

Elevating Prevention and Promotion in Early Childhood Mental Health: A Case Study Series

This case study is part of a series that describes evidence-based, innovative, and exemplary practices that support positive mental health for children. The case studies of five organizations highlight key elements of prevention and promotion efforts in early childhood mental health as well as the contextual factors that support implementation. Case study sites were selected from an environmental scan that identified innovative and exemplary practices and approaches to prevention and promotion in early childhood mental health.

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The Whole Child Approach at Boys and Girls Club of the Valley Integrating Social-Emotional Learning and Wellness Supports in After-School Programming to Promote Children’s Mental Health

What is this initiative?

[The Whole Child Approach \(WCA\) program](#) at the Boys and Girls Club of the Valley (BGCAZ) is a partnership initiative with [Terros Health](#), a behavioral health agency in Phoenix, Arizona. Funded by three Arizona-based private foundations, the WCA finished its pilot year in 2023. **The WCA aims to promote mental health by supporting children and youth through implementation of trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning (SEL) in all after-school club activities.**

While other Boys and Girls Clubs only collaborate with external agencies to support the mental health needs of their students, the WCA at the BGCAZ integrates prevention and promotion for mental health into the entire organizational culture. Wellness coaches from Terros Health and youth development professionals at Boys and Girls Club sites are trained in social, mental, and behavioral health. This allows them to incorporate wellness programs—such as art, recreational activities, emotional check-ins, and mindfulness—into all club activities. The Wellness Coaches create a safe and supportive environment where children can

Key terms

Promotion and prevention. Strategies and services to improve skills, support resilience, reduce risk factors, and establish supportive environments for healthy mental well-being.¹

Social-emotional learning (SEL). The process through which children and adults learn skills to support healthy interpersonal development and relationships.²

Trauma-informed approach. A practice approach that seeks to recognize and respond to the impact of trauma on children and adults by fostering safety and empowerment.³

Whole Child Approach (WCA). Programming to foster safe, challenged, engaged, supportive, and healthy environments where students can thrive.⁴

¹ Saxena, S., P.K. Maulik, and World Health Organization. "Prevention and Promotion in Mental Health." World Health Organization, 2002.

² National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. "Social Emotional Learning." American Institutes for Research, n.d.

³ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach." 2014. https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf.

⁴ Slade, S., and D. Griffith. "A Whole Child Approach to Student Success." *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy*, 2013, pp 21-35

develop healthy connections with peers and trusted adults, learn to manage their emotions, and strengthen their resilience to promote positive mental health. The training also equips staff with strategies to support their own mental health by encouraging self-care, meaningful connections with others, and emotional regulation skills.

Whom does the WCA serve?

The WCA was pilot tested in eight sites. The majority of these sites were located in low-income neighborhoods in Maricopa County. Within the next few years, the initiative's objective is to expand to all BGCAZ sites across the state.

The WCA serves all students ages 5 to 18, their families, and staff members at the clubs. It takes regional differences into consideration to ensure that its supports align with the unique preferences of each community it serves. For example, supports are tailored to respect the values of Tribal and Hispanic communities.

How does the WCA use prevention and promotion to support mental health in out-of-school settings?

The WCA provides comprehensive, ongoing, and developmentally appropriate training to BGCAZ's wellness coaches and youth development professionals. It focuses on trauma-informed approaches and SEL to support children's social, emotional, and behavioral health and well-being. The WCA's unique approach integrates mental health promotion into all the club's daily activities, including having wellness coaches help deliver the SEL curriculum and other wellness activities. By promoting mental health as part of the club's culture, the goal is for the skills learned in the clubs to be transferable to other settings—school, home, and the community.

- **Trauma-informed approach.** BGCAZ prioritizes programming that acknowledges the developmental impact of trauma, encourages healthy emotional identification, creates a safe (physically and psychologically) and supportive environment, and fosters positive relationships in all club activities. This programming helps lessen the negative impact of adversity and trauma on the mental health of children. For example, the BGCAZ trains all staff members in [Youth Mental Health First Aid](#), an evidence-based approach for responding to children and families in the immediate aftermath of a potentially traumatic event. The WCA also developed informational [handouts and resources](#) for families on topics covering [grief](#), [mental health supports](#), [suicide](#), and [trauma](#). By prioritizing trauma-

What is the WCA's approach?

