

CoLab FrameWorks report highlights misconception that mental health in babies and toddlers

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The West Australian

Thursday, 24 October 2019 6:23AM

A new report has highlighted big gaps in the Australian public's understanding of early childhood development, in particular a misconception that mental health in babies and toddlers is irrelevant or non-existent.

A perception that children's worlds are simple and worry-free, and that mental health and emotional development only start around the ages of five or six when they have adequate vocabulary, is among the key public misunderstandings about the first few years of life.

Experts say that young children are capable of deep and intense feelings of sadness, including depression, grief, anxiety and anger, in addition to joy and happiness.

This misunderstanding is described as a "deep challenge" in the report, *Cultivating Nature: Mapping the Gaps Between Expert and Public Understandings of Early Development in Australia*.

The FrameWorks Institute report was commissioned by CoLab (Collaborate for Kids), a partnership between the Telethon Kids Institute and the Minderoo Foundation.

It found some public perceptions to be "deeply unproductive", and found gaps which "must be addressed" to improve understanding of early childhood and build support for change.

"Taken together, many of these patterns in public thinking make it difficult for members of the public to fully grasp key aspects of early development," the report said. "They can block support of the kinds of policy solutions that experts recommend."

Misconceptions include the widely held assumption that foetal development is the responsibility of the pregnant woman alone, a perception that a child's life outcomes are fully determined by the age of seven, and a misunderstanding around the concept of child mental health.

"Our research shows that the public simply does not think about child mental health in deep or productive ways," the report said. "People struggle to even engage with the concept of mental health in early years, especially in infancy."

CoLab director Professor Donna Cross said the public assumed children lived in an idealised, fun world and the concept of mental health wasn't relevant until they were almost school age.

“If they’re not thinking about children’s mental health and emotional traits and stress until four or five it means parents might not be conscious of the kinds of environments their children could be in, in that area, that are affecting their overall development,” she said.

Professor Cross said the 13 partner organisations involved in the report had started implementing changes in their public messaging as a result of the findings.

“It’s no fault of parents, but they’ve become quite confused by the messaging we’ve had around brain development ... they know it’s important but they don’t know when, and what can be done to address it,” she said.

“This whole initiative is about helping parents feel better about the job of parenting.

“Parents are feeling defeated and deflated, or that they’re not doing all the things they should be doing.

“But they are doing wonderful things, they just need to be encouraged.”

Professor Cross said one of the most significant findings was that public messaging had almost 10 times greater impact if it focused on improving outcomes for children, as opposed to improving the quality of parenting. The report also highlighted the complicated role digital technologies play in early childhood.

Experts said when used in excess and without support, technology could be a threat to development, and deprive children from outside stimuli, social interactions and real-life play.

But when used collaboratively, with the active engagement of adults, technology could support early development in productive ways and develop critical thinking and problem solving.

The report recommended that public messaging avoid focusing exclusively on the dangers of screen time, as this would only stigmatise parents whose children use technology.

Instead, it recommended practical and specific advice. Other recommendations for public messaging included emphasising the potential for change and development throughout life, developing examples of how children are affected by experiences before they can speak, and defining child mental health as a positive state before describing challenges to it.

The research is part of a broader project to develop a comprehensive “core story” of early childhood development.