Supporting Relationships: Evaluating the effectiveness of an Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health training programme for Early Years Practitioners

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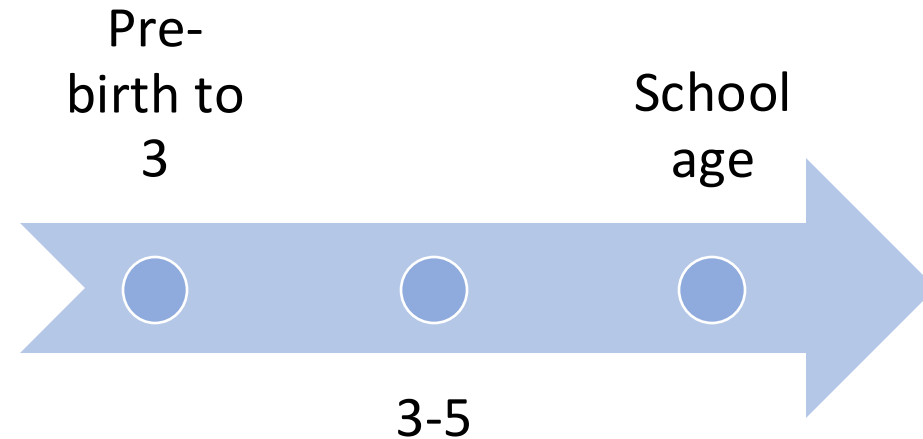School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork

Overview

- The paper will present findings on the development and impact of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) training for Early Years Practitioners (EYPs) in Cork, Ireland.

- The project aims to translate and make accessible the science of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health and early childhood development and apply this to a format which builds capacity in the everyday practice of Early Years Practitioners.

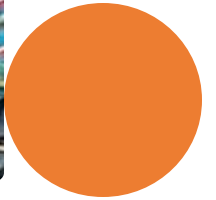# Let's Grow Together! Programme Structure

4 Interconnected strategies

Ages and stages

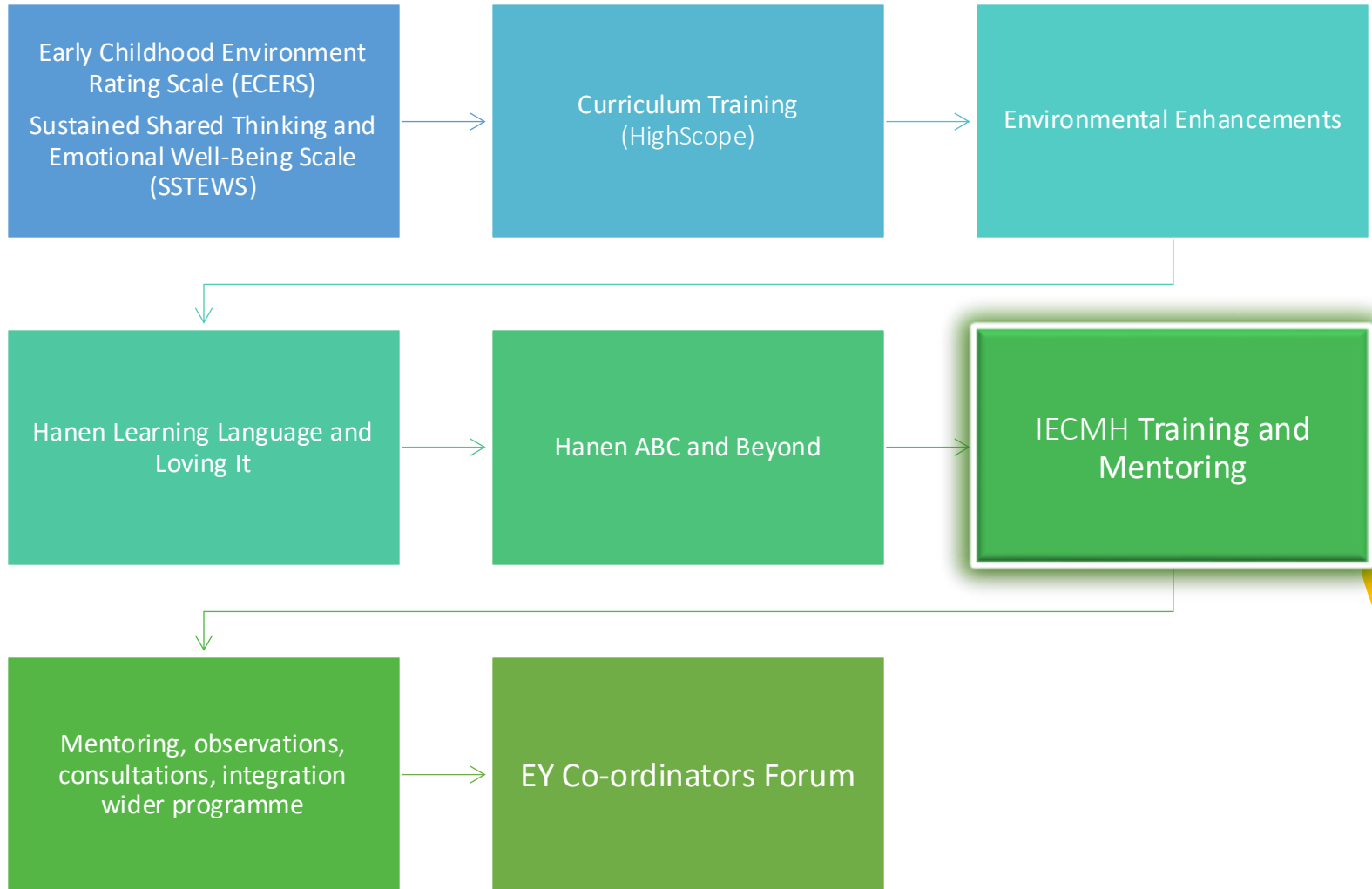| Infant Mental Health and Wellbeing	Speech, Language and Literacy
Capacity Building Integration Quality Improvement	
Early Childhood Care and Education	Prosocial Behaviour and Self-Regulation

