

# 2

## MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLBEING AND PLAY



2 hours



Flipchart, markers, pens, toy bricks (optional), Classroom Wellbeing Portfolios, Handout 3: MHPSS Intervention Pyramid, Handout 4: Learning to Cope Through Play, Handout 5: Characteristics of Playful Experiences



By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- Define mental health and psychosocial support
- Explain the different levels of support and response
- Describe the relationship between play and mental health and psychosocial wellbeing
- Identify strategies that can be used in the classroom.



## Introduction



15–20 minutes



Flipchart, paper, markers and pens, toy bricks (optional)



Whole group

- ➔ Display the learning objectives for the session. Invite a participant to read them.
- ➔ Ask participants to think about a time at school or in a learning environment when they felt supported by a teacher. Ask them how that individual supported them.
  - What action did the teacher take?
  - How was the experience supportive?
  - How did it affect them?
- ➔ Give participants the option to draw the supportive experience or build it using toy bricks.
- ➔ Invite participants to share their supportive experience.

- ➔ Write the key themes (i.e., the qualities and behaviour of the teacher) arising from the participants' examples on a flipchart.
  - *Examples:* non-judgmental, empathic, supportive, encouraging, created a safe space, trustworthy, genuine, etc.

- ➔ Using the key themes that have arisen, reflect on the participants' shared experiences and discuss the important role that teachers play in supporting students' psychosocial wellbeing.

Say, for example:

*"Teachers not only influence students' learning but also their social, emotional and cognitive development. Teachers can play an important role in supporting children (e.g., those with mental health and psychosocial needs, including children with developmental disabilities or with protection vulnerabilities)."*



## Background / Theoretical Explanation



15–20 minutes



Flipchart, paper, markers



Facilitator explanation

- ➔ Guide the participants through the Wellbeing Flower exercise adapted from the IFRC Well-being Guide.<sup>2</sup>
  - Ask participants to map their own wellbeing resources by drawing a flower with seven large petals.
  - Then ask them to colour each petal with a colour(s) of their choice and to label each petal (provide them with definitions):
    - **Material:** satisfaction with a range of economic concerns
    - **Social:** the ability to communicate with others and build meaningful relationships in which one can freely be oneself
    - **Spiritual:** a connection with spirituality and/or religion
    - **Cultural:** the ability to pursue one's own interests and celebrate others' experiences, beliefs, traditions and values
    - **Mental:** how we think and feel about ourselves, and how these thoughts influence our behaviour
    - **Emotional:** the ability to have positive emotions, moods, thoughts and feelings, and adapt when confronted with adversity
    - **Biological:** the physical health of one's body.

- Each petal represents one domain of personal wellbeing. Together they represent the aspects of life where we need to feel healthy and content.
- Ask participants to reflect and write down under each of the seven areas examples of things, people or activities that give them a sense of feeling healthy and good. This is their own wellbeing flower.

- ➔ Explain that in this session they will learn about the term mental health and psychosocial support and the role of teachers in promoting and protecting the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of students. Read the following definitions out loud.



The definitions can be sent as a PDF.

- **Psychosocial wellbeing** describes the positive state of being in which a person thrives. In children and adolescents, it results from the interplay of physical, psychological, cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual aspects that influence a child or adolescent's ability to grow, learn, socialize and develop to their full potential.
- **Mental health and psychosocial support** (MHPSS) is a composite term used to describe any type of local or external support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial wellbeing and/or prevent or treat mental disorders.
- **Mental disorders** are characterized by a clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotional regulation or behaviour.

<sup>2</sup> The Well-being Guide: Reduce stress, recharge and build inner resilience. 2022. Copenhagen: IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support.



- ➔ Explain that the wellbeing flower represents the “petals” of psychosocial (psychological and social) wellbeing.
- ➔ Explain that teachers play a very important role in promoting and protecting the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of students and highlight the key themes arising from the first exercise (in the introduction) showing the relationship between supportive, encouraging, etc. teachers and how those characteristics promote and protect wellbeing.





