

Meerilinga Podcast – Positive Childhoods

Season 2 Episode 2 with Dr Daniel Moss

Belynda Smith

Welcome everyone. Welcome to the Positive Childhoods Podcast. This podcast is recorded on the land of the Whadjuk Noongar people. I'd like to respectfully acknowledge their continuing connection to land, waters and community, and honour First Nations people, past and present in the spirit of reconciliation

Positive Childhoods is produced as part of the Children Week celebrations in WA and is funded by the Department of Education and Lotterywest.

I'd really like to appreciate those early childhood educators, parents, and others listening in today. We really do appreciate everything it took for you to tune into this podcast. We know how busy you are, and so taking this time out is a really powerful way to support the needs of the children you care for.

I'm Belynda Smith. I'm a parenting facilitator with Meerilinga Parenting Service and I'm passionate about meeting the needs of parents so we can help families to thrive.

Meerilinga is a not-for-profit organisation and a registered charity that promotes the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, working with children, their families, early childhood professionals, planners, and the community to raise the status of children in WA.

The 2022 Children Week theme is: "All children have the right to a standard of living that supports their well-being and healthy development" and that's our focus for this series

Now I'm really pleased to have a guest from Emerging Minds with us today, Daniel Moss. For over 20 years, Emerging Minds has been an organisation dedicated to advancing the mental health and emotional well-being of Australian infants, children, adolescents, and their families. And they're really now a leader in this space working lots of different organisations, developing mental health policy interventions, in person and online training, programs, and resources in response to the needs of professionals, children and their families.

And Doctor Dan Moss has been manager of workforce development and emerging minds for five years. He's had a really interesting career trajectory. Lots of things. Working for the Department of Child Protection, where he worked closely with Early Intervention Research Directorate to determine the social determinants of child disadvantage and child protection involvement.

Previously, he worked for United Communities for 15 years as a practitioner, supervisor, and senior manager in a range of services with children, families, and parents dealing with the effects of family violence, child sexual abuse, mental health conditions and drug and alcohol use.

Dan's PhD thesis included research on approaches to men's behaviour change programs, and interestingly, a creative writing component.

I loved hearing a little bit more about you, Dan, but I'm sure that our audience of listeners would like to learn even more and know how you came to be working with emerging minds. So, tell us a little bit about your story.

Dr Daniel Moss

Thanks Belynda, and thanks for having me on, I really appreciate it.

Yeah, I suppose as my bio talks a little bit about, I spent a lot of my career working in services who worked with children and families, particularly often children and families who are doing it tough for a whole host of different reasons. I suppose I was no stranger to the challenges of providing the best possible engagement for those children and their parents; finding ways that allowed them to tell their stories when often that hadn't been a privilege they've been afforded throughout their lives.

So given that, I was really attracted when the position of Content Manager came up at Emerging Minds. I was really interested in being able to translate the knowledge and understandings and skills that I had acquired from other practitioners throughout my career. I've been really fortunate to be able to work with some very skilled and I think compassionate human beings. So that that was something that attracted me and when I knew a little bit more about that the job, I remember as you've talked about going onto the emerging lines website, being really impressed by the key messages. Particularly thinking about contextual understandings of children mental health and that children's mental health is not just negative mental health, it exists on a continuum.

And there are all sorts of things that we can do to be thinking and supporting children to be thinking positively about themselves and the world around them. That was something that really impressed me.

The other thing that attracted me to the organisations was the kind of suite of practical strategies and skills that they have – that we have – on our website, for practitioners, for educators, for families.

I know, since I've been there, we've really tried hard to demystify practice. A lot of that information that we get from professionals is that, you know, a lot of the theoretical underpinnings of what they've learned in the past haven't always equip them to ask the right

questions. We want everyone to have confidence in asking children and families questions that help them tell their story.

Because we know for children, as you would know, that not being able to tell these stories, or secrecy, or carrying blame are some of the most detrimental things to children's mental health, that we can think of.

So yeah, that's a bit of a roundabout way of how I came to work at Emerging Minds.

Belynda Smith

Beautiful. Firstly, I love your focus on stories and the fact that people need an opportunity to tell their stories. I know, working with parents, there's some really significant research to show that when parents can form a cohesive narrative of their own story, they're able to show up for parenting in ways they feel good about and in ways that work for their children.

So, I can really see how that definitely impacts children, but also applies to them: they need an opportunity to tell their stories.

And I love your passion for the organisation. I feel that too with the website, for those listeners who are interested, I would really encourage you to head over to the Emerging Minds website and check it out.

It's really practical, it's really useful, it's fabulous stuff.

So, my next question is about Emerging Minds: what are its aims, how it came to exist, and how it really tries to improve the well-being of children in Australia. Tell us a bit more about the organisation.

