turnover, high numbers of inexperienced, under-qualified staff; and a focus on operational tasks. However, within these circumstances there are also many opportunities for the early childhood professional to be a significant attachment figure and to provide the sort of care that makes a difference in children's lives.

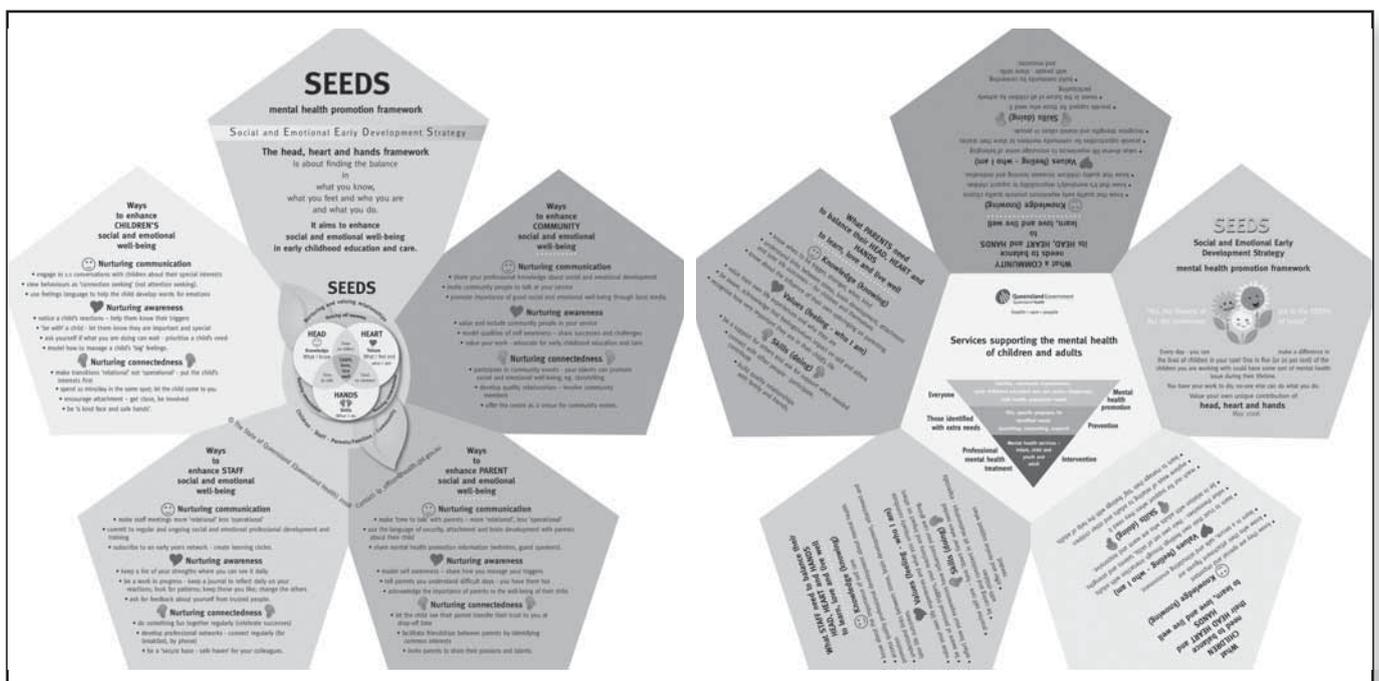
What we did

The SEEDS framework was developed collaboratively with parents and staff of child

care centres. Following a needs assessment phase during April 2006 to early 2007, staff and parents from 15 child care centres were invited to attend a series of three workshops during 2007.

Child care centres were encouraged to include a parent and were offered a subsidy for two staff from each centre to attend all three workshops. The workshops presented information on attachment and early brain development and

The time to talk was valuable in the process because it gave participants opportunities to engage with others and come to an understanding of how the information presented could be applied in caring for children.





included time for participants to talk using the Griffith University 'Circles of Change' process. The time to talk was valuable in the process because it gave participants opportunities to engage with others and come to an understanding of how the information presented could be applied in caring for children. In between workshops the project team visited the child care centres and recorded the strategies that were being implemented. At the next workshop all strategies were shared and became part of the shared knowledge. All the strategies in the SEEDS 'flower' (see below) came from the participants of the three workshops.

