

**mieact**

mental health & well-being  
education & training providers



ACT Budget Submission 2020-21

## Mental Illness Education ACT Inc (MIEACT)

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## About Mental Illness Education ACT (MIEACT)

Mental Illness Education ACT (MIEACT) is the primary local mental health and well-being education provider for workplaces, community groups and secondary schools across the Canberra region and surrounding area.

Since 1993, MIEACT has delivered evidence-informed programs, partnered with lived experience stories that increase mental health literacy, promote early intervention, reduce stigma and emphasise recovery.

What makes MIEACT unique is that we bring small audiences into direct positive contact with Volunteer Educators who share their stories of living with a mental illness. Such face-to-face contact is a proven, powerful stigma reduction model, importantly guided by a safe and non-triggering [DoNOHarm Framework](#) © for both story-teller and viewer. This is further partnered with evidence-informed educational content mapped to The Australian Curriculum.

In addition to our overarching mental health workshops, our programs cover topics including stress, body image, PTSD, bullying prevention, communicating and hearing stories safely, and we ensure participants leave not only with an increased knowledge of mental health, but practical tools to manage, support and practice positive help seeking behaviours.

## Recommendation: Expand MIEACT universal mental health education programs to reach primary school age students.

### Background

The current state of youth mental health in the ACT is at a crisis point for our community. It is estimated that almost half (45%) of Australians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime (ABS, 2009).

Stated in *Mission Australia's Can we talk? Seven year youth mental health report (2019)* there has been an increase in the proportion of young people experiencing psychological distress over the past seven years: rising from 18.7% in 2012 to 24.2% in 2018. The proportion of young people with psychological distress was over 20.0% for each age group in 2018 (15-19 years). Further to this the report states that more needs to be done to prevent and intervene early for young people, in need, to promote positive mental health, and to combat mental ill-health. Many of the risk and protective factors for mental health issues have their origins in early and middle childhood, including the development of adaptive coping and problem-solving skills, and exposure to supportive, caring parenting.

Investing in promotion and prevention of youth mental health has never been more crucial. This was strongly highlighted in the *How Australia can invest in children and return more (2019)* report with the annual cost of late interventions in mental health across Australia being \$1.3bn. Youth mental health hospitalisations have increased by 25% from 2008-09 to 2014-15 and have increased sharply since then. The recommendations in the report include equipping all children so they can thrive through a happy healthy and productive life, in particular, a commitment to evidence-based early intervention that supports children and builds capabilities they need to thrive.

Statistics for the ACT, taken from the *ACT Chief Health Officer's Report (2018)* highlights that mental illness is a leading cause of chronic disease in the ACT and alarmingly that 50% of self-harm hospitalisations in 2015-16 were young Canberrans aged 10-24 years. This report identified the lack of mental health promotion activities including stigma reduction, early intervention and referral pathways, particularly for vulnerable groups as a key issue. More needs to be done to reach young people in the ACT and earlier in their lives.

In partnership with the Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing and the Capital Health Network, MIEACT has led the 2019 ACT Children and Young Person Review. The early findings of this community consultation reinforced national research highlighting that 'stigma' is still the main obstacle for young people, under the age of 17 years, to accessing help and that 'coping with stress/anxiety' is the main issue young people in the ACT are facing. Investment in a universal strategy that targets the whole of our community in their

early stages of life is paramount. In line with the ACT Government's approach - the right care, right time, right place, MIEACT explored the needs and identifies the gap in primary school mental health education in the ACT.

Under the Australian Curriculum mental health and wellbeing outcomes are identified as teachable areas from year three onwards. There is, however, a gap in universal programs available for primary school age students in the ACT. Currently in the ACT only targeted programs are available for young men under the age of 12 years, there are no programs for young women or for those under 7 years of age with a mental health focus. Programs available include young men (10+ years) through Menslink with a focus on suicide prevention and developing values and self-awareness and the YWCA offers programs for young women on leadership (age 13-14) and relationships (ages 9-12). The introduction of universal mental health awareness programs commence at age 13 (secondary school) and decreases when young people enter university or the workforce. Otherwise, education departments, schools and classroom teachers are left to develop their own wellbeing programs reaching young people inconsistently across the ACT or find interstate programs that can travel to deliver locally at significant cost.

