



# SEW Arts

Enhancing the social and emotional wellbeing of children & adolescents in arts programs

A resource for arts practitioners & professionals



Draft Version 2

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**SEW - Arts** Project  
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The research team acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Custodians of the land and waters of Australia. We also acknowledge the Noongar Wadjuk, Yawuru, Kariyarra and Kurna Elders, their people and the land upon which the Institute is located and seek their wisdom in our work to improve the health and development of all children.



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# Contents

1

## Where to start?

What is the aim of the SEW - Arts resource?

Who is this for?

How was the resource developed?

3

## Enhancing SEWB through the arts

SEW - Arts Key Areas & Wellbeing Factors

9

## How to use the *SEW - Arts* resources

10

## Evaluating Progress

11

## *SEW - Arts* Wellbeing Factors

63

## Mental Health considerations



# Where to start?

## What is the aim of the *SEW - Arts* resource?

The *SEW - Arts* resource aims to support arts organisations enhance students' social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) through their programs.

The *SEW - Arts* resource helps arts educators use the affordances offered by art to intentionally promote the SEWB of students and adolescents in their programs.

**DRAFT**

*SEW - Arts* resources are still in draft form. Your feedback will help shape it into something useful for all

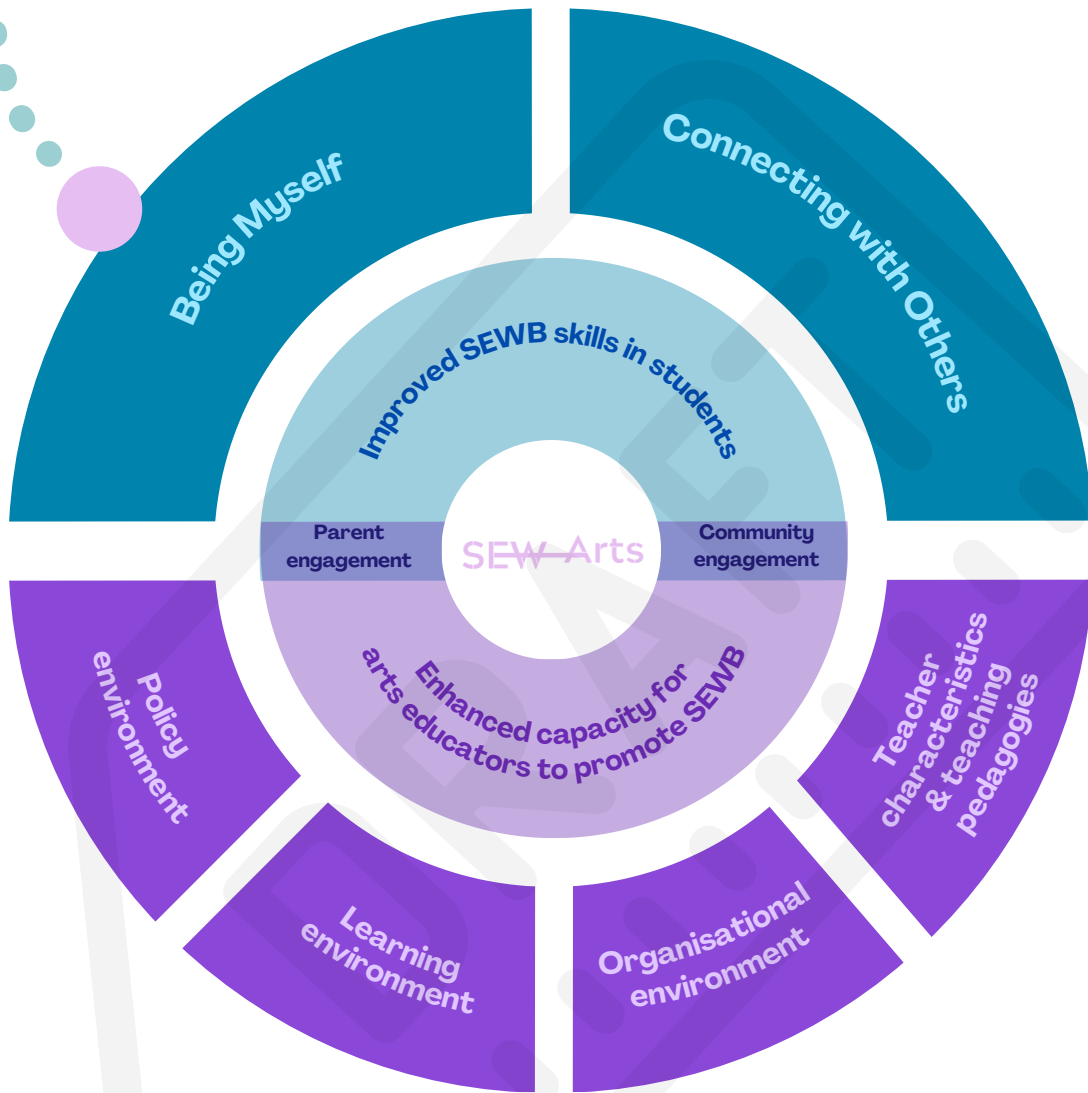
## Who is it for?

Arts educators and arts organisations engaged with arts programs for children and adolescents.

## How was the resource developed?

The resource was developed through consultation with arts educators and administrators, children and adolescents who participate in arts programs away from school, and their parents. In the *Building Social and Emotional Wellbeing through the Arts* research project, children and adolescents who participated in arts programs (and their parents) were asked what they needed to feel good about themselves, and how the arts helped them develop wellbeing. Teaching Artists (TAs) were asked how they support SEWB in their classes or workshops and what they need to further this support. Two main themes were identified from all the comments: **Being Myself** and **Connecting with Others**. In other words, the SEWB of children and adolescents in arts programs depended on being able to be themselves and also connect with others. Commentaries explaining what they needed to be themselves or connect with others were organised into sub-themes and became known as the **Wellbeing Factors**. A resource was then developed with the help of a psychologist/artist around the identified wellbeing factors to help TAs promote an intentional focus on SEWB through the arts.

TAs also explained how the organization environment, including the policy environment, needs to support the SEWB of students and staff. A tool was developed to help arts organisations map the gaps in their capacity to promote the SEWB of students and staff. The model shows the various components identified in the consultations as important for SEWB.



The Figure below also shows pedagogies TAs identified as important in the development of student SEWB.



An overview of each pedagogy can be seen here

Relatable Teachers

Autonomy or Student Voice

Process as well as Product

Exploring Issues

Decreasing Stereotypes

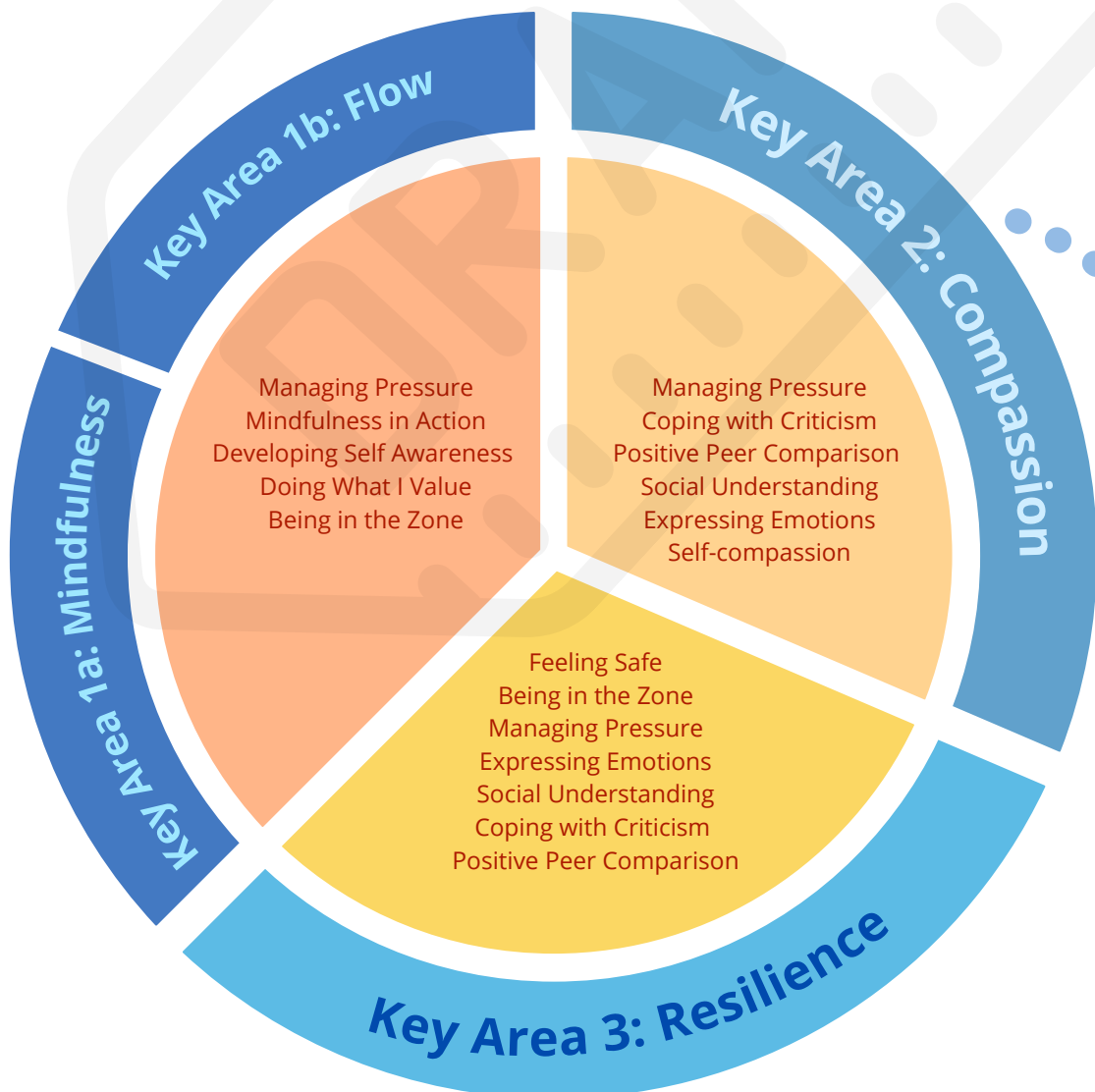
Playfulness - Balance of Seriousness & Fun

Reflection

# Enhancing SEWB through the arts

## SEW - Arts Key Areas of opportunity to enhance SEWB through the arts

Work undertaken through the *Building Social and Emotional Wellbeing through the Arts* research project highlighted four **Key Areas** of opportunity to enhance SEWB through the arts: Mindfulness, Flow, Compassion and Resilience. Mindfulness and Flow are considered closely connected and therefore categorized as 1a and 1b. However, it is also important, particularly in the arts context, to consider them as two separate key areas. Each **Key Area** is supported by *SEW - Arts Wellbeing Factors*.



- 1
- 2
- 3

## Key Area 1a: Mindfulness

**Wellbeing Factors:** Mindfulness in Action; Developing Self-Awareness; Being in the Zone; Managing Pressure; Doing What I Value

Mindfulness can be thought of as moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a specific way, that is, in the present moment. Researchers suggest mindfulness is a state of being in the world that promotes metacognitive awareness, decreases ruminative thinking, and enhances attentional capacities supporting improvements in the emotion regulation processes [1].

With regular practice mindfulness can help young people to learn to be aware of their present thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations without negative judgements. With this nonjudgmental awareness, young people can develop the ability to choose a response to uncomfortable situations and emotions instead of reacting with unhealthy behaviours and interpretations. Mindfulness can therefore result in decreased stress and anxiety in young people through accepting thoughts and feelings rather than repressing or trying to control them.

Mindfulness and the arts have a bi-directional relationship. The creative process can enhance mindfulness, while developing mindfulness has been found to increase creativity. The arts provide experiential activities through which mindfulness can be taught that do not rely on sitting meditation. As the frontal lobe of young people is generally in the process of developing and their executive functioning skills are limited [2] sitting meditation can be difficult, especially for marginalized youths also dealing with challenging life situations. Additionally, the primary elements of mindfulness come from breath work, physical exercise and sensory activities, all of which are accessible through meaningful arts practice.