Dr Daniel Moss

A lot of the underpinnings for the Emerging Minds National Workforce Centre, which began about 2017 and is funded by the Department of Health, so Commonwealth funded.

There was a 2015 Young Minds Matter Survey

And we've known for a while, I think, as a society, about some of the implications of mental health issues for adolescents. But what this survey, really kind of highlighted was that there was a significant issue in our society, also for children, between four and eleven for example, the survey showed that about one in seven of those children had in the past 12 months had mental health difficulties of clinical significance.

The same survey they found that only one in six of those children who met the criteria for a mental health condition had received a service to help them in the past 12 months

So, what this told us is that there were lots of kids out there that were doing it tough and that not many of those children were receiving the specialized service provision that they needed. The

National Workforce Centre really looks at early intervention and prevention methods which can help match children, infants and children, to the services that they made as quickly as possible.

So firstly, where children do have contact with service professionals that those professionals are able to help them to tell their story. Help them to bring to the full the things that are upsetting them or making them feel bad about themselves or making them feel scared or anxious. A lot of the work that we've been doing has been working with practitioners who do this very well and also people with lived experience so that their stories can come to the floor.

Secondly, a big part of our role at emerging minds is underpinned by that research which says five in six children who need help and are not necessarily receiving that – what can be done, for example, in adult services, so for those practitioners who are working with adults who are facing adversity such as mental health or family violence or substance use, how can practitioners, even though their children might not be present in those sessions, how can those practitioners shine a light on the needs of those children. And not in a way that blames or stigmatises the parent, but just acknowledging that often those parents who come into adult focus services will be very concerned about their children, will be very concerned about, for example, how they're living within a family violence or coercion and might be affecting their child.

So how do we provide these adults with an opportunity to talk about what's going on for their children? That's also been a big part of our work over the last five or six years.

Belynda Smith

And you've mentioned quite a bit of interesting research in there, so that was my next sort of focuses. What do children need? You know, I think we've all got a sense of that in our hearts and in our experiences with children, but what's the research telling us that children need and is there a developmental difference, you know, from an infant to a toddler to a pre-schooler to a tween to a teen?

What do these kids need from us?

Dr Daniel Moss

Yeah, it's really interesting, isn't it Belynda, because I think we know now more about age-appropriate developmental needs of infants and children. We know more about that than at any time in our history.

Neurosciences has also made a really significant contribution to what we know about the developing brain. What infants, for example, need in the first days of their lives But I think for us the challenge is to bring parents and families along for the ride and the dissemination and the understanding of this information.

There's some really interesting research came out of the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne in 2017 where over half of parents said that they would like to know more about what their

infant's mental health needs were. And only about a third of his parents said that they felt confident in recognising mental health distress in their children.

So even though we are much more well researched than any other time in our history, if we're not careful, this research can further how parents feel like they're at a loss or confuse parents. We need a really compassionate lens to any of this research that we do, that we're really clear on what children and infants need, but that we're also understanding of the adversities and some of the concerns that parents have.

Belynda Smith

Beautiful, thank you.

I really love that focus. I think that's so important as someone who works with parents, as someone who's been a parent who's struggled, to have someone walk alongside you and understand those struggles and support you through them in a non-judgmental way is really powerful, isn't it? It really makes a difference to enacting those changes.

Dr Daniel Moss

There's nothing worse, we know as parents, there's nothing worse than feeling like we're not doing a good job or feeling like other people are judging what we're doing. So, any way that we can work with parents to make sure that that's not an issue, to make sure that we understand that parents want what's best for their children and I think is a really important part of any work that we do.

Belynda Smith

And I've mentioned already at the website and all the amazing resources that are there for families and practitioners. I'd love to hear more about some of your specific favourites.

What have you found most useful to direct families to? What do you love on the website?

Dr Daniel Moss

Thank you for Belynda.

We've really done a lot of work, I think, over the last five or six years, to bring out a number of workforce packages, and those workforce packages generally include an e-learning course, which often has practical, fictitious scenarios of work with children and parents. And often it includes podcasts, practice papers, and webinars as well.

So, we've done quite a bit of work, as I've said, in thinking about how to work with parents who are facing adversity and lots of this work for bringing children's voices into the room where a parent, for example, might be going through family violence or mental health issues or substance abuse issues has been at the forefront of our work.

And we've developed through this a model which is called the PERCS model. Now PERCS stands for parent-child relationships, emotions, routines, communication, and support networks.

What that is, is a way that practitioners can ask questions of a parent about every aspect or every domain of a child's life. And the assumption behind this is that parents who come into services who might be doing it tough, will want to talk about their children. The research tells us, and our child and family partners tell us, that when they've been in the service, they're actually really hoping that their GP or their psychologist or social worker asks them questions about what's going on for their child.

But I think that doesn't always happen, just depending on how confident we feel as practitioners.