Pre-birth to 3

School age

3-5

Let's Grow Together! is a community-based prevention and early intervention programme operating in an area of intergenerational disadvantage. LGT is part of the Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme)

Let's Grow Together!
INFANT & CHILDHOOD
PARTNERSHIPS CLG

LGT Early Years Care and Education Strategy

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┌─────────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Early Childhood         │     │                         │     │                         │
│ Environment Rating      │ ──▶ │ Curriculum Training     │ ──▶ │ Environmental           │
│ Scale (ECERS)           │     │ (HighScope)             │     │ Enhancements            │
│ Sustained Shared        │     │                         │     │                         │
│ Thinking and Emotional  │     │                         │     │                         │
│ Well-Being Scale        │     │                         │     │                         │
│ (SSTEWS)                │     │                         │     │                         │
└─────────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────────┘

┌─────────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Hanen Learning Language │ ──▶ │ Hanen ABC and Beyond    │ ──▶ │ IECMH Training and      │
│ and Loving It           │     │                         │     │ Mentoring               │
└─────────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────────┘

┌─────────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Mentoring, observations,│ ──▶ │ EY Co-ordinators Forum  │
│ consultations,          │     │                         │
│ integration wider       │     │                         │
│ programme               │     │                         │
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Let's Grow Together!
INFANT & CHILDHOOD PARTNERSHIPS CLG

# The importance of care-giver relationships for infants and young children

- The **quality of the relationships** between babies and their caregivers has significant implications for brain development and emerging social-emotional skills and may be a predictor of later life outcomes such as physical and emotional health and educational attainment (Zero to Three, 2023).

- **Early Years Professionals** are uniquely placed to provide children with responsive and supportive relationships that can facilitate adaptive coping responses, providing a buffer against the harmful effects of negative experiences, as well as recognising and responding to signs of emerging social and emotional challenges (Ritblatt et al., 2013).

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH)

- **IECMH** is defined as "*the capacity of the child from birth to 5 years old to form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, manage, and express a full range of emotions; and explore the environment and learn – all in the context of family, community, and culture*" (Zero to Three, 2023).

- Growing evidence base to support IECMH training for EYPs in supporting children's social-emotional well-being (Spielberger et al., 2024).