## Key Area 1b: Flow

**Wellbeing Factors:** Mindfulness in Action; Developing Self-Awareness; Managing Pressure; Being in the Zone; Doing What I Value

The Flow State is the subjective experience of feeling completely immersed in the present moment because one's capabilities to act can meet, or are stretched by, the opportunities present in the environment [3; 4]. It is a mental state where a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of invigorated and effortless focus, involvement and enjoyment in the process of the activity. Flow is characterised by:

- a merging of action and awareness, where one has a sense of knowing exactly what needs to be done and how to do it;
- total concentration on the present moment;
- the loss of self-consciousness, such that there is an absence of critical self-talk and social comparison;
- no fear of failure;
- a sense that time is either speeding up or slowing down; and
- intrinsic motivation, which is the desire to engage in the activity for the joy of doing so, rather than to obtain extrinsic rewards or fulfil obligations. [3]

Flow States can be useful for the arts education context because:

- Engaging in flow states is helpful for our wellbeing [5].
- Flow states and creativity appear linked [6,7].
- Flow states and optimal performance appear linked [8].

## Key Area 2: Compassion

**Wellbeing Factors:** Self-compassion; Managing Pressure; Positive Peer Comparison; Expressing Emotions; Social Understanding - Perspective Taking and Empathy; Coping with Criticism

Compassion involves feeling another person's pain and wanting to take steps to help relieve their suffering. The word compassion itself derives from Latin and means "to suffer together."

Compassion often comes in one of two forms, which vary depending on where these feelings are directed. Your experience of compassion may be either directed toward other people, or it may be directed inwardly toward yourself [9]. Studies have shown that compassion has tremendous positive benefits for both physical and mental health and our overall well-being [10].

Individuals with higher levels of creativity tend to be more in tune with what others are experiencing than less creative individuals [11]. It has been found that as people become more creative, they develop greater sensitivity toward environmental stimuli, specifically others' emotional states within that environment. As creativity increases, open-mindedness increases, a trait that enhances accuracy of understanding the emotion messages communicated by others [12]. This skill underlies the capacity to be compassionate to others.

## Key Area 3: Resilience

**Wellbeing Factors:** Managing Pressure; Being in the Zone; Social Understanding; Feeling Safe; Positive Peer Comparison; Coping with Criticism

Children and adolescents experience a tremendous amount of daily physical and mental growth. Plus, they are constantly facing new experiences and challenges. Resilience enables them to tackle challenges head-on and pick themselves up from any setbacks. Resilience is the ability to cope with unexpected challenges and changes.

Resilience can be encouraged and built through the arts. An important aspect of providing an environment for building resilience, and often seen in the arts, is having a strengths focus. This enables individuals to see that they have what's needed to face adversity. Often in the arts students can follow their own ideas and express themselves without a fear of being wrong; this can be a powerful way to build confidence and resilience.

In a recent review It was found that participating in arts activities can have a positive effect on self-confidence, self-esteem, relationship building and a sense of belonging, qualities which have been associated with resilience and positive mental wellbeing [13].

## SEW - Arts Key Wellbeing Factors

A young person's SEWB is dynamic. There are many factors that influence their SEWB and various ways that it is expressed or shown.

On balance, and for the scope of this resource, we have selected to focus on social and emotional factors, termed the *SEW - Arts Wellbeing Factors*, that are:

- Theoretically feasible to impact a young person's SEWB (for example, can be translated onto the various levels of influence on the Social-Ecological model)
- Potentially responsive to already existing and evidence-based SEWB interventions, within an arts education context.
- Informed by, and translatable, to the themes extracted from the workshops and focus groups conducted with Western Australian (WA) arts organisations, teachers, parents and arts students in the *Building Social and Emotional Wellbeing through the Arts* research project.
- Can be presented in a way to empower students with the language and skills to promote their own SEWB.

Each *SEW - Arts Wellbeing Factor* is presented with a description, key messages for teachers and/or students, open-ended questions for teachers to ask students to promote thinking on the wellbeing factor, activities to develop the wellbeing factor, supports that may be needed where appropriate, reflection questions for teachers and information for parents. Arts organisations can use the information for parents in multiple ways as they see fit.

# How to use the resource?

## The SEW – Arts Teaching Artist (TA) survey

Before you explore the **wellbeing factors** housed in this resource, it may be helpful for you to gauge how well you feel you are currently providing opportunities and guidance for your arts students to **be themselves** and **connect with others** by completing the *SEW - Arts* TA survey. This survey is aligned with the wellbeing factors and will therefore help you plan your social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) focus.



Complete the *SEW - Arts* TA survey to help identify your strengths and areas of need

## Mapping the SEWB gap in your arts organisation

How your arts organisation operates, including its culture, policies, and interaction with the community, can significantly impact the SEWB of children and adolescents who participate in your programs. It is therefore important to first ascertain the extent your organisation is currently promoting SEWB, highlighting your strengths and areas of need by completing the *SEW - Arts* Map the Gap Tool.



Use the *SEW - Arts* Map the Gap Tool to help identify your organisations strengths and areas of need

The *SEW - Arts* Map the Gap Tool was developed in conjunction with other arts organisations and can be used to develop a plan for your organisation.

## SEW – Arts key areas & wellbeing factors

Now that you have completed the *SEW - Arts* TA survey and *SEW - Arts* Map the Gap Tool you would have identified strengths and areas of need for you as a teacher and your organisation. Using your findings as a guide, select one or more of the **wellbeing factors** as your focus identified through the *SEW - Arts* TA survey and an area of organisation focus identified by the *SEW - Arts* Map the Gap tool. Another way you can engage with the resource is to identify one of the **key areas** as your focus and use the associated **wellbeing factors** to guide you.



Use the implementation planning outline to guide the development of strategies linked to wellbeing factors

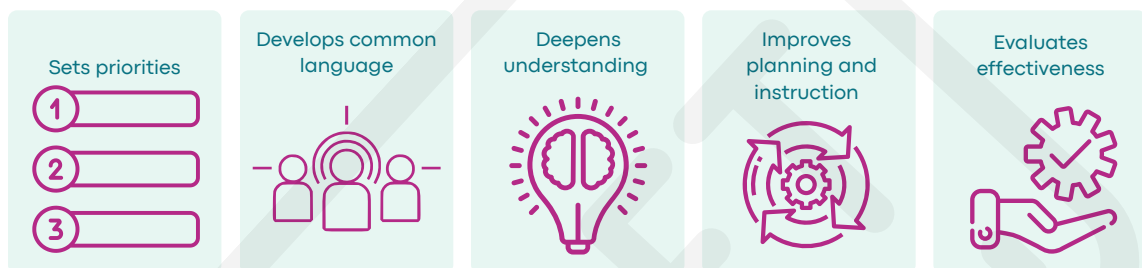
Using the implementation planning outline, design strategies, interventions, and adaptations to strengthen your promotion of SEWB in your arts classes and organisation.

# Evaluating Progress

It is important to monitor not only your arts outcomes as a result of your arts programs but also your social and emotional wellbeing outcomes. There are several reasons this is important:



An overview of each can be seen here



## Process, Impact & Outcomes

When evaluating the impact of your intentional focus on SEWB through your arts program, the process, impact, and outcomes need to be measured.

**Process:** Often this requires documenting the processes undertaken or collecting quantitative and/or qualitative data related to program delivery.

**Impact:** Evaluating the impact may involve collecting quantitative data through quasi-experimental designs using pre-and post-testing of participants, individually or in groups. The *SEW - Arts* website includes some examples of questions that can be used to measure the impact of a focus on SEWB wellbeing factors, as identified by this resource. The impact of your program can also be measured through qualitative data collection. Interviews, focus groups, and observation can help to capture participants' experience of arts projects from a SEWB perspective. Qualitative data collection can explore broader project impacts, such as those on organisations and staff.

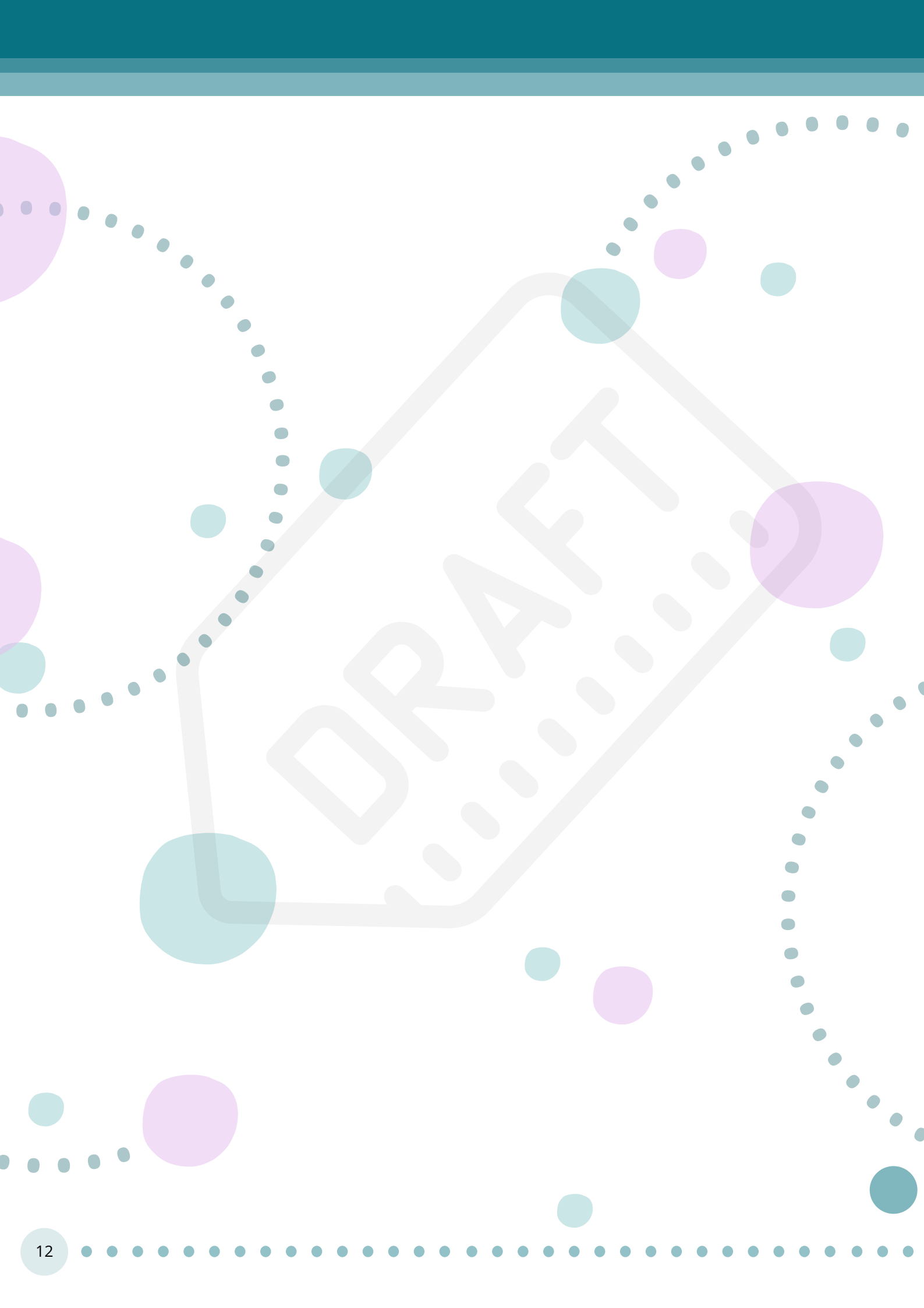
**Outcomes:** SEWB can be considered one of the long-term outcomes of your program. The **key areas** in the *SEW - Arts* resource can also be considered your long-term outcomes.



Examples of how to measure SEWB and the key areas can be found on the website.