Throughout the project evaluation was built in and significant partnerships were fostered by an active and diverse steering committee. Membership included Professional Support Coordinators Queensland (PSCQ), TAFE, Creche and Kindergarten Association, Indigenous Professional Support Unit (IPSU), Queensland Council of Social Services (QCOSS), Department of Communities and Griffith University.

The resources

The A3-size SEEDS mental health promotion framework poster proposes that social and emotional wellbeing develops through nurturing and valuing relationships. It provides a way for caregivers to reflect on how they can increase their awareness of the importance of the impact of early life experiences on later life outcomes (specifically the connection between attachment relationships and early brain development) and how they can enhance the social and emotional wellbeing of the children and adults in their lives.

The SEEDS project has used a gardening metaphor throughout the life of the project to highlight the importance of nurturing the social and emotional wellbeing of young children and their caregivers (parents and child care staff). This started with the motto: 'All the flowers of all the tomorrows are in the SEEDS of today'. This metaphor is continued by developing a SEEDS 'packet' which contains useful websites, some key messages, implications for care giving and a short description of the head, heart and hands framework.

The packet includes a SEEDS 'flower' and a resource CD. The flower uses simple language to outline what children need to balance their

head, heart and hands to learn, love and live well. In addition, it provides practical suggestions for nurturing communications, self awareness and connectedness to enhance children's, parents', staff and community social and emotional wellbeing. The CD contains the resources used during the project, and provides 'free use' copyright (Queensland Health) to encourage the incorporation of the framework's head, heart and hands language into core practice.

Results and feedback to date

'Children don't see us as 'caregivers' who have certificates and diplomas, etc. They see us as someone to build a relationship, to trust and care for them. We are their 'secure base' their 'safe haven', just as their parents are when they are with them. We have an extremely important role in these children's lives. Especially emotionally!' (Child care centre staff)

The SEEDS framework, based on the key competencies of 'head, heart and hands', the processes of 'time to talk, reflect and connect', and the strategies of nurturing communications, self awareness and connectedness as a way of enhancing social and emotional wellbeing, has been favourably received within the early childhood education and care sector. Preliminary findings suggest:

Sowing the SEEDS of Healthy Social and Emotional Wellbeing

- The SEEDS approach of providing content and a process for implementing change can increase parents' and professionals' awareness about

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the need to promote universal positive mental health for children and adults in the early childhood education and care sector;

- Increased awareness has led to reflection on caregiving practices and policies; and
- The inclusion of parents has strengthened partnerships within the centres and within families.

'Looking around the centre now, I see a lot of 'hands' working, always something to do, a routine to meet, a timeline of events. Caregivers could take a moment off the busy schedule and be aware of being more emotionally available to the children.' (Child care centre staff)

The partnerships that were developed through the process of the SEEDS project have created numerous opportunities for the framework and concepts to be integrated into practice. Professional Support Coordinators Queensland (a training organisation which provides professional development for staff of early years services) is developing a training DVD and a series of professional seminars which will incorporate the SEEDS framework and materials. TAFE is exploring the use of the materials for online student services and there is interest in the framework from other organisations focused on child safety and wellbeing.

Some comments received by parents who have experienced the SEEDS approach include:

'I have a much better appreciation for the job of child care staff.'

'I am more aware of spending time with my child – preparing them for things that we are doing ... talk about what is going to happen.'

'I am aware of my child's attachment figures in child care and always pass him to this person.'

'I have made our family schedule less busy so we could all have down time.'

'I talked to my husband about things I learned. It has helped my son form a better attachment with his dad.'

More information

The SEEDS framework and associated resources have been distributed for trial to selected children's services and other key stakeholders.

Feedback on the materials continues to be sought by Southern Population Health Services for further development of the resources and support materials. Key SEEDS concepts such as attachment, brain development, social and emotional development are integral components of Queensland Health's broader *Healthy bodies healthy minds* (2nd edition) health promoting early childhood approach, which assists services to adopt health promotion processes and best practice. Refer to www.health.qld.gov.au for more information.

For more information and access to framework and resources contact:

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