The *ACT Government Response (2019) to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into the social and economic benefits of improving mental health* acknowledges that universal strategies are required as part of a strategic approach to building mental health literacy and resilience in people, particularly the early stages of life. *BlackDog's Prevention of depression and anxiety in Australian schools report 2016*, outlined there are two important caveats to the support for targeted prevention programs. This is particularly important to consider where targeted programs are delivered in isolation.

- i. They can potentially fail to identify those who aren't symptomatic, and
- ii. They can result in stigmatisation due to students being taken out of class to do that program.

As outlined in the *Fifth National Mental Health Plan* early intervention through education programs can lead to: improved diagnosis and treatment, more timely and targeted referrals to specialist services, and improved confidence and engagement of primary care providers. As schools strive to develop an environment that is inclusive, supportive and safe for its learners they require programs that enrich the development of the whole child in all aspects of learning. The development of mental health and wellbeing is vital for the social, emotional, physical and academic growth of a child.

As a long term provider of mental health education programs in the ACT MIEACT is in the best position to expand our work with schools and young people to create healthy communities that foster resilience and wellbeing.

### **MIEACT's Primary School Mental Health and Wellbeing Program**

As a result of these findings MIEACT, with support from Hands Across Canberra, delivered a pilot Primary School Mental Health and Wellbeing Program with two ACT primary schools in 2019 targeting children aged 7-9 years. Expressions of interest of the program were received from 14 schools across Government, Catholic and Independent.

"As a large school with a diverse student population, we have certainly seen an increase in anxiety, self-harm and suicidal ideations with our older students over the last few years. I am excited to see an organisation that is finally developing programs with an educative intent for primary school aged children." - Government Primary School

MIEACT's Primary School Mental Health and Wellbeing Program is the first multi-touch and multifaceted approach to mental health literacy promotion and effective help seeking of its kind for a primary school audience. This program is a ground-breaking approach to encourage open conversations about mental health with young children. It aims to build a student's sense of belonging, an understanding of themselves and others and provide strategies for effective help seeking behaviours. This program is evidence-informed, co-designed by people with a lived experience of mental illness and education and programming experts and addresses coping with stress/anxiety and understanding bullying behaviours.

Outcomes measured 6-10 weeks after the program was delivered found that:

- 87% of students now know where to go for help,
- 55% discussed their worries with someone within 2 weeks of the session; and,
- 68% implemented practical strategies shown during the session.

Most importantly, because of the programs engagement and educative approach, child participants were able to articulate the key messages of the program, including:

- 87% were able to identify their own worry and concern emotions and the importance of seeking help; and,
- 92% were able to articulate how to identify bullying behaviours and that behaviours can be changed into positive behaviours.

These results in retained learning is just the beginning to improving mental health and wellbeing outcomes for ACT youth and building their supportive networks.

As leaders in mental health education across the ACT, MIEACT's Primary School Mental Health and Well-Being Program provides school leadership teams with all the essentials required to position their schools and the young people for whom they care to become mental health literate and offer practical strategies to self-care and develop resilience. Through this they will be enabled to be empowered to have an active voice in regards to their mental health and seek help early.

## **Conclusion**

MIEACT's recommendation to expand universal mental health education programs to primary school age students fosters all young people in the ACT during their early years, building their awareness of and strategies to manage a mental health issue, should they need to in the future.

We believe action in expanding prevention and promotion in the early stages of life is required now. This will compliment other initiatives of the ACT Government including MIEACT's current secondary school programs, *LifeSpan Integrated Suicide Prevention* and the *Youth Aware of Mental Health* for ACT Year 9 students to be rolled out in 2020.

By investing in children and building their resilience we have the best chance of allowing them to thrive, reducing the growing burden on hospital emergency departments over time and other crisis service requirements such as mental health care plans, specialised mental health services, hospital admissions, alcohol and drug-related hospital admissions and mental health related prescriptions.

The time to act is now.

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