# Wellbeing Factors

|                                                     |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----|
| Being in the Zone                                   | 13 |
| Coping with Criticism                               | 16 |
| Developing Self Awareness - Emotions                | 19 |
| Developing Self Awareness - Thoughts                | 20 |
| Doing What I Value                                  | 25 |
| Expressing Emotions                                 | 28 |
| Feeling Safe - Body Image                           | 32 |
| Feeling Safe - Making Mistakes                      | 36 |
| Managing Pressure                                   | 39 |
| Mindfulness in Action                               | 44 |
| Positive Peer Comparison                            | 47 |
| Self-compassion                                     | 50 |
| Social Understanding - Listening to Others          | 53 |
| Social Understanding - Perspective Taking & Empathy | 56 |
| Social Understanding - Working in Groups            | 59 |





# Being in the zone

1

3

## What is it?

When people are 'in the zone' they experience Flow. Flow is a mental state, described originally by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, where a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of invigorated and effortless focus, involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity [14].

Being "in the zone" is achieved when engaged with a task that challenges a person's skills but does not exceed them. The challenge-skill balance can be fostered in arts classes by individualising and differentiating tasks so there is better alignment between students' skill level and the activity's challenge level. Establishing competence via scaffolding into manageable bite-size pieces and modelling each part of the arts process (such as a drama performance, an art-making activity, or a dance routine) ensures a better challenge-skill balance - especially for more difficult or complex tasks that students are presented with.

While Csikszentmihalyi [14] speaks of eight Flow characteristics, the three components particularly relevant to arts activities are:

- Immediate feedback (this can be from the task, not necessarily the instructor)
- Feeling they have the potential to succeed
- Feeling so engrossed in the experience, that other needs become negligible.



## Key messages

- Recognising when you are, or have been, "in the zone" helps develop your own self-awareness.
- Being "in the zone" is helpful for psychological wellbeing. It can also be beneficial from a physiological point of view also. For example, in a Swedish study the musicians who entered flow exhibited deepened breathing and slowed heart rates. Even the facial muscles that enable us to smile were activated [15].
- Students can get "in the zone" when the tasks are well pitched challenge-wise (not too challenging and not too easy). Tasks that are too challenging may result in feelings of anxiety, while tasks that are too easy may lead to feelings of boredom. They also need to feel they have the skills to succeed.
- Setting clear goals and receiving immediate and clear feedback (primarily from the task itself) can help facilitate being "in the zone", as can minimizing distractions to improve focus.



## Key messages

- If you're struggling to get "in the zone" – or just worn out by its intensity – you might aim for mindfulness instead. Think of mindfulness as a more accessible cousin of flow.
- Whole group "in the zone" or flow is also possible and is known to improve a team's effectiveness, productivity, performance, and capabilities. Equal participation and familiarity are important when working towards group flow. The blending of egos is also important – in a group flow state there is no room for a domineering ego – each member must merge their needs into those of the group while retaining a sense of control.

### Open-ended questions for students

What do you notice when you are "in the zone"?

What prevents you from being "in the zone"?

What helps you be "in the zone"?



### Activities

Activities that incorporate student autonomy, enable them to set goals, and provide challenges (but not too challenging) will facilitate "being in the zone". Students need time and lack of distractions to remain "in the zone". In addition, students may be able to get a sense of being "in the zone" if they know their output is not going to be judged or on display unless they choose to show it.

Group flow can be achieved through improvisation, for example in dance and drama. Group dance improvisation, for example, demands that students constantly regulate the situation according to their skills and modify their dance, making it more or less challenging through their movement choices. Students can be asked to solve various problems as a group through dance using improvisation and sharing leadership of the group.

### Reflection questions for teachers

How can I support my students to get "in the zone"?

How can I support my students to remain "in the zone" once they are there?

Are my students developing an awareness of "being in the zone" and able to articulate their experiences of this?



## For Parents

A famous Hungarian psychologist discovered that people were most happy when they were in a mental state he named Flow. Being in the zone" - or "Flow" - is when an individual is wholly immersed in an activity or process. It can give people a boost of energy, fuelling creativity, and is an integral part of wellbeing.

You may have observed your child playing video games and noticed their total absorption for extended periods of time. This is an example of Flow. Parents can help their child experience Flow in other activities but they need to pay careful attention to their children's interests and abilities as Flow is a highly personal and individual experience. Your child will experience Flow when they are suitably challenged - not overly challenged and not under challenged. Its also important that your child has goals specific to the activity they are involved in - goals they have developed and not other people.

Families can cultivate Flow as a part of how they function. Maximising each member's ability to learn and grow and increasing how your family, as a team, learns and grows together, can facilitate Flow.

Parents or carers can help children recognise what activities enable them to be in Flow by asking questions such as:

- Besides social media or watching TV shows, what activity do you enjoy doing so much that it sometimes causes you to lose track of time?
- Is there anything you do when you are alone that makes you lose track of what is going on around you?
- Is there anything that you do that sometimes absorbs you so completely that you forget yourself and are unaware of what is happening around you?

2

3

# Coping with criticism



## What is it?

Feedback and artistic processes are inherently linked. In the arts, feedback can be a relational exchange. Feedback might be generated from an individual or a group, directed towards ourselves, or something we notice in another person's work. Feedback can be given at different time points (i.e., in the moment, in a note-taking session, or in a review) from different roles (performer, observer, director etc.).

Feedback processes in arts contexts can be quite normalised, reducing feedback to criticism and amplifying power dynamics. However, feedback contexts, and not criticism, can be opportunities for attending to SEWB. Feedback can help arts students to think not just about technical aspects of the art form, but also how they can better manage their SEWB. There are two parts to this wellbeing factor. Firstly, there is the need for Teaching Artists to take care in how they provide feedback to young people. Secondly, there is the need to help young people to cope with criticism they may receive from others.



## Key messages

- Feedback can be a thoughtful and dynamic exchange, more complex than simply 'give and receive'.
- Take yourself out of the equation when giving feedback. It's essential to be objective and open to ideas that diverge from your own.
- Feedback should be about the work, providing guidance on what needs to change and how, and refraining from personal commentary or perfectionist themes. For example, Teaching Artists can begin the feedback process with: This is not about you as a creator. It is my thoughts about this particular piece of creation.
- Avoid giving feedback about something that can't be changed.
- Specific and positive feedback can support wellbeing and be more likely to lead to change and improvement.
- Feedback can be given in a way to provide students with the skills for self-evaluation of not only their art form but also their social and emotional competencies. For example, ask students: How do you feel about what you created?
- Feedback can be delivered in developmentally appropriate ways. For example, young people might struggle to take on feedback given immediately post-performance, being more responsive to feedback that is delivered asynchronously, when they are calm.



## Key messages

- Young people need to recognize the power they have in passing any criticism through the filter of their own logical mind — taking in what they've decided is of value, and setting aside what they've decided is not. This is difficult to do and they will need help to weigh and measure any criticism and feedback they receive.

### Open-ended questions for students

What is it like to share and hear feedback?

How do you use feedback to change or improve your art form?



### Activities

Our brains act like Velcro for the 'bad' stuff but Teflon for the 'good' stuff. This metaphor helps explain that our brains are hardwired to spend more time focusing on painful or threatening events we want to change or avoid, rather than centring on pleasurable and positive experiences.

- Try circuit-breaking the above, for example - keep reminders of good feedback or document at least one 'good' feedback point for every 'bad'.
- Make sure positive feedback is documented in the same quantity and frequency as negative feedback. Create a culture of using a journal to document and share feedback. Collaboratively agree about who sees the document and how its contents will be shared. Journals could be for individuals or a shared for close cohorts.
- Develop group rules and boundaries around feedback processes – for example, when is it okay to give feedback to peers? When are there 'feedback-free' activities or sessions? Should we ask for permission to give feedback and check in after?
- Try mindfulness and self-compassion focused activities to help feedback processes become appropriate.

How do you deliver feedback (informally and formally; privately and publicly)?

How can you adapt feedback processes to be more aligned with wellbeing factors?

How can you be overt about feedback processes with your young people?

How can you support your young people to share, hear and respond to feedback in helpful ways?

### Reflection questions for teachers



## For Parents

Children and adolescents develop at different rates, and this includes learning how to handle criticism. They are likely to overreact when feeling stressed out, tired or hungry, or when they are trying out a new skill. They can also tend to overreact, particularly in the teenage years, when someone questions the choices they are making (e.g., how they look or who they are friends with).

They can go through periods of wanting everything to be perfect or being frustrated with school – even the mildest criticism seems harsh if they feel like they can't do anything right. Reframe your criticism as constructive criticism as this allows focus on what they have done and not who they are.

Some ways to help your child handle criticism are:

- Encourage a growth mindset. Improvement is what is important - less about the end product and more about the trajectory.
- Keep focused on the action, not who your child is, and avoid pulling in too many issues at once. Help them to see how useful mistakes are in terms of growing or developing into who they want to be.
- Be kind but direct in your constructive criticism and always ask your child's opinion. Use 'I' rather than 'you' statements. For example, "I feel <insert your emotion> because <insert your reason>". Like "I feel disappointed because we had agreed that you would finish your homework before going out with your friends" [16].



# Developing self-awareness

## Emotions

1

### What is it?

Your thoughts and emotions can affect your health. Emotions that are freely experienced and expressed without judgment tend to flow fluidly without impacting our health. On the other hand, repressed emotions (especially fearful or negative ones) can zap mental energy, negatively affect the body, and lead to health problems. In fact, anger and sadness are an important part of life, and new research shows that experiencing and accepting such emotions are vital to our mental health.



### Key messages

- You don't have to dwell on your emotions or constantly talk about how you feel. Emotional awareness simply means recognizing, respecting, and accepting your feelings as they happen.
- Expressing an emotion doesn't have to be something outward like slamming a door, yelling into a pillow or even telling someone about it. It can happen entirely in our minds.
- Acceptance of negative emotions is also important. Accepting them and not struggling to get rid of them will help to make them less profound in the future.
- Sharing your feelings with people close to you is the best way to practice putting emotions into words; a skill that helps us feel closer to people and that improves with practice!

### Open-ended questions for students

**Which emotions do you find easy to recognise in yourself and others?**

**Which emotions are difficult to recognise in yourself and others?**

**Why are some emotions more difficult to recognise than others?**



## Activities

Many people find it helpful to breathe slowly and deeply while learning to tolerate strong feelings or to imagine the feelings as floating clouds, as a reminder that they will pass.

Here is a way to move uncomfortable emotions quickly:

- Identify the emotion you are feeling. Is it anger, sadness, fear, disgust?
- Focus on the emotion without the reason you are feeling that way. This is going to be difficult because we usually think about the reason we are feeling a certain way.
- Focus on where you feel this emotion in your body and what it feels like. It might help to give it a shape or colour and focus on that. If you start thinking about why you are feeling it, stop yourself and go back to just focusing on the basic emotion.
- Take deep breaths and as you exhale, imagine the emotion melting away.
- Continue to do this until you feel relief. If you leave the story out of it, the relief should come quickly – five minutes or less.

At some point later you may want to problem solve why you felt that way and what may help you in the future to not have such an emotional response. You may also simply accept that this is likely a response you may have in the future.

## Supports

Adolescent brains are still developing and they will at times need help to self-regulate intense emotional experiences. Some things that work with adolescents are paced breathing, paired muscle relaxation and intense aerobic activity.







## For Parents

All emotions tell us something about ourselves and our situation. However sometimes young people and adults find it hard to accept what they feel. They might judge themselves for feeling a certain way, like if they feel jealous, for example. But instead of thinking they shouldn't feel that way, it's better they just notice how they actually feel.

Avoiding negative feelings or pretending we don't feel the way we do can backfire. It's harder to move past difficult feelings and allow them to fade if we don't face them and try to understand why we feel that way. You don't have to dwell on your emotions or constantly talk about how you feel. Emotional awareness simply means recognising, respecting, and accepting your feelings as they happen.

Convey the message that emotions are normal and all of what they feel is valid because it is what they are feeling. You can do this through making your own emotion awareness obvious to your child and accepting your own emotions. Convey the message that naming and accepting emotions is an important part of coping with difficult emotions.