- Increased self-efficacy and competence in managing children's emotionally dysregulated behaviour, improved sensitivity and responsiveness in interactions with children, and improved quality in the setting (Harms et al., 2015).
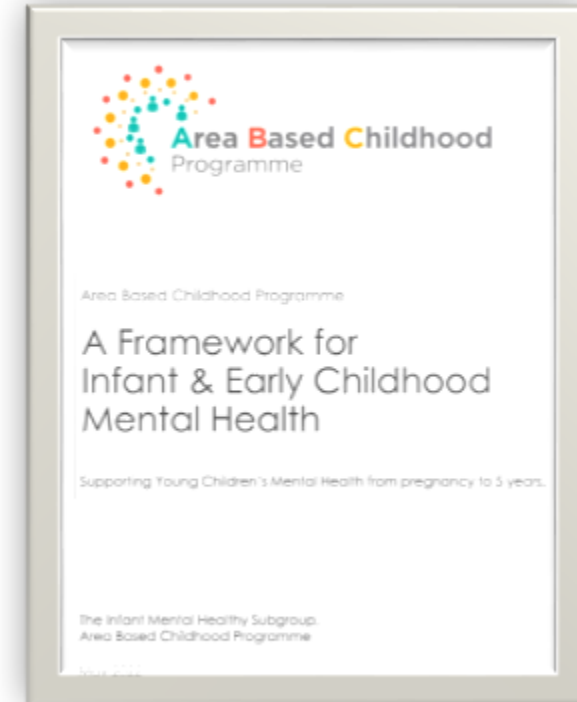
LGT IMH Training Objectives
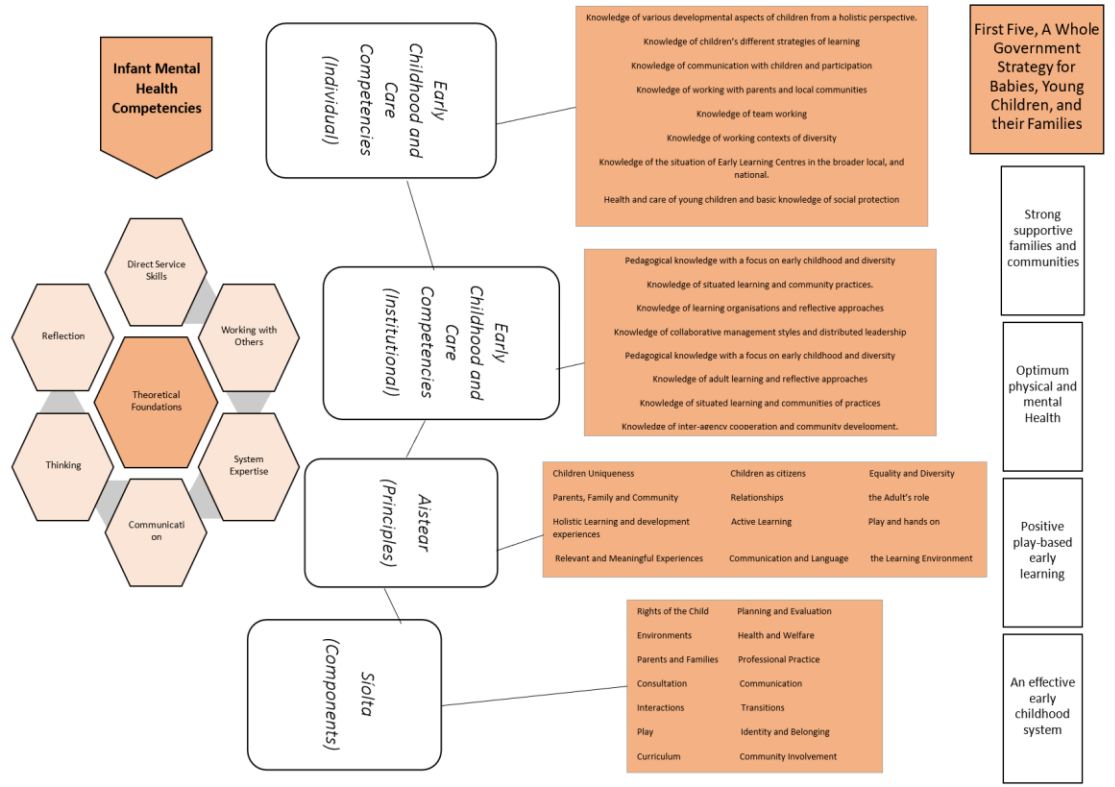
Develop an early year's training model to provide quality improvement n the EY sector.

adapt LGTs existing IMH training to make it accessible and applicable to EYPs.

Enhance EYPs' understanding of social and emotional development and the important role of relationships in child development.

To develop EYPs' reflective practice knowledge and skills.

Support EYPs to integrate IMH skills and knowledge into daily practice.

Enhance the quality of EYP-child relationships and interactions in EY settings through application of I-AIMH Competency Guidelines and incorporating IMH principles.