Say, for example:

*“How teachers engage with students and the learning environments they create can have an impact on the psychosocial wellbeing of students. When teachers use basic helping skills, such as empathy, encouragement and non-judgmental language, it can support students to feel safe and nurtured at school. Also, when teachers focus not only on academic subjects but also on the development of social, emotional and cognitive skills, students’ wellbeing can be promoted by teaching valuable life skills and supporting them to cope with difficult situations.”*

- ➔ You might need to dispel any misconceptions that mental health and psychosocial support can only be provided by medical or mental health professionals. Explain that teachers can provide psychosocial support by interacting with students in ways that are empathic, creating a safe and supportive environment in which students can express their emotions and experiences, and by including specific structured and playful psychosocial activities in the teaching/learning process. It’s important to note that when mental health and psychosocial wellbeing is integrated into the

learning environment, it doesn’t change the role of mental health professionals (school counsellors/psychologists) but strengthens the link to focused care and specialized services. Teachers should never be expected to take on the role of trained mental health staff.

### Key Points

-  Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) approaches and interventions in education services for children in conflict situations can be imperative to overcome the effects of adversities and loss of learning opportunities that we know are all too common.
-  Learning spaces can provide a protective environment that helps to restore a sense of normality and promotes healing and recovery, especially for children living otherwise disrupted lives.
-  Teachers can provide psychosocial support by interacting with students in ways that are empathic, creating a safe and supportive environment in which students can express their emotions and experiences, and by including specific structured psychosocial activities in the teaching/learning process.
-  Teachers do not replace the role of mental health professionals and are not in a position to provide focused or specialized care. Rather, they can promote mental health and psychosocial wellbeing and serve as an entry point when specialized care is needed.



## Practice: promoting and protecting mental health and wellbeing



30–45 minutes



Flipchart, markers, pens and Handout 3: MHPSS Intervention Pyramid



Whole group

- ➔ Explain that in this activity, participants will brainstorm strategies used in a learning environment to promote mental health and psychosocial wellbeing.
- ➔ Split participants into groups of three or four (depending on the number of people in the training) and assign one of the following six topics to each group. Explain that they are all important to a child's sense of wellbeing and that by taking part in engaging activities in a safe environment, students can internalize and use them in their daily lives. The topics are:
  - a sense of belonging: feeling accepted, valued and included by others
  - social connectedness: feeling close and connected to others

- feeling valued: feeling respected, appreciated and important
- positive coping: having the skills to manage and reduce stress in one's life
- self-confidence: feeling worthwhile, believing in oneself and knowing what you do well
- a sense of agency: belief in one's ability to act independently and exercise choice.



Divide participants into virtual breakout room groups for the brainstorm. If possible, provide each group with a virtual board to co-create their list.

- ➔ Ask each group to come up with one or two strategies used in learning environments to promote mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. If participants can't think of strategies used currently, they can come up with examples that could be integrated into learning environments (see table on page 33).<sup>3</sup>
- ➔ Ask participants to think about how these strategies might be different or adapted for girls and boys or children from different language or cultural groups, and those with disabilities. Allow five minutes for each group to identify the strategies, write them on a flip chart, and then share the ideas in plenary.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from the Save the Children Teacher Professional Development Psychosocial Support and Social and Emotional Learning module.