Intense emotions are a part of growing up. Parents can help children and adolescents learn to recognize their emotions. Your role as a parent can involve:

- Noticing the emotions in your child, making an educated guess about what the emotion is and making a comment that shows you have noticed it without judging. "You seem to be (angry, upset, nervous, agitated, annoyed). Is there anything I can do to help?" For younger children you can use questioning to help them identify what they are feeling.
- Accept their correction and then offer your help. Walk away if they let you know your interest is not welcome.





## Key messages

- It's easy and natural to think about things that are not good. This is how our minds work. It takes effort, reminding and practice to think about what is good.
- Children and adolescents often see the world as either bad or good, right or wrong, with nothing in between. It's important to help adolescents to recognize the complexity and grey areas in any situation.



## Activities

Activities that help children and adolescents distinguish between thoughts, emotions and behaviours are all valuable. For example, role playing various characters and discussing their thoughts, feelings and behaviours is valuable.

Whenever a thought enters your mind, imagine it rests on a cloud floating by. Don't judge the thoughts, and don't label them; simply observe them as they float through your mind. Don't grab onto them or get caught up in thinking about them - just notice them.

When young people identify their thoughts and represent them in all different ways, it can help to diminish their power. For example, they can write an unhelpful thought in fancy writing or say it in a funny voice.

### Reflection questions for teachers

**How can you encourage creativity in your classes, to increase opportunities for students to notice and describe thoughts, feelings, and body sensations?**

**Do you notice when your mind is saying things that are not helpful?** Are you able to preface your thoughts with "My mind is saying..."

## Supports

Be thoughtful about what you are inviting young people to disclose, and how. Content of internal sensations can be kept appropriately private, and reluctance to disclose does not necessarily indicate problems. It can be helpful to encourage connection to thoughts and feelings, without expectation or pressure to share content.





## For Parents

Our heads are constantly busy with up to 60,000 thoughts a day! The 'busy-ness' in our heads is generally not fact but judgement, baseless worry or inane internal chatter. The trouble is when we start to believe that chatter. This can be particularly scary for kids. Some kids can become stuck in their thoughts about themselves, others, and the world.

It's important to help young people to develop skills in mindfulness, to slow down, focus on their breathing and watch their thoughts come and go. Teach them that they are not their thoughts! And when we give thoughts attention they become stronger. This is not helpful for thoughts that are preventing them from becoming themselves.

Unfortunately, science says it's natural for people to dwell more on negative thoughts than on positive ones, and this can be even more true for children. According to positive psychology researcher Barbara Fredrickson, positive thinking is important because it broadens your sense of possibility and opens your mind, allowing you to build new skills. Positive thinking, Fredrickson says, "broadens and builds." It also makes children (and adults) more resilient.

It's best to discuss negative self-talk when your child is relaxed and comfortable, not when she's frustrated or overwhelmed. By bringing up the subject calmly, you can create dialogue around the consequences of self-talk and the realities of her words affecting her potential to be who she wants to be. Realise that negative self-talk is often a symptom of fear, and share that realisation with your child. Think together about WHAT your child might be afraid of when she says things like, "I'm dumb."

Help your child to recognise their minds are just one aspect of themselves and they can learn to discern which thoughts will help them be the sort of person they want to be and which thoughts won't.



# Doing what I value

1

## What is it?

Values convey what people find important in their lives. They vary in importance and serve as guiding principles in a person's life or other social entity. Values are "fundamental attitudes guiding our thinking and behaviour" that "produce the belief that life is meaningful and serve as a measure of how meaningful one's actions are, that is, consistent with that person's value system" [17].

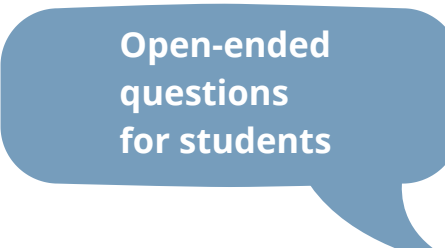
Providing opportunities for children and adolescents to investigate what is important to them, what sort of person they would like to be and what actions will get them there, helps them to live in a way wherein their values and actions or behaviours are in alignment.

Culture can impact the way young people develop values. For example, in some cultural groups values may be considered from a community rather than individual perspective.



## Key messages

- It's important to help students explore their own values language (avoiding telling them what to value).
- Values talk is a tool to activate young people to move and interact with the world, adding more meaning to their life.
- Values are fluid and can change in form or function.
- Values are about how people want to act – not the outcomes they want to achieve.
- Aboriginal people are likely to consider values from a community perspective, rather than an individual one.
- A value is something you do because it is important to you, not because someone else wants you to do it.



## Open-ended questions for students

What things do you really care about?

What values are important to you, and how are your values different and similar to others?

What do you want out of these sessions?

What makes a good life?

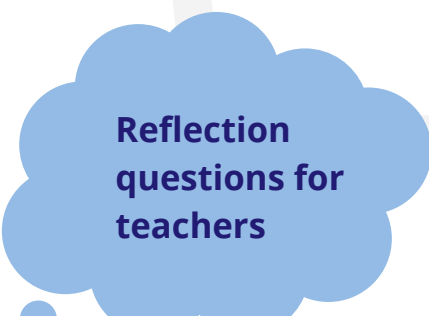
What action goes with your value?



## Activities

Art forms provide many opportunities for students to create something that represents to them a valued life or one of their values. This may require the arts teacher to help develop the language around what the students value, what sort of life they would like to live etc.

- Students identify their own individual or community values from a set of values cards or a values mandala and sort into 'most important', 'somewhat important' etc. Encourage students to notice shared values and differences (there is no right or wrong, or better or worse, with values!). Ask students to match actions with their values. Discuss how some values clash and that pursuing one will take away from another.
- Practice mental contrasting. In this practice students identify positive and negative outcomes of their values related actions. These can be represented through various art forms.
- Practice problem-solving when it is difficult to line up values and actions. Represent solutions through various art forms.



## Reflection questions for teachers

How well can students articulate their own values? Is this something that needs revisiting?

## Supports

Values can be misunderstood as preferences or behaviours.

Some students may have obstacles out of their control, preventing them from lining up their values and actions. Students may feel shame about revealing their living situation and therefore the focus should be on achievable actions.





## For Parents

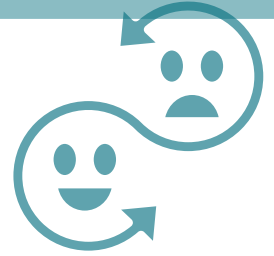
Your child will benefit from discussing their values i.e., things they really care about.

It is important here to distinguish between values and goals. A value is a direction in which you want your life to go - like heading West, whereas goals are places you might walk to on the way. A goal is something you can complete. If you say you want to walk to the next corner you can walk there, reach it and it is done. You can't complete heading West. It is never finished. In the same way "being a loving parent" is never finished. It doesn't matter how many hugs you've given your child you can never say that you've finished being a loving parent. There's always more to do. This distinction between values and goals is an important one because we can get very caught up with our goals and lose sight of the underlying values which is really what it is all about.

It's a good idea to write down your values - you could divide this up into different aspects of your life such as: family life, work life, your own self-development etc. Once you have done this you can ask yourself: what could I actually do to move closer to my values? What actions could I take? Pick a life domain that you've rated as important but where you also feel you aren't living out your values fully. Then brainstorm and come up with some actions that you could take. You may think of some bigger actions and that's fine. You might decide that there are skills that you don't have that you'll need to learn or extra information that you need to gain. That's fine too, put that down as well. It doesn't have to be a list of just bigger acts though. We also want to make sure there are plenty of small, tiny steps on this list as well. So please put down actions that you can do every day as well as actions that you might do only once a year.

You can help your child to line up their actions with their values by going through a similar process with them - most likely verbally and in a simplified way. Avoid imposing your values on your child. They will have their own values that may or may not overlap with yours. This is an opportunity to help them come up with acts as well as ideas for solutions around barriers. Often there can be two types of barriers... a practical barrier that needs to be problem-solved, or a thought or an emotion that may need to be let go.

# Expressing emotions



## What is it?

Our creative discipline (dance, theatre, music, circus... whatever it is!) gives us a form and structure for emotional expression. Creative activities are opportunities to express our inner life, as well as opportunities to explore experiences that are quite different to our own. Sometimes we can draw on our own emotions in our creative work; sometimes we generate and portray emotions that are unfamiliar to us or different to what we are feeling at the time. Sometimes our creative work can be an outlet that allows us to organize and discharge emotions that might be feeling otherwise stuck inside us. Your thoughts and emotions can affect your health. Emotions that are freely experienced and expressed without judgment or attachment tend to flow fluidly without impacting our health. On the other hand, repressed emotions (especially fearful or negative ones) can zap mental energy, negatively affect the body, and lead to health problems.

Feeling and expressing a broad repertoire of emotions is an important part of our wellbeing. Humans have very primitive emotional processes, and emotions are important to help us make sense of our experiences and work towards our goals. How we respond emotionally to events can be quite individual, so a group of people might all respond to the same event by feeling different emotions and also show very individual ways of expressing those emotions.

As we mature, our bodies and brains develop skills and learn habits for adjusting the intensity of the emotions we feel. This maturation process starts right from when we are young and doesn't finish until our mid twenties! However, the process of how to understand and regulate our emotions never really stops. As we mature, we also get better at making decisions around how we respond to emotional impulses and how intensely we express our emotions, for example, learning how we can calm ourselves and do complex performance work even though we feel incredibly nervous. And learning that yelling loudly in anger or rolling on the floor in laughter is probably not appropriate in a classroom setting when our group is trying to learn.

Interestingly, evidence suggests that our bodies and brains take on the effects of performing (or even 'faking', or 'pretending') emotional experiences similar to if we were in our 'real life'. In other words, "faking it till you can make it" can sometimes work. For example, striking a power pose can increase your genuine sense of confidence during a time of nervousness. Making yourself smile and laugh can help shift your emotional state to feeling happier. However, it is important to always acknowledge what your true feelings are initially.

Over development, we learn to respond not only to the emotions we experience, but also the emotions of other people in our lives. Our bodies and brains also feel similar effects if we witness someone else in an intense emotional state.



This is called 'vicarious effects' – such as feeling more relaxed when you are in a group of people who are also relaxed, and feeling more stressed when you are around others who look stressed. Vicarious experiences are those we feel genuine effects of in ourselves, even though the feelings or actions are being expressed in another person and we are only witnessing them.



## Key messages

- Emotional expression of a broad repertoire of emotions is a natural and helpful aspect of being a human.
- As we mature, our bodies and brains become more adept at modulating how we express emotions.
- As we mature we become able to hold multiple, sometimes conflicting emotions about the same experience.
- All emotions tell us something about ourselves and our situation. But sometimes we find it hard to accept what we feel. Instead of thinking we shouldn't feel that way, it's better to acknowledge how we feel.
- There are no good or bad emotions, but there are healthy or helpful and unhealthy or unhelpful ways of expressing or acting on them. Individuals have the capacity to discover their own healthy ways of expressing and acting on emotions.
- Avoiding negative feelings or pretending we don't feel the way we do can backfire and leave us feeling more stressed and upset.
- Our brains are hardwired to notice our own emotions, and also the emotions of others around us.
- "Fake it 'til you make it" has some evidence behind it, in that portraying or inducing emotional expression in yourself can shift your authentic emotional state.
- Expressing intense emotions in creative work requires us to utilize our inner resources, so we may feel tired and more vulnerable in wellbeing afterwards – especially if we don't take the time to warm down and properly return to a grounded emotional state afterwards.

### Open-ended questions for students

**What are you feeling right now?**

**How is what you feel inside different to what you present on the outside?**

**When do you think it is ok to keep your emotions inside?**

**What do emotions feel like in your body?** For example, how does sadness, anger, joy, disgust etc feel, where do you feel it, what can others see when you feel those emotions?



## Activities

There are many activities that can be incorporated into arts sessions to help students become aware of how they are currently feeling and how to recognise those emotions. There will be multiple opportunities to connect students with their emotions and help them find ways they can express these through their music, visual art, dance, etc. Another idea which can be incorporated into all arts sessions is journaling. Young people can journal and express themselves creatively with a pen or keyboard, or by using the notes app on a smartphone. Entries can be made about their current emotions using words or drawings. Before finishing their journal entry, they can be encouraged to add something kind about themselves, recognising that they have expressed their feelings honestly and taken a step toward managing their own wellbeing.