The LGT IMH EYP training programme

Session 1
Introduction to IMH
Brain development
Relationships
Trauma informed

Focus on self-awareness & reflection

Focus on practice

Session 4
Reflective practice
Family practices
Parent interactions
Summary

Session 2
Interactions
Attachment
Co-regulation
Separation
Expression of emotions
Care routines

Session 3
Emotional regulation
Peer relations
Naming behaviour
Fussy behaviour
Sensory processing
Observing, listening & speaking

Programme Evaluation Methodology

Stage 1 Pre-intervention measures:
Pre-IMH training questionnaire completed by 22 Early Years Practitioners

7 observations of EYP and child interactions pre and post training using the Child Caregiver Interaction Scale (CCIS) Revised Edition (Carl, 2010**).**

Stage 2 Post-implementation measures: Post-IMH training questionnaire

EYP and child interactions were observed and measured pre and post training using the Child Caregiver Interaction Scale (CCIS) Revised Edition (Carl, 2010).

Ethical approval from UCC SREC

Observation of Practice: CCIS Results

- **Emotional Domain** Consists of 4 items: 'tone of voice', 'acceptance/respect of children', 'enjoys and appreciates children', and 'expectations for children'.

- **Cognitive/Physical Domain** Consists of 7 items: 'health and safety', 'routines/time spent', 'physical attention', 'discipline', "language development', 'learning opportunities', and 'involvement with children's activities'.

- **Connections with a Wider World** Consists of 3 items: 'arrival', 'promotion of prosocial behaviour/social emotional learning (SEL)', and 'relationship with families'.

Settings and Participants

Phase 1: September –December 2021

Phase 2: November 2023- February 2024

Six early years settings participated: A family centre, an Early Start, three services delivering the ECCE programme and one part-time day-care service for toddlers.
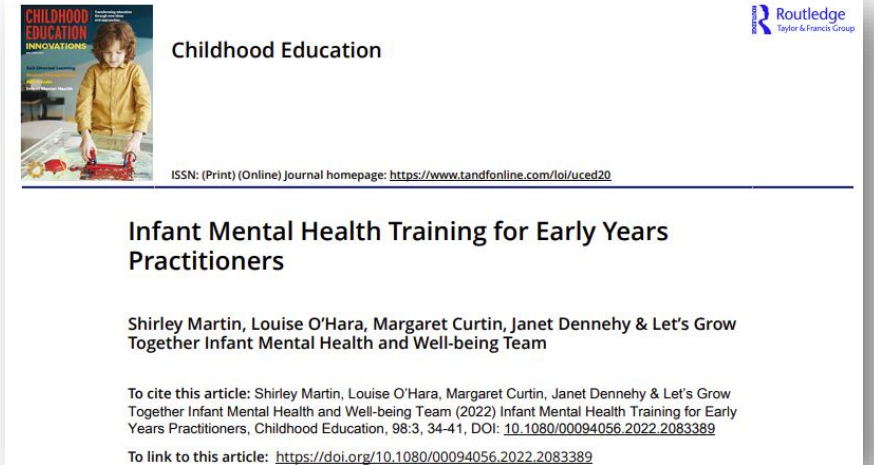
Results

Profile of the Early Years Participants

Experience

Time working in Early Years Education (EYE) (n = 22)	N	%
Less than 1 year	3	13.7
1-3 years	4	18.2
4-6 years	0	0
7-10 years	4	18.2
More than 10 years	11	50

Qualifications

Educational background (n = 22)	N	%
NFQ Level 9	2	9.1
NFQ Level 8	7	31.8
NFQ Level 7	3	13.7
NFQ Level 6	5	22.7
NFQ Level 5	2	9.1
NFQ Level 5 (not yet complete)	0	0
Other	3	13.7

50% (n=11) of participants were working in the ECEC sector for more than 10 years – this is higher than average for the sector. The most recently available Annual Early Years Sector Profile indicates that 34% of ECEC staff nationally have worked in the sector for more than ten years (Pobal, 2022).

Prior IECMH Knowledge

- 95.5% of practitioners had **no prior IECMH training** but they demonstrated knowledge of theories which underpin IMH such as centrality of the caregiver-child relationship, importance of attachment, and attunement.

- Post-training, practitioners demonstrated **increased use of IECMH language** and terminology such as '*serve and return*', '*regulation of emotion*' and '*acknowledging feelings*'.