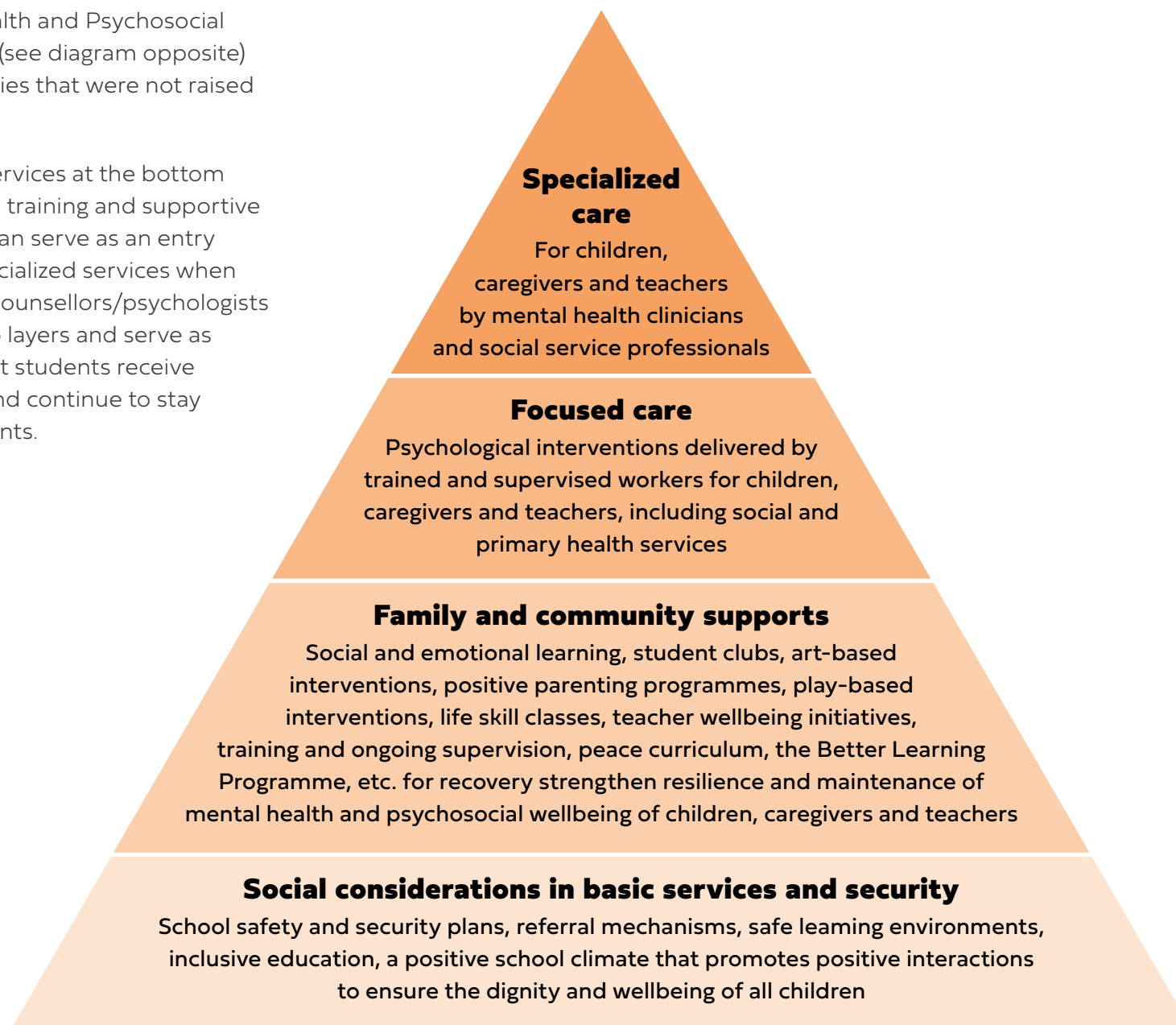
## Examples of strategies used in learning environments to promote mental health and psychosocial wellbeing

<b>A sense of belonging</b>	Engaging students in decision making, e.g., decisions about the layout of the classroom or helping to plan a holiday party
	Engaging students in developing safe school plans
<b>Social connectedness</b>	Play-based learning activities focused on social development
	Student clubs or art-based activities
<b>Feeling valued</b>	Making each student head of the class and take on classroom responsibilities for a week
	Providing positive feedback when students go out of their way to support other students, focusing on their unique value when providing feedback (We give grades for academic achievements, but teachers can also give praise for being helpful, kind, etc.)
<b>Positive coping</b>	Social emotional learning activities
	Developing self-care plans with students (e.g., what they do to take care of themselves during difficult times)
<b>Self-confidence</b>	Play-based learning activities focused on building self-confidence
	Teaching life skills focused on building self-confidence
<b>A sense of agency<sup>4</sup></b>	Asking questions that give children the opportunity to initiate and lead their own learning
	Providing flexible and unhurried routines that allow children to make choices about decisions that affect them

<sup>4</sup> Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority. Supporting Agency: Involving Children in Decision-making. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au>




- ➔ Review Handout 3: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Intervention Pyramid (see diagram opposite) and highlight any of the strategies that were not raised by the participants.
- ➔ Explain that teachers deliver services at the bottom two layers of the pyramid (with training and supportive supervision) and that schools can serve as an entry point for focused care and specialized services when needed. Highlight that school counsellors/psychologists provide services at the top two layers and serve as an important link to ensure that students receive access to care when needed and continue to stay engaged in learning environments.