Mask making is a good way for exploring internal emotions and what is presented to the outside world. 'Everyday masks' show ways people may daily present to the world and this may differ to the masks that show how they feel inside in different context.

### Reflection questions for teachers

**How am I providing an environment wherein students feel safe to express their emotions?**

**Are there students who appear to struggle to be aware of, and express their emotions? What strategies can you put in place to specifically help those students?**

**Are you aware of your own emotions throughout the day and your need for emotional expression?**

## Supports

Coming to "class" might be an opportunity for distraction or compartmentalisation, a kind of refuge if a young person is going through a tricky time at school or home. If so, they might be reluctant or find it difficult to notice and sit with emotions in a class setting. Students might display distress or disclose 'what is going on outside class'. This does not have to be problematic but demonstrates why it is important for educators to feel comfortable hearing distress or disclosures and are aware of helpful ways to respond. It's a good idea to talk with work colleagues about the best way to respond to these situations and to be aware of when it is necessary to refer young people to other services.

Sorry business is one of the most important parts of being Aboriginal. Due to the impact of historical events, Aboriginal mortality rates are much higher than the rest of Australia and therefore Aboriginal people experience death and grief at a much higher rate than other people. Young Aboriginal people may need avenues for emotional expression that are provided sensitively.





## For Parents

In general, people around us expect us to be in a good mood. If we appear unhappy, we may be greeted with a “What’s wrong?” or “Is everything okay?” We might cast aside these questions with a simple “I’m fine,” or “Don’t worry about it,” to protect ourselves from judgement and avoid burdening others with our troubles.

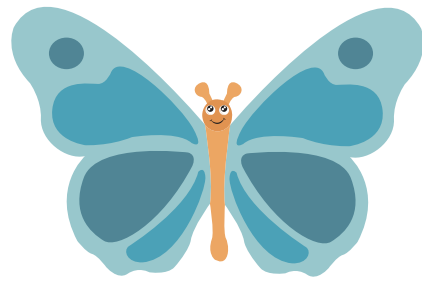
If parents exhibit this behaviour all the time, especially when something is upsetting, they do a disservice to themselves and their children. They risk bottling up feelings of sadness, anger, or fear. Many parents believe they need to be strong, silent types projecting a steady mind and even temper. Others believe a parents’ role is to not burden others, so they put on a mask of happiness, regardless of true feelings. But when emotions pile up, they may begin to feel too overwhelming to access. When this happens, it’s common to shut down or explode because feelings have not been expressed.

In fact, both parents and children are better off if parents learn how to appropriately express the full range of emotions [18].

Writing, singing, laughing and dancing are examples of effective outlets for expressing emotions. When children and adolescents learn to manage their own internal emotions, of which emotional expression is an important part, it can make them more likely to open up to others around them.

# Feeling safe

## Body image



### What is it?

Body image is the thoughts and feelings we have about our bodies. It does not depend upon the way we actually look. Both males and females develop body image. It can be positive or negative, and people can have positive and negative body image at the same time. In Western culture, children as young as three years of age learn that being thin is thought to be attractive for women, and being muscular is considered attractive for men.

Body image starts developing in early childhood. People with a positive body image are comfortable with their appearance and are more likely to think about their body in terms of its functionality rather than its form. In other words, they focus mostly on the way their body helps them do the things they want to do – playing sport, climbing trees or walking the dog – rather than how their body looks.

People may have negative body image to varying degrees. Poor body image may lead to poor mental health. At some levels it doesn't cause harm, but at high levels it can cause depression, anxiety, social isolation and disordered eating and harmful levels of exercising. In Western culture it's common to make judgments about people according to how they look.

A positive body image won't necessarily mean you avoid feeling insecure or think your body is perfect, but you will be able to acknowledge any insecurities and accept your body is yours. Beauty and appearance ideals exist in all societies, and they are all unhelpful. These ideals don't encourage uniqueness but instead suggest that everyone 'should' and 'could' look a certain way, which is unrealistic [19].

Children grow and develop by watching, copying and absorbing information they get from all kinds of sources, including the TV and movies, their friends, families and teachers.

For more information about what body image is, click [here](#).



## Key messages

- Bodies are unique and amazing in what they can do. (A bigger focus on what they can do as opposed to what they look like).
- Body image is an internal construct, it is separate and not always linked to physical body appearance.
- Your body is unique – your differences give you style and personality.
- True beauty is not skin deep! That is, true beauty is about who you are inside and how you show who you are, not how you look on the outside.

### Open-ended questions for students

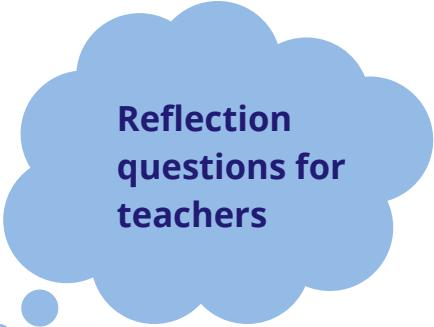
What makes up 'you'?

What do you appreciate about your body?



## Activities

- Self-compassion is a powerful tool in combatting perfectionism which can often be tied to poor body image. Perfectionists are constantly aiming to reach excessively high or unrealistic goals. Self-compassion activities have been shown to improve anxiety and body image. This can be as simple as becoming aware of when your critical voice is talking to you, or comparing you to someone else, and replacing that thought with something that a kind friend would say instead. Arts activities wherein students learn to express the critical voice and replace it with a compassionate voice will help to build positive body image.
- The use of positive affirmations during dance instruction, as well as kinesthetic imagery (also known as kinesthesia) when exploring movement has been shown to improve body image. Removing mirrors from dance classes can also help develop positive body image. This allows students to explore how movement feels in their bodies, to feel more in-tune with their bodies and ultimately more deeply connected with their movement.
- Life drawing can also bring real improvements in positive body image in adolescents. Use of a diverse range of models should be encouraged, as it may help adolescents to develop more realistic notions about body normativity and challenge beauty ideals they have internalized from wider society.




## Reflection questions for teachers

Reflect on the messages you give your students about their bodies in the way you speak, act and the way you feel about your own body.

If you need support for improving your own body image, the [Butterfly Foundation](#) have lots of great resources.

## Supports



Young people with significant body image concerns might conceal their experience during overt body image discussions. Body image discussions can be glorified and used to perpetuate disordered body image behaviours.

Eating disorders are not synonymous with body image; however, it is important for educators to keep in mind that disordered eating (or compensatory behaviours such as over-exercising, taking supplements etc.) is a significant mental health pathology that often has a severe risk of long standing physical consequences. It is important for educators to escalate any concerns regarding student wellbeing.

Refer to the [Mental Health](#) section of this resource for support avenues.



## For Parents

Children and youth are sensitive to messages about body image and appearance shared by their parents and other adults around them. Be aware of the effect of negative body talk around your children, about your own body, and the bodies of other people. Work on modelling a healthy acceptance of your own body shape and size.

- Avoid talking negatively about your body, or at least, don't share these thoughts in front of your children.
- **Help** your child celebrate body diversity. Avoid placing too much value on physical appearances. Instead, talk to them about all the different aspects that make up a person.
- **Encourage** your children to be media savvy – to question and challenge Western society's narrow ideals of beauty or attractiveness. This includes helping them to be critical of the images they see in the media (including social media).
- Be kind to yourself as a person and as a parent, and encourage your young person or people to do the same. The more compassion and less judgement young people are exposed to the better for a positive body image.

Click [here](#) for more information about what body image is and how you can support your child to develop a healthy body image.







## Key messages

- Self-compassion is an important part of making a mistake.
- Give yourself time to think about what the mistake can teach you and then move forward!

### Open-ended questions for students

**What have you said (or thought!) when someone else has made a mistake?**

**What does the voice in your head say to you when you make a mistake?**

**Is that voice helping or hindering you?**



### Activities

- Brainstorm with the group what can be done to minimise the fear of failure and appearing foolish.
- Activities that help students to step aside and listen to the voice in their heads are all useful!
- Discuss mistakes openly and what can be learned from them. Provide an explanation of how learning takes place and how the brain needs mistakes to learn and grow. Discuss famous 'mistakes' that have resulted in amazing discoveries, such as the discovery of penicillin or fireworks!.

### Reflection questions for teachers

**Do you have strategies in place to help those students who appear afraid to make mistakes?**

**How is perfectionist or highly self-critical behaviour perpetuated in your cohorts?**

**Do you have strategies in place to help students who appear to highly perfectionist and/or highly self-critical?**

### Supports

Research suggests perfectionism can be adaptive or maladaptive [21]. Perfectionism, defined as a fear of failure or criticism, can lead to procrastination, eating disorders and obsessive-compulsive disorders. It is frequently seen in gifted students who have little experience of academic failure and are unaware how to cope with mistakes in other areas of their lives. These students need to see the value of making mistakes and the learning that goes along with it.





## For Parents

Mistakes can be opportunities to learn. Valuable lifelong lessons can be learnt by children when they make a mistake. By allowing children to make mistakes and fix them, you allow them to develop skills and judgment to deal with similar problems in the future.

You can help your child understand mistakes are for learning by:

- Being forgiving of yourself when you make a mistake.
- Letting them know that you are not perfect and that you use your mistakes as opportunities to reflect on how you can do better the next time.
- Being forgiving of them when they make a mistake.

Validating your child's emotions is an important step in helping them feel psychologically safe.

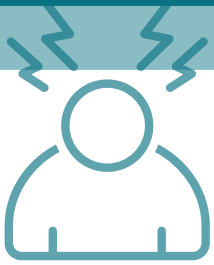
Attending to your own emotions will increase the likelihood that your child will feel psychologically safe. Asking yourself these questions can help:

Are there recurring patterns in your emotion-driven behavior?

What sets them off?

Can you clearly identify your most frequent emotions?

How do you manage your emotional triggers?



# Managing pressure

1

2

3

## What is it?

Natural stress responses help your body and brain adjust to new or challenging situations. Stress has an important role in keeping us alert, motivated and ready to perform at our best. Stress is an inherent part of being human - we cannot avoid stress, rather we can feel more or less resilient to the effects of stress at different times of our life.

Stress can take two forms: challenge and threat. Threat stress is related to emotions such as apprehension and fear – experienced when feeling overwhelmed or at risk of harm (this could be physical, social, or emotional harm). Challenge stress can be experienced in situations of excitement or when motivated to tackle a particular situation or challenge. There are signs of unhelpful threat stress to look out for, including changes in:

- Body sensations (such as nausea, appetite changes, panic, restlessness).
- Emotions (such as either more intense or even absent emotions; increased irritability, frustration, anger, sadness, or general distress).
- Thoughts (such as racing thoughts, over-thinking, blank thoughts, more negative self-directed thoughts).
- Behaviour (avoidance of usual and/or more challenging activities, withdrawal from social connection or unusual increase in socialising, changes to sleep behaviours).



## Key messages

- Some strategies for relieving stress are better in the long run than others. Positive stress coping strategies include:

1. Breathing exercises
2. Mindfulness practice
3. Engaging your smart brain
4. Doing something creative (they are perfectly placed for this in an arts activity!)
5. Using your imagination (day-dreaming is the flip side of worrying)
6. Talking it out with someone (link [here](#)).



## Key messages

- To focus on how we can manage stress in performance contexts, we can think about how we respond to stress in terms of different zones. One evidence-based model of this is the Yerks-Dodson Law which explains the relationship between performance and pressure, outlined in the following dot-points.
- We have an '**Optimal Stress Zone**' that balances the right amount of stress for us to perform at our best. There is enough stress to help motivate and focus us, but not too much to overwhelm or distract us. In this zone, we are coping with an elevated amount of stress, and it is not a zone that we can sustain 24/7.
- We also have an '**Under-Stressed Zone**', which means there is not enough stress for us to perform optimally. When we are under-stressed, we might be sleepy (or even asleep!) or passively alert, perhaps even daydreaming or zoned out.
- Finally, we have an '**Over-Stressed Zone**', which is when there is too much stress for us to perform at our best. We can feel unhelpfully anxious or restless, right up to overwhelmed or blank in our mind, and having trouble organising our thoughts.
- We have a tendency sometimes to "take on" the stress of other people – this is a form of emotion contagion. If someone you know is stressed treat them with compassion and give them the opportunity to express how they feel. But remember, it is their stress and not yours and the best way you can help them is to not being consumed by their negative feelings.
- It is important to note that coping strategies are culturally based. For example, Aboriginal coping strategies appear to rely more on emotion expression and communication together with collective coping [22].