So, this piece of work is hopefully being influential in helping practitioners in adult-focused services to have the confidence to just be able to ask every client that they have, "Are you a parent?" and "What's going on for your child?" in really supportive and nurturing ways.

I think probably the other kind of strong piece of work that we have been doing lately is really looking at the practice strategies that that work with children who might be experiencing anxiety or depression, might be struggling to get to school, they might be distressed for some or a lot of the time. So that's been a series of 13 skills. And that's based on some very strong beliefs that children have told us about how they want to be interacted with in services. That's come around [through] what we call practice shifts and treating children like their knowledgeable and rather than naïve.

Thinking about the contexts of children's lives rather than categorising them. Taking a bottom-up approach to work with children and their families rather than the top down. And really kind of, I suppose, recruiting children into being the experts in their own lives and helping parents to be able to be the experts in children's lives too.

We've also done quite a lot of work in in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander space.

We've been really fortunate at Emerging Minds; we have a really strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consultancy group and they've really supported us to produce some really lovely documentaries and a suite of content which helps non Aboriginal people to just reflect on their own cultural competence or appropriateness in being able to listen to children and community stories.

Belynda Smith

Wow, so much there. And I'm just loving, you know, so many of the words you're using: nurturing, supporting, listening, I just think it's such powerful stuff for the families that you're working with and for the practitioners and who they're supporting.

So, I am curious. I mean the sky's the limit we've got all this research, we've got all these wonderful people, what's the vision?

What do you hope for children as we move forward?

It's been such a turbulent couple of years for everyone, but I think part of that is that everyone becoming clearer and clearer, and we're amassing this beautiful body of evidence to say what we can be doing.

What's your big vision as an organisation? What are we hoping for?

Dr Daniel Moss

Obviously emerging minds focuses on early intervention and prevention. So, our hope is that every child has the opportunity for someone within their lives – whether that be parents or families whether that be educators, whether that be practitioners – who have a real eye to their mental health and obviously our hope is that that mental health is going well and it's positive and supported, but our hope also is that enough is known about mental health in infants and children for communities to be able to look out for when children might be struggling a little bit.

We know the research tells us that the earlier that we can intervene, and the more effective we are providing these children consistent and supportive messages, the more likely they are to kind of get back on to the positive end of the mental health continuum.

Belynda Smith

Beautiful.

We like to finish for each of these podcasts with a series of quick questions just about you and you know who you are, and they're really focused on you as a child as well.

So, the first one is: Name the book you loved most as a child.

Dr Daniel Moss

You know, I'm looking at my bookshelf at very tattered copy of *The Adventures of Blinky Bill*, which I think I had since I was five years old, and miraculously has survived almost half a century and several house moves, so I'm quite proud to still have that.

Belynda Smith

Yeah, beautiful.

What are the building blocks of your well-being, personally? What do **you** need?

Dr Daniel Moss

I think having really strong, and safe, and energising relationships, with my children, and friends, Family, colleagues and also, I think it's really helpful for my sense of well-being to be engaged in meaningful and purposeful work as well.

Belynda Smith

In a sentence, what's your happiest childhood memory?

Dr Daniel Moss

I think Christmases at home with family, really happy memories of playing cricket in the background until dark. Yeah, eating way too much... lovely memories.

Belynda Smith

Gorgeous, thank you

Your favourite outdoor space, Please could you describe it to us?

Dr Daniel Moss

I still love the smell of freshly cut grass and community footy ovals with children playing.

That still a really lovely place for me, yeah.

Belynda Smith

Great.

Finally complete this sentence: to help them thrive, children need:

Dr Daniel Moss

I think safe and nurturing environments where they can build their preferred identities really, and express themselves, be able to tell their stories and create their stories.

Belynda Smith

So how can listeners learn more about your work or get in touch with your organization.

Dr Daniel Moss

Obviously, a website is www.emergingminds.com.au. On our website we have a number of ways that people can get in touch with us.

And we really love it when practitioners reach out to us and are able to share their stories.

We as an organization rely really on collecting the stories of practice from practitioners, but also from families around Australia. Without being able to do that, we wouldn't be able to produce what we produce, so we encourage anyone that's interested in our organisation to get in touch, talk to me or other people, come and share your stories.

Such a privilege, I think, to hear about all the practitioners, families, and educators around Australia who are all trying innovative ways to support children.

Belynda Smith

Thank you so much, Dan.

It's been really great speaking to you and learning a lot more about your work and the ways we can support children well with being.

I really appreciate you being here.

Thank you.

Dr Daniel Moss

Thank you so much, Belynda.

It's been lovely.

Belynda Smith

And for listeners, if you'd like more information regarding Meerilinga, you can contact mycf@meerilinga.org.au or visit www.meerilinga.org.au

Thank you very much.