Adapted from the IASC MHPSS Intervention Pyramid (2007) and UNICEF Community Based Operational Guidelines on MHPSS in Humanitarian Settings (2018).



## Practice: play and the promotion of mental health

 15–20 minutes

 Paper, markers, pens, Handout 4: Learning to Cope Through Play, Handout 5: Characteristics of Playful Experiences, P.O.W.E.R. game: “Paper Bird”

 Whole group

➔ Provide participants with Handout 4: Learning to Cope Through Play.

➔ Explain that **playful experiences** and interventions can be an effective way of addressing the psychosocial needs of children who have experienced or witnessed war, violence, displacement and/or other forms of adversity. Designing **culturally responsive play approaches in education environments to facilitate children’s learning and development** increases the chances of maintaining their health and psychosocial wellbeing when faced with adversity.

*“Playing helps children to recognize and express their emotions and develop positive relationships with peers and family members. It helps them to deal with anxiety and build their ability to concentrate and focus on what’s important to them. It helps them recover their sense of normality and their hope for a bright future.”*

Right to Play: Children’s Mental Health Matters  
[www.righttoplay.com](http://www.righttoplay.com)

➔ Explain that when children experience war and conflict, they might stop playing with their peers and siblings, or even playing by themselves. Instead, they may start pretending to be in a bomb shelter or coming up to a roadblock, or acting out explosions, incoming rockets or evacuations, or pretending to be soldiers or fighters. Teachers can support children by adding intentional play into the school curriculum and redirecting inappropriate play by providing alternative activities. This helps to refocus children’s energy on play that is more productive and positive.


 The definitions can be sent as a PDF.

➔ Play Paper Bird in the Right to Play P.O.W.E.R. games. This game teaches students to improve their self-care by making an animal that represents their self-care activities and supportive relationship.





- Invite each participant to think of an animal that makes them feel happy or hopeful, and to make it with art supplies or other materials.
- Invite participants to choose one part of the animal on which they can draw or write things they can do to take care of themselves. Then they can choose another part of the animal to draw or name people who support them.
- Participants can decorate their animals however they wish. As they play, encourage them to share any other ideas they have for doing the activity.





- ➔ Invite participants to share what they've done with their neighbour and briefly discuss how this playful activity promotes mental health and psychosocial wellbeing.
  -  Participants raise their virtual hand or type in the chat, depending on the platform being used.
- ➔ Explain that the five characteristics of play – **meaningful, joyful, socially interactive, actively engaging and iterative** – are important for creating a successful and engaging play experience.
- ➔ Give participants Handout 5: Characteristics of Playful Experiences and read the definitions out loud from your own copy of the handout. Discuss with them the importance of reengaging children in appropriate play (i.e., play that is not focused on war or conflict).
- ➔ Explain that the P.O.W.E.R. play-based learning activities will be taught throughout the training, and that they will have a toolbox of playful activities to utilize in the classroom.

### Key Points

-  Play provides a supportive context to help children cope with stress.
-  Play serves as a method to promote mental health and psychosocial wellbeing in learning environments.
-  Intentional play builds social and emotional skills and creates social cohesion among peers.
-  The Play Opportunities for Wellness and Education Resource (P.O.W.E.R.) is a collection of 100 gender-responsive play-based learning activities. The games are available as animated videos and PDFs in English, French and Arabic through the Right to Play website: [www.righttoplay.com](http://www.righttoplay.com)



## Conclusion



5–10 minutes



Markers and pens, Classroom Wellbeing Portfolios



Whole group review, individual drawing/writing

➔ Recap what you've learned (ask questions of the group or invite one or two participants to provide a recap):

- The role of the teacher in supporting students' social, emotional and cognitive development
- The link between play and mental health and psychosocial wellbeing.



Invite participants to take five minutes to add notes in their Classroom Wellbeing Portfolio.

- How will they promote psychosocial wellbeing in their classroom?
- How will they incorporate play into the learning environment?