### Open-ended questions for students

#### How do you recognise your own stress?

**Think of a time when you experienced a stressful situation. What strengths did you use to handle that situation? What did you learn from that experience?**

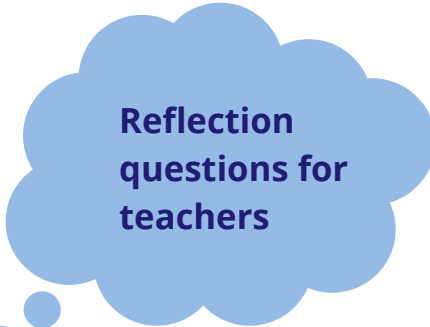
**What kind of activities help get you into your Optimal Zone for performance, if you are under-stressed?**

**What kind of activities help get you into your Optimal Zone for performance, if you are over-stressed?**



## Activities

- Create your own Stress Wave.
  - Decide and agree as a group whether this is individual work or something you will all share as a group.
  - Draw a bell-curve/wave on a piece of paper. Divide it into three sections - on the left is 'anticipation', in the middle is 'during', and on the right is 'afterwards'. Now, think of a stressful situation related to your art/performance work - perhaps it was a big audition, big performance, or an exam.
  - Think and jot down what you noticed in the lead up to the situation, what did you notice going through your mind, or feelings in your body, or things you found yourself doing, when you were in the anticipation phase of the situation? You might use words or even drawings or symbols, however you like to describe what it was like for you on paper.
  - Next, put your attention on the middle section. What did you notice going through your mind, or feelings in your body, or things you found yourself doing, when you were experiencing the situation - the 'during' phase?
  - Finally, repeat this for the afterwards phase. If you feel safe doing so and it was agreed, you can share your Stress Wave. Are there similarities and differences between your phases? And what about similarities and difference in other people's waves? There is no right or wrong... it is useful information to know about yourself, because we all respond to stress differently. But we are all similar because we all experience stress!
- Role playing the use of stress release strategies.
- Integrating stress release strategies into your sessions. This could include incorporating breath work, stretching, and progressive muscle relaxation. Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing and releasing the muscles in your body. You can work with the students in a systematic manner from head to toe (or vice versa), or you can target specific body areas (e.g., hands, feet, jaw, etc). Use imagery to help students connect to the physical sensations: 'pretend you're squeezing a tennis ball and then drop the ball and relax'.
- "5-4-3-2-1" Technique - incorporate the five senses to calm the mind and bring focus and attention back to the task at hand. Name five things you can see, four things you can hear, three things you can feel, two things you can smell, one thing you can taste.



## Reflection questions for teachers

**Can I break down the task into smaller more manageable chunks? Which students need scaffolding and which students can work on the task independently? Are there sub-skills that can be taught?**

**Are there students who may need a more intense focus on stress relief strategies? How can this be provided?**

**What strategies do you use to relieve stress? Are they successful and do you need to expand on these?**

## Supports

Be aware of indicators of stress in students: they will vary from withdrawing to acting out, being oppositional, uncooperative.

Use perspective taking when students are showing signs of unhelpful stress. What is the worst possible thing that could happen if I attempt this task?

Performance-related stress responses (and activities to either increase or reduce stress to get into Optimal Zone) will be diverse, so group activities might need differentiation.

For students who are overwhelmed by a task, break down the task into smaller achievable goals. Identify the elements of a task they can already do, focus their attention on the zone of proximal development: those things that they can do with support or scaffolding.





## For Parents

Natural stress responses help your body and brain adjust to new or challenging situations.

Stress has an important role in keeping us alert, motivated and ready to perform at our best. Stress is an inherent part of being human - we cannot avoid stress, rather we can feel more or less resilient to the effects of stress at different times of our life.

Parents can talk with children about how they've thought about and dealt with their own stressful situations.

It's important to role model the use of healthy stress release strategies. (See Step 5).

Remind yourself and your child of the first rule of coping with stress: "Try to change the things you can, and accept the things you cannot change."

Engage with the following steps:

- Step 1: Reframe Stress: Help your child shift from a "stress hurts" mindset to a "stress helps" mindset.
- Step 2: Shift from a Fixed Mindset to a Growth Mindset. That means helping them shift from a "I can't do that" mindset to a "I can't do that yet" mindset.
- Step 3: Stop Catastrophic Thinking – help your child to see the range of outcomes that are possible. For children and adults alike, catastrophizing comes down to blowing things out of proportion. It creates barriers to facing challenges because problems seem much larger and harder to handle. Sometimes mindfulness and deep breathing exercises can help slow down your thinking and place you back in the moment, away from spiraling negative thoughts.
- Step 4: Practice Problem-Solving. Raising Children Network outlines [six steps to problem solving](#). Using these steps yourself when problem solving, will reinforce their importance in the eyes of your child.
- Step 5. Use stress management techniques such as those found [here](#).

# Mindfulness in action



## What is it?

Mindfulness involves paying attention on purpose; such as noticing things we take for granted - like the feel of our shoes against our feet or the ways we interact with others. Mindfulness is also the ability to see what's going on in your head, without getting carried away.

The key to mindfulness is being non-judgmental about what we see and feel. Its about feeling more comfortable with your emotions. This involves learning to sit with anxiety without bolting out the door. Like, for example confronting a fear of spiders, this is something that can be done in baby steps.

As humans we often instinctively want to change every moment in life that we cannot accept. However, mindfulness is about changing our way of being so that we can accept every moment in life with open arms.



## Key messages

- Mindfulness is a skill that can be learnt and developed.
- Being mindful can help relieve stress and improves wellbeing.
- When practicing mindfulness, gently bring your mind back if it wanders.
- Mindfulness involves being kind and forgiving towards yourself when your mind wanders.
- Mindfulness helps you detach from thoughts; watching them come and go - useful for thoughts that are not helping you live the life you would like.
- Mindfulness involves training attention; with attention improving for those who practice mindfulness regularly.
- A “drip-feed” approach to mindfulness is best for children and adolescents – building on a little at a time.

### Open-ended questions for students

**What does being calm look like or feel like to you?**

**What does your breath feel like as it moves in and out of your body?**





## Activities

The arts provide multiple opportunities for mindfulness whether it be, for example, through mindful viewing of art, mindfulness in music practice or dancing mindfully.

Other examples of mindfulness in the arts include: Drawing Breath, Mindful Yarning Circles, and Mindful Practice.

Below are some mindfulness activities that can be incorporated into arts sessions.

- **Basic mindfulness meditation:** Sit quietly and focus on your natural breathing or a word or 'mantra' you repeat silently. Allow thoughts to come and go without judgment and return to your focus on breath or mantra.
- **Body sensations:** Notice subtle body sensations such as an itch or tingling without judgment and let them pass. Notice each part of your body in succession from head-to-toe.
- **Sensory:** Notice sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. Name them 'sight', 'sound', 'smell', 'taste', or 'touch' without judgment and let them go.
- **Emotions:** Allow emotions to be present without judgment. Practice a steady and relaxed naming of emotions: 'joy', 'anger', 'frustration'. Accept the presence of the emotions without judgment and let them go.

### Reflection questions for teachers

How can I incorporate mindfulness into every session?

What challenges are students experiencing with mindfulness?

How can these challenges be overcome?

## Supports

Some students may experience adverse effects when practicing mindfulness. Anxiety, panic, feeling spaced out, boredom, or even excessive use of mindfulness can occur. Plan for how to manage these responses if they occur. There is a need to be cautious using mindfulness with students who have experienced trauma - they may not feel safe as quietness can re-activate trauma. Therefore, it is important to allow students to opt out.





## For Parents

Mindfulness is the skill of being able to notice that your attention has wandered, maybe to a thought or a feeling, and being able to put that attention back onto whatever we want our attention to be on. Mindfulness also means that we do this without judging ourselves, without struggling with thoughts or getting carried away with them.

Mindfulness is an experiential skill - it is something that you do. Just like any other skill, you can be given some good instructions and some feedback on how you're going but you're going to need to practice it. So it is like learning to bake a cake or learning to swim, you can get a great explanation of how to swim but that doesn't mean you can actually do it. You need to try it out and practice and practice until it clicks.

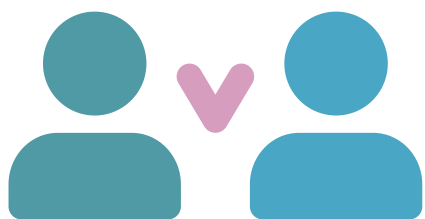
Mindfulness may seem like a simple skill but it is amazing how little time we spend being really mindful. We spend a lot of our time not living in the present, getting caught up in thoughts about the past and thoughts about the future.

Mindful parenting is about setting an ongoing intention to be present at a given moment. This presence can take many forms: for example, it may look like paying attention to your child, noticing your own feelings when you're in conflict with them, pausing before responding, and listening to your child's viewpoints, even if they differ from your own.

Another way parents can be mindful is by using the **STOP** method:

- **Stop, Pause:** Wait a few moments before reacting to your child.
- **Take a few deep breaths:** Breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. Feel your muscles soften and relax.
- **Observe:** Notice and pay attention with curiosity to your thoughts, sensations, and emotions.
- **Proceed:** Return to whatever you were doing, responding to your child from a clearer, calmer mental state.

A helpful response to your child may begin with what you have noticed about how they are feeling such as: 'It sounds like you are feeling...' Acknowledging their feelings and why they may feel a certain way is important for their emotional development. Studies show that children who had more mindful parents report lower levels of stress. These results suggest that mindful parenting may help children to cope with stress. Mindful parenting also has a direct impact on lowering parent stress [23].



# Positive peer comparison

2

3

## What is it?

We are social beings, and our brains are hard-wired from birth to connect to others - first to our primary caregivers (such as a parent). We then form attachments with others, such as friends, teachers, peers and romantic partners as we develop. Over our lives, what we notice in these attachments - and how we each make sense of what we notice - gives us important information that shapes our beliefs about relationships, ourselves and others.

Noticing and making sense of ourselves in relation to others are healthy and important human functions. From an evolutionary perspective, humans have used this awareness to adapt to changing conditions to maximise survival (e.g., enhancing qualities or behaviours that increased the chance of attracting an enviable mate; reducing qualities that could lead to exclusion from our group, and consequent loss of social protection and increased vulnerability to threats).

Nowadays, our brain continues to use this ancient skill of looking to others and using what we observe as feedback on how we are going. However, because we are now highly evolved social beings, the process can be detrimental in several ways. For example, we might become pre-occupied with comparing ourselves to other/s and find it difficult to focus on anything else. The beliefs we form (about ourselves and others!) as a result of comparisons might become stuck, unhelpful or critical; or we might resort to unhealthy ways to try to change ourselves!



## Key messages

- Comparing ourselves to others is a natural human behavior evolved to help us live as a cohesive group, to learn from one another, and keep us from falling too far behind our potential. How we evaluate ourselves compared to others will change at different time points and contexts, especially during times of stress or competition.
- We tend to compare ourselves with people who are better than us in some way even when it affects how we feel about ourselves.
- While comparing ourselves to others can be beneficial it is when we start comparing ourselves to others too much that we run into problems. It is important for young people to be mindful of how much they are comparing themselves to others, and help them to be aware that everyone has completely different life experiences and luck.



## Key messages

- We each have our own psychological biases that inform how vulnerable (or resilient!) we might be when we compare ourselves to others.
- It's important to provide opportunities for students to help and teach each other. In this way they get to balance negative comparisons with others through seeing how we can learn from others, and from getting to know the people they are comparing with 'close up'.
- Using compassion-focused techniques can help circuit break overly critical interpretations of self or others.
- Self-comparison, setting personal goals and being aware of your progress is much better for your wellbeing than constant comparisons with others.

