

THE ROLE OF JUNIOR KINDERGARTEN IN IMPROVING CHILD MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES



DR. DAVID PHILPOTT
RESEARCH ASSOCIATE
ATKINSON CENTRE

Discussions about improving mental health outcomes for children often overlook a critical factor: the mental health and well-being of their educators. Research has long highlighted the importance of healthy, supportive environments for early childhood development, yet the working conditions of early childhood educators remain a blind spot. The mental health of educators is not just an individual issue—it is deeply tied to the success of early childhood programs in fostering positive mental health outcomes in children.

The Mental Health Crisis Among Educators

The early childhood sector, predominantly female and often racialized, has faced systemic challenges for years. Low pay, minimal benefits, and high-stress work environments create a landscape where mental health struggles are common. This reality has led to high turnover rates and chronic staffing shortages, further exacerbating the stress on those who remain.

Studies, including Thriving at Work: A Health-Based Framework for Decent Work, outline the conditions necessary for healthy employment, such as fair compensation, reasonable work hours, policies promoting work-life balance, and access to support systems for both educators and children. When educators thrive, their ability to create nurturing, emotionally supportive environments improves, benefiting the children in their care.

Junior Kindergarten's Role in Supporting Mental Health

The importance of addressing educator mental health becomes even more evident when examining the role of Junior Kindergarten in improving child mental health outcomes. Junior Kindergarten has a strong curriculum incorporating play-based learning and social-emotional development, equipping children with skills to navigate their emotions and relationships effectively.

Research into JK's impact has demonstrated its ability to significantly reduce stress in children. In one study, researchers measured the cortisol levels—a key stress hormone—of “at-risk” four-year-olds at the start and end of the school year. These children, who experienced poverty and racial marginalization, showed dramatic reductions in cortisol levels and significant improvements in emotional knowledge and regulation skills. The researchers concluded that the play-based curriculum's focus on emotional competence is key to early intervention success.

Through activities that help children recognize, manage, and express their emotions, Junior Kindergarten builds resilience and teaches essential life skills. Children learn to plan, predict outcomes, understand consequences, and make healthier choices—all attributes that protect against trauma and environmental stressors.

Educator Well-Being: A Critical Component

While the positive effects of JK on children are well-documented, these outcomes are deeply dependent on the educators delivering the program. Stressed, unsupported educators struggle to provide the consistent, high-quality interactions children need to thrive. Just as children raised by stressed parents are at greater risk of mental health challenges, children in programs led by stressed educators face similar risks.

Junior Kindergarten, housed within the public education system, offers a unique opportunity to address these challenges. Schools can create environments where educators flourish by providing greater stability of placement, access to resources, and fewer transitions. This stability ensures that educators are better equipped to deliver the high-quality care and emotional support that children need.

A Path Forward

Improving mental health outcomes for children starts with supporting their educators. Junior Kindergarten programs already have the curriculum and pedagogical frameworks to promote social-emotional learning in children. However, to maximize their potential, these programs must also prioritize the well-being of the educators who bring them to life.

Children and educators thrive by fostering healthy working conditions—through fair wages, benefits, and supportive policies. Junior Kindergarten, operating within the stability of public education, provides the ideal foundation for this transformation. When educators are supported, their ability to nurture and guide children is amplified, creating a ripple effect that benefits families, communities, and society.