Emotional and relational safety. A central priority of the WCA is to create a safe and supportive environment where all children feel comfortable expressing and navigating their emotions with peers and trusted adults. Helping children express, process, and cope with their emotions in healthy ways can prevent mental health difficulties.

Healthy peer connections. Through positive reinforcement and emotional validation, Wellness Coaches and Youth Development Professionals model positive relationships across age groups and foster healthy connections between children of different ages. Healthy peer connections are critical for promoting mental health during childhood because they help create social networks where children can thrive.

Community-oriented. The WCA connects children and families to needed resources. This includes hosting community events focused on topics related to child development, such as strategies to support the mental health of students who have experienced adversity. At these events, the program seeks informal feedback on how programs such as the WCA can continue meeting the evolving needs of children and families.

informed approaches, BGCAZ is helping build resilience by promoting mental health and supporting the wellness of students, families, and staff members.

- **SEL and wellness curricula.** The WCA infuses developmentally appropriate SEL activities into the arts and recreational curriculum offered to all students. Club staff, including front desk workers, wellness coaches, youth development professionals, and other supporting staff, engage in an emotional check-in routine as students transition through activities. These check-ins help students increase their emotional awareness and contribute to the creation of meaningful relationships with trusted adults. Staff members also incorporate strategies such as deep breathing, mindfulness and body connections, physical and cognitive soothing, and identifying emotions throughout the club’s daily activities.

Safe environments to foster meaningful relationships and family engagement

Integrating mental health into all club activities results in a sustainable strategy that promotes BGCAZ’s goal of establishing mental health promotion through meaningful and healthy relationships between children and staff members. Every adult at the club takes the time to get to know the children individually. Every day, staff members participate in their “warm welcome” routine, where they greet each child by name and have personal conversations with them. These routines sustain meaningful connections that allow children to feel safer about being vulnerable and expressing their emotions. The WCA also designates an adult to help each child with their emotions. If a child is emotionally distressed, a staff member will help them express what they are feeling.

Strong relationships are a key strategy to involve families in learning and talking about mental health concerns. The WCA call this their “open-door policy” which includes (1) sharing of resources, such as booklets and pamphlets, to inform families about mental health and (2) gathering ongoing feedback from families on what they need. This approach respects parents’ autonomy by meeting families where they are. BGCAZ also organizes a mental health day when students are offered strategies to help build their emotional regulation and identification skills. Fostering these skills boosts children’s self-confidence and problem-solving capacities and empowers them—and thus promotes positive mental health.

Integrated SEL for all



“[The SEL] activities get blended in with what was already ongoing at the club site ... and it’s for all [children and staff]. We’re doing it during each session.... No kids get separated out. It’s a universal thing.... We are a philosophy not a program, and that is what works.”

—WCA coordinator

Story of success: Fostering trusting relationships between staff and kids



“Every adult will learn every child’s name, and ... I don’t always see that. I don’t always see the adults that work with children really take the time to learn the kids.... Whoever is at the front is welcoming each kid by name, saying—Hey, how did this project go? or how was your soccer practice? It’s amazing to see them connect because this is the gateway to mental health.”

—BGCAZ parent

How does the WCA leverage resources to sustain the initiative?

The WCA combines government grants and private funding to operate its programs throughout the year without interruption. In 2023, BGCAZ was awarded a federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration grant, which supports several sites in a specific district. These funds cover salaries and benefits for Terros Health staff working in these clubs and contribute to BGCAZ salaries, benefits, travel expenses, program supplies, office supplies, and a grant management contract. Private donations cover trainings for the remaining clubs.



What is a barrier to WCA implementation?

Staff turnover has consistently been one of the primary challenges reported by BGCAZ. Through the WCA, BGCAZ wants to enhance supportive environments for all staff—which should decrease turnover rates over time. Less staff turnover creates stable and consistent learning environments, where meaningful relationships can develop, and positive mental health can flourish.

BGCAZ is also a 21st Century Community Learning Center partner with school districts. Through this partnership, students at the clubs can receive additional academic enrichment activities in safe spaces that also encourage physical activity and healthy habits. This partnership enhances the sustainability of the WCA by providing extra resources and opportunities for community connections to students and families.



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