### Open-ended questions for students

**What are the things that make you uniquely you?**

**When does comparison with others feel ok for you?**



## Activities

- Activities that involve noticing similarities and differences between students, and between different groups, including values, interests, preferences and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses are beneficial in developing healthy peer comparisons.
- Help students to identify their own strengths and uniqueness and how they can use their strengths to progress towards their goals.
- Activities wherein students work collaboratively and get to see how others have their own strengths and weaknesses helps to develop healthy peer comparisons.

### Reflection questions for teachers

**Am I modelling healthy social comparing?**

**Am I encouraging students to be themselves in how I speak and act?**



## For Parents

All humans notice other people and we all make comparisons to others in some way or other. Over our evolution, this has been important for humans to increase the odds of survival: borrowing a good idea from your neighbour could have kept you and your offspring alive longer! Noticing how you are seen by others helped prevent our ancestors from being rejected and left alone from our groups, making us less vulnerable to the dangers around us.

Nowadays, our brain continues to use this ancient skill of looking to others and using what we observe as feedback on how we are going. However, because we are now highly evolved social beings, the process can get us in trouble in several ways. For example, we might become pre-occupied with comparing ourselves to other/s and find it difficult to focus on anything else. The beliefs we form (about ourselves and others!) as a result of comparisons might become stuck, unhelpful or critical; or we might resort to unhealthy ways to try to change ourselves.

Below are some tips for parents to help their child avoid unhealthy comparison with others.

- When you compare your child to others, it teaches them to look outward for their value.
- Help your child to build a growth mindset (see explanation elsewhere). With a growth mindset your child will look to be better than yesterday rather than better than another person.
- Help your child reflect on how they have improved, and to track their progress helps them to develop internal (rather than external) comparison.
- Consider what you are role modeling to your child. Are you comparing yourself to others, making comments about how you wish you were something other than you are? The best way to a fulfilling life is to appreciate what you have rather than focus on what you're lacking. Model this perspective to your child to help them feel the same.
- Periodically reflect on the things you are grateful for so you stay in the frame of mind of counting your blessings rather than what you lack. This also helps you to stay focused on your own life and not the lives of others. Modelling this will have a positive effect on your child.
- Encourage your child to "be themselves!" by acknowledging all the unique qualities that make them who they are.

# Self-compassion



## What is it?

Compassion involves acknowledging that pain and distress are inherent to being human, recognising these feelings and responding with kindness and wanting to soften or reduce the pain. Self-compassion is compassion turned inward; the ability to hold one's feelings of suffering with a sense of warmth, connection, and concern. That is, to accept our imperfections without falling into despair [24].

Self-compassion works as a protective factor for children and teenagers experiencing stress. Self-compassionate individuals understand that their weaknesses and failings do not have to define them, and that their self-worth is not dependent on evaluations and outcomes [19].

There are three components of self-compassion: Self-kindness, Common humanity and Mindfulness. This [video](#) explains these three components.

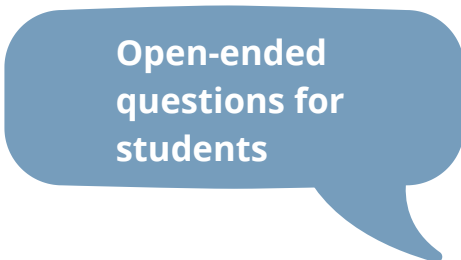
The creative process enables the development of suitable personal skills and resources associated with self-compassion, providing multiple opportunities for practicing expressing and becoming comfortable with self-compassion [25].

Given the extensive history of trauma, disconnection, and grief that has been experienced by Indigenous Australians, and the prominent experience of "shame", self-compassion appears to be an important avenue to boost SEWB in Aboriginal young people.



## Key messages

- Imperfection is a shared aspect of the human experience.
- Suffering, failure and disappointment are things we all go through.
- You don't need to be hard on yourself to improve.
- Compassion is the opposite to criticism.



## Open-ended questions for students

Why do you think people are more compassionate to other people than to themselves?

What have you said to yourself in the past when you have made a mistake?

What does it feel like to be kind to yourself?

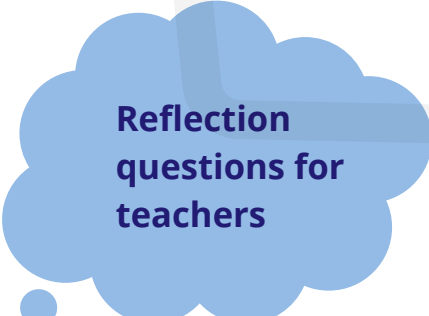
How can you balance being critical with also being compassionate during times of struggle, such as when you've felt rejected or disappointed?



## Activities

- Bring to mind someone you care about. Now, imagine a situation where that person feels like they completely messed up a performance and is upset about it. What are some compassionate things you could say or do for them? Next, imagine the person who is upset is you. What would it be like to do those same compassionate acts for yourself?
- Work in small groups. Divide a piece of paper in two, and in one section write the heading **critical voice** and on the other write **kind coach**. Each group comes up with a different imagined scenario which is about someone going through a time of struggle, perceived failure or mistake. Brainstorm all sorts of thoughts that person might experience, and list them under which column fits best. Next, as a group, come up with some ways of how the person could begin to pay more attention to the **kind coach** and turn down the volume on the **critical voice** statements?

Link [here](#) to self-compassion exercises.



## Reflection questions for teachers

Discuss with students how this practice may be helpful or unhelpful in their lives. Revisit and discuss whether students have used this practice.

Reflect on your own use of self-compassion...make a note of your response when something doesn't turn out as planned in your life.

## Supports

Young people may struggle to engage with compassion themes when emotionally activated. Returning to a state of regulation or calmness before overtly using compassion activities may help.





## For Parents

Self-compassion is the same experience as compassion for others. It comes from Latin, 'to suffer with.' It's different from self-pity, where you think, 'My experience is worse or abnormal.' Self-compassion recognises 'This is the human experience' [24].

For parents, self-compassion supports their own mental health and wellbeing. It helps them feel less stressed and anxious so they are better able to give their child what they need to grow and develop well.

- A recent study found that parents who reported less self-blame - and were less self-critical of their own parenting - had adolescents with fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression [26].
- If parents are kind to themselves, their children are likely to be kind to themselves too.
- The human brain empathically resonates with others' emotions. Parents and children are especially in tune and communicate emotions without even saying a word. Parents can reverse the feedback loop of heightened emotions by calming themselves through self-compassion exercises.
- Practicing self-kindness is a helpful way of counteracting self-criticism, and how we can encourage ourselves in the same way we would a friend in the same situation.

Three steps in using self-compassion for parents ([raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au)):

- 1 Model your own self-compassion out loud.
- 2 Provide children with reinforcement and affirmation not based on achievement.
- 3 Help teach them when and how to practice self-compassion.

Here are some conversation starters you can use to help your child be more self-compassionate:

How does what you would say to your friend differ to what you say to yourself in that situation?

What would you say to a friend in that same situation?





# Social understanding

## Listening to Others

2

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### What is it?

Active Listening, allows us to hear not only the words people are saying but also the emotions they are reflecting through their nonverbal behaviour. Both are important in understanding the whole message being communicated. Remaining neutral is an important part of active listening. Other important aspects of active listening includes reflecting back to the listener what you have heard to confirm you have heard correctly and using nonverbal cues to show you are listening.



### Key messages

- Active listening is the foundation for any successful conversation.
- You can give verbal and non-verbal feedback to show you are listening.
- Active listening helps earn others trust and to understand their situations.
- Being an active listener means the conversation is more about the other person than you.

**Open-ended questions for students**

**When someone else is talking, are you listening to them or are you thinking about how you will respond or your own similar experiences?**



## Activities

A variety of arts related activities can be used where students are encouraged to listen to the thoughts and experiences of another person and reflect on their own listening skills e.g., interviewing an actor about how they take on particular roles etc.

- Tell another person about a recent experience you had. Ask a third person to watch and notate the listening cues the listener was showing. Swap around roles.

Back-to-back listening task:

- Sit back-to-back with a partner. A third person is the questioner.
- Each person spends two minutes talking about an experience they had. The second person listens without interruption. The questioner then asks the listener five questions about the story they heard.
- Swap roles.
- Discuss how it felt to talk uninterrupted. How did it feel not being able to interrupt? How difficult was it to remember what was said? How did sitting back-to-back limit the normal cues you rely on when listening to someone's story?

Model good active listening skills when listening to students.

### Reflection questions for teachers

**How well do I listen to students without judgement or feeling the need to come up with a solution?**

**How comfortable do I feel as a listener?**

**Do I always need to come up with a solution or are students' content with having their story heard?**

## Supports

Students often find it difficult to listen to other perspectives when there is conflict. When involved in conflict resolution, ask each student to tell their side of the story in chronological order while the other listens without interruption. The other student then tells the story from their perspective without interruption. Have students consider the similarities and differences between stories. If students have actively listened the conflict is often resolved without further action/s.





## For Parents

Active listening has been considered the single most important skill a parent can have. It is however very hard as a busy parent to focus your full attention on your child at all times. Active listening is a specific form of communication that lets another person know that you are “with them,” aware of what they are saying, accepting of their perspective, and appreciative of their situation. Active listening involves no judgment or evaluation of what the speaker is saying. This doesn’t mean you necessarily have to agree with your child but rather accept the way they feel and respect their view point.

Active Listening allows us to hear not only the words people are saying but also the emotions they are reflecting through their nonverbal behaviour. Both are important in understanding the whole message being communicated. Remaining neutral is an important part of active listening.

Other important aspects of active listening include reflecting back to the listener what you have heard to confirm you have heard correctly and using nonverbal cues to show you are listening.

Children will often be more open with telling their stories if they feel they’re not going to be judged or lectured. Practice listening without providing a solution. If the conversation stops, ask how the situation made them feel or if they feel they need a resolution. Assist with problem solving only if asked.

- Active listening improves communication and builds positive relationships with pre-teens and teenagers.
- Active listening starts with giving your child your full attention.
- It involves letting your child talk, showing you’re interested, and summarising your child’s words and feelings.

# Social understanding

## Perspective taking & empathy



### What is it?

The development of perspective taking is a key factor in the development of social behaviour, as well as psychological wellbeing. Perspective taking is a protective factor with adolescents high in perspective taking have higher self-esteem [27], as well as higher levels of gratitude and lower levels of envy [28]. They also tend to exhibit higher levels of trust and reciprocity in group cooperation tasks [29].

Perspective taking has also been found to be protective in risk taking, due to perspective taking being linked to compassionate concern. Also, adolescents proficient in perspective taking are more able to skillfully navigate conflict situations using problem-solving approaches.

Perspective taking is the cognitive aspect of empathy.

There are three types of empathy (informed by work of Ekman & Goleman) [30].

- **Cognitive:** The ability to see the world through the eyes of others, to recognize perspectives and experiences in others that might be different to your own. Sometimes described as “perspective taking”.
- **Emotional:** The feelings and sensations we experience in response to emotions in others, including vicarious stress and mirroring the states of others.
- **Compassionate:** An ability to recognise and share in the feelings of others, with an accompanying urge to take action to help. Compassionate empathy uses emotional intelligence to apply helpful boundaries, so the other person’s emotions are not unhelpfully mirrored or adopted.

Emotional empathy isn’t enough on its own. To respond to the needs of others we also need cognitive empathy, or perspective taking.

In brain scan studies, individuals who score high in cognitive empathy tend to experience less stress reactivity when they witness distress in others. And they are actually better at responding in helpful ways [31].



## Key messages

- Emotional development is important in empathy development. **Emotional regulation** allows a child to face negative emotions of others in a healthy way. Therefore students need to have strategies to regulate negative emotions.
- The ability to read faces well is an important part of developing empathy. Listening skills are vital for developing empathy; listening firstly to their own feelings and thoughts and then those of others.
- On-going practice in imagining/perceiving another's perspective is required. Repeated practice at taking another's perspective is more effective than one-shot or infrequent efforts to do so.
- Empathy training research shows that when teachers model desired values, children are more likely to adopt these than when they are merely instructed to behave in a certain way.



## Activities

Role playing various scenarios.

Students can be encouraged to think critically, as a group, about the multiple perspectives that exist within and around a work of art. They can be encouraged to step into the shoes of the artist or a figure represented in a work of art—and to consider the different experiences and viewpoints they discover in the process.

Use Theory of Mind tasks (Sally Ann; Smarties task) to demonstrate perspective. What are the people in the room thinking? What does the person leaving the room think? What does the person who stays in the room think? How can this task be related to a conflict situation between students or parents and their child? Create a humorous play based on faulty beliefs.

Activities that explore commonalities between people are a good starting point for encouraging empathy. Likewise are activities where young people are actively imagining situations involving others.

## Supports

Students may need support when feeling the emotions of others. Help them develop strategies to cope with strong emotions and turn these emotions into actions to help.





## For Parents

Brain scans suggest a teenage brain has to work much harder when thinking about the perspective of others, compared with adults. And a brain region that helps with perspective taking, the medial prefrontal cortex, continues to develop through adolescence. However, parents can still play an influential role in helping their adolescent with perspective taking.

Perspective taking is really important. It helps teens to regulate their emotions, improve their listening skills and strengthen their ability to tolerate conflict. Perspective taking can also help young people work through disagreements with their parents more constructively. It can also help young people to realize that people and situations can change, which allows them to face social challenges more easily.

Parents can help their kids strengthen perspective taking by talking with them about the importance of looking at both sides of the story. When learning to empathise, young people's natural reaction is to shrink away when they begin to feel someone else's pain – it's a natural, self-protective reaction. Parents can help their child to move past this experience and be a compassionate helper. That is, they can turn their emotions into actions to help other people.

In order for young people to develop skills of empathy its important they are given the opportunity to make mistakes. That way they learn how to support others in need.



# Social understanding

## Working in groups

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### What is it?

Working effectively in groups can require different skills compared to thriving as an individual.

Personal characteristics can inform both the roles an individual tends to adopt in a group context (e.g., initiator, observer, dominator, scapegoat, etc.) and the group roles an individual might struggle or excel in. Relational dynamics are also important, including identifying helpful and unhelpful alliances between group members.

There are numerous theories that focus on group processes, including how to form effective groups and how to influence group productivity and longevity. One of these is Belbin's role theory. This outlines how people tend to like to take on particular roles when they are working in a group. These include: the action roles – helping the group move towards their goals and complete tasks by keeping focused on what needs to be done; the Social Roles – helping group members get on, making sure all people have a say and helping with conflict resolution, and; the Thinking Roles – generating ideas and problem solving [24]. While people may generally have a role they feel more comfortable in, they naturally move in and out of the other roles. More traditional group roles are: the Facilitator – leads discussion and makes sure every voice is heard; the Summariser – clarifies what has been said and checks for understanding; the Recorder – records group ideas and progress; Presenter – presents group ideas to others.

When embarking on group work, like stories, it can be helpful to be aware of groups as having beginnings, middles and endings.

### Stages of Group Formation [32]

- **Forming:** Getting to know each other and looking for leadership and direction.
- **Storming:** A time of challenging boundaries and pushing against established norms, conflict can arise as group members seek to clarify and challenge both roles and preferred ways of working.
- **Norming:** Group roles, preferences and processes (both helpful and unhelpful) feel established and clear. The group can share a goal and work productively towards constructive outcomes, including making help-seeking and feedback gestures.

- **Performing:** A phase of efficiency and performance that is aligned with full group potential. The group accepts and embraces diversity in group members. Group members might flow between different group roles to assist performance of the group as a whole.
- **Adjourning** – whether naturally due to an end of term or project, or for other reasons, a phase where the group is dissolved. Sometimes called ‘mourning’, with group members often displaying different adjourning behaviours (such as struggling with loss of routine or social contact, avoiding or encouraging ongoing relationships with previous group members etc).



## Key messages

- Diversity is key to the functioning and thriving of creative groups.
- The capability of a group is different to the sum of the individual skills/capabilities.
- Group reflection on how well they are working as a group or team is important.
- Potentials and outcomes of group collaborations will be informed by stage of group formation and the balance of roles that individuals adopt within the group.
- Helping students understand the roles they naturally take can expand their self-awareness. Encouraging them to try out different roles will help them develop social understanding and also expand their own SEWB skills.



## Activities

Use Belbin's model to identify the role students play in groups: thinkers, action and social roles. Do you take on different roles in different groups? Help students to see what roles they are more suited to and give them opportunities to try different roles.

- Discuss - How does it feel to take on a different role, which role feels most comfortable, how does it feel not to be able to take your normal role?
- Discuss roles done effectively and ineffectively.
- Discuss skills that all group members need to work well as a group. This might include listening, conflict resolution etc.

Groups can brainstorm how to do these skills well. Reflect on how the group is working by using their own checklist of what's needed to work well as a group or a checklist such as Are We a Team Checklist [33].







## For Parents

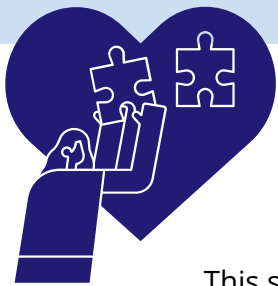
Families in many ways are teams. By making this clear to your child, giving them a voice and clarifying the roles you all can play you help them to build their teamwork or group work skills.

Family meetings can help to build on the idea that you are working as a collaborative group. Make sure the family group is focused on good communication including good listening skills and perspective taking skills. These skills form the basis of good groups and therefore can be promoted in your family group and transferred to other groups.

- Discuss as a family group what roles each likes to take on. Common family roles include: the rescuer - the person that takes care of other people's needs and emotions; the mediator - the person who tries to keep the peace; the scapegoat or blacksheep - the person who needs the most help; the switchboard - the person who is the centre of family information; the nurturer - the person who provides emotional support; the clown - the person who diffuses situations with humour. There may be other roles that you can identify in your family.

Reflect on what role you prefer to take in the family group? Other family members? How does this create harmony or conflict?


- Consider the different groups your child belongs to. Did they choose this group or did you? Are they comfortable in this group or do they report conflict? Does the group match the roles they have at home or are they different?



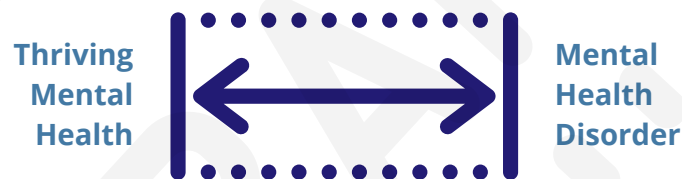
# Mental Health

This section investigates the concept of mental health – what it is and what it isn't. It also provides some strategies for educators to deal with mental health issues that may occur in the arts room.

## What is mental health?

In this section we will consider the total construct of mental health. As presented in the website  SEWB can be viewed as a component of mental health and forms an important part of mental health promotion.

Definitions suggest mental health as a dimensional construct. Mental health does not seem to be all or nothing (ie., you either have mental health or you don't). Rather, mental health is better viewed as a continuum. In this way, mental health could be viewed as:



The Australian Government's National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy suggests a similar continuum:



Such a continuum recognises that there are time points along the entire length of dimension for intervention opportunities to promote well-being and improve mental health outcomes. The principles of preventative and early intervention, both evidence-based pillars of mental health, are reflected in this approach. This resource aims to support opportunities for mental health promotion through a focus on developing SEWB.

## What is not mental health?

It is important to be specific in conceptualising mental health, and it can be helpful to identify concepts that are part of the current well-being lexicon but are not 'mental health'. These concepts might indeed impact on an individual's mental health but are not fundamentally what we understand an individual's mental health to be.

## Normative adjustment and distress

A young person's capacity for resilience when coping with stressors matures alongside their own developmental trajectory. It is important to take a developmental perspective on how we are interpreting a young person's behaviour, thoughts and emotionality.

Young people, and indeed all of us, are constantly adjusting to stressors. For example, we adjust to the stress of extreme temperature, access to natural light, hunger, sleep deprivation, changes to routine... the list goes on and that is before we consider social-emotional factors such as identity, relationships and assessment/evaluation pressure.

It is important that we remember that it is expected and often developmentally appropriate for young people to grapple with adjusting to stressors. It is normal that such grappling might bring with it a degree of psychological distress and changes to functioning, such as: regression or surge in gestures of independence; urges to avoid, quit or withdraw; intense or unexpected expression of emotions including (but not limited to!) sadness, anger and poor tolerance for frustration; and changes to behaviour that someone might "not seem like their usual self".

Mental health experts are specially trained to recognise individual differences in the threshold between normative adjustment distress and mental health difficulties.

## Disability

Definitions of disability vary, due to such factors as policy and legal jurisdiction. For example, the WHO conceptualise disability as resulting "from the interaction between individuals with a health condition, with personal and environmental factors including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support".

In this way, the Social Model of Disability can also help with clarifying disability as a concept.

## Neurodivergence

Refers to "variations between human minds occurring naturally within a population, and includes conditions such as autism, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyspraxia, dyslexia and dyscalculia" [32].

Taken together with definitions of mental health and disability, we can see that there might be an intersection with such concepts as neurodivergence. However, we can also understand that neurodivergence and disability are not mental health conditions, and are in fact separate constructs. There is though a higher rate of mental health problems associated with neurodivergence.

## Mental Health & Young People in Australia

Links for more information about understanding mental health and young people in Australia:

- [Young Minds Matter Survey](#) (Telethon Kids Institute)
- [Commonwealth Govt's Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#)
- [National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#)

Some recommended expert and peak organisations for specialised youth mental health support and education in Australia:

- [Headspace](#) (information for young people and also adults, including parents and adults)
- [Beyond Blue](#)
- [Butterfly Foundation](#)
- [Kids Helpline](#)
- [Minus 18](#)



## Support for Teaching Artists

### Fit your own oxygen mask first

The most helpful thing an adult can do, when they are aiming to support the wellbeing of others, is to cultivate their own self-care.

Here are some helpful links for educators in relation to self-care.

### Coping when tricky stuff happens in the arts class

#### Young person displays highly distressed or dysregulated behaviour:

It is encouraged that organisations have a clear policy that supports their teaching artists should a young person display inappropriate and/or unsafe behaviour during class. This could be an individualised organisational response or the [ALGEE mental health first aid response](#).

Consider the immediate safety of the group and the individual and recruit in additional support if required (i.e., call for organisational help). [De-escalation principles](#) are a helpful first response.

Communicate appropriately with organisation administrators and young person's caregivers (don't keep it a secret that something has happened).

Be prepared by completing Mental Health First Aid and De-escalation training  
Be aware of any already existing behavioural management or support plans that your students might have. Some students might have existing plans that are integrated with school, at home or other contexts.

#### You suspect bullying:

It is encouraged that organisations have a clear policy that supports their teaching artists should a young person disclose bullying or if the educator has reasonable suspicion that a child is being bullied. Bullying is different to 'one-off' acts of aggressive behaviour and is a repeated act by an individual or group that target a person who finds it hard to stop it from happening. Bullying can be verbal, physical or social or happen online (cyberbullying).

Children often do not seek out support but struggle to deal with bullying situations by themselves. If they do ask for help it's important to Listen, Acknowledge that bullying is wrong, Talk about options and End with encouragement (the LATE strategy).

It is important to also let their parents know about the bullying with the child/young person's permission to maintain trust, unless you feel they are at risk of harm.

For support on strategies to address bullying in your classroom or advice to give young people go to:

[www.friendlyschools.com.au](http://www.friendlyschools.com.au)

<https://bullyingnoway.gov.au/>

<https://kidshelpline.com.au/teens/issues/bullying>

### You suspect abuse:

It is encouraged that organisations have a clear policy that supports their teaching artists should a young person disclose abuse or if the educator has reasonable suspicion that a child is at risk.

Outside of that, helpful WA links to help familiarise yourself with recognising abuse and neglect, and responding to a child disclosing abuse are:



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