Observation of Practice: CCIS Results

| ID | Time | Emotional | | | | | | Cognitive/Physical | | | | | | | | | Connections with a Wider World | | | | | Total | |
		1	2	3	4	Sum Total	Mean	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Sum Total	Mean	12	13	14	Sum Total	Mean	Sum Total	Mean
AC	Pre	6	6	4	4	20	5	5	1	4	1	7	4	1	23	3.2	4	2	0	6	2	49	3.4
	Post	6	6	6	7	25	6.25	7	6	7	5	6	5	7	43	6.14	6	5	0	11	3.66	79	5.35
BC	Pre	1	1	5	1	8	2	6	1	7	5	3	4	5	31	4.43	2	1	0	3	1	42	2.48
	Post	7	7	6	6	26	6.5	6	6	6	4	7	6	6	41	5.85	6	7	5	18	6	85	6.11
DC	Pre	7	7	7	7	28	7	6	5	7	5	7	6	4	40	5.71	7	6	5	18	6	86	6.24
	Post	7	7	7	7	28	7	6	6	7	6	7	7	6	45	6.43	7	6	5	18	6	91	6.48
CC	Pre	7	6	6	6	25	6.25	5	5	7	3	7	6	4	37	5.29	7	4	5	16	5.33	78	5.62
	Post	6	6	6	6	24	6	6	5	4	4	5	6	4	34	4.86	6	2	4	12	4	70	4.95
AA	Pre	5	5	6	6	22	5.50	5	1	5	5	3	5	5	29	4.14	2	5	2	9	3.00	60	4.29
	Post	7	7	7	7	28	7.00	6	6	7	6	6	6	7	44	6.29	2	7	2	11	3.67	83	5.93
BA	Pre	5	2	5	4	16	4.00	2	1	5	3	2	2	5	20	2.86	2	1	2	5	1.67	41	2.93
	Post	7	7	6	7	27	6.75	7	7	7	7	5	6	7	46	6.57	4	6	5	15	5.00	88	6.29
BB	Pre	2	1	1	1	5	1.25	2	1	3	1	1	2	1	11	1.57	2	1	2	5	1.67	21	1.50
	Post	6	6	5	6	23	5.75	7	1	7	5	3	5	5	33	4.71	2	7	2	11	3.67	67	4.79
Total	Pre					124	4.43								191	3.89				62	2.95	377	3.78
	Post					181	6.46								286	5.84				96	4.57	563	5.70

Identifying and Responding to social and emotional needs

Identify

Respond

Ability to identify when a child is not meeting social and emotional milestones (n = 22)	Pre N	%	Post N	%
Extremely able	4	18.2	8	36.4
Very able	7	31.8	9	40.9
Able	6	27.3	3	27.3
Somewhat able	5	22.7	2	22.7
Not able	0	0	0	0

Ability to respond when a child is not meeting social and emotional milestones (n = 22)	Pre N	%	Post N	%
Extremely able	5	22.7%	5	22.7%
Very able	5	22.7%	13	59.1%
Able	8	36.4%	1	4.5%
Somewhat able	4	18.2	3	13.6%
Not able	0	0	0	0%

Increased awareness of children's emotions

Increase in awareness of children's emotions and behaviour and in their capacity to respond sensitively and support children through big emotions.

"We have made a concerted effort to mirror the child's feelings more as opposed to disguising it with chirpiness" [Participant A1].

Several EYPs cited increased understanding of children's needs.

"More aware of everyone's feelings and needs" [Participant C2].

"I understand children more" [Participant D1].

Increased confidence in supporting children's relationship development

- The proportion of EYPs who reported feeling 'extremely confident' __identifying__ when children experience difficulties forming relationships more than doubled from 18.2% (n=4) pre training to 40.1% (n=9) post-training.

- The number of EYPs who reported feeling 'extremely' or 'very' able to __respond__ in this situation increased from 50% (n=11) pre-training to 81.8% (n=18).

Increased reflective practices

- The proportion of EYPs who reported 'always' **sharing observations** on interactions with children with their colleagues **increased** from 45.5% (n=10) pre-training to 63.6% (n=14) post-training.

- Post-training, **all** participants recognised the importance of sharing observations with their colleagues.

- Participants demonstrated **increased understanding** of the **benefits of reflective practice** post-training.

Increased collaborative working

"*Shared experiences will prompt child led plans. Shared observations will identify if children have needs. Shared observations will identify if needs are being met*" [Participant B8].

Increased confidence in ability to support parents and caregivers

- Pre-training, just 9.1% (n=2) of EYPs felt 'extremely confident' confident in their ability to help parents or caregivers comfort their child when they are struggling to do so, and a further 50% (n=11) felt 'very confident'. Post-training, the number of EYPs feeling 'extremely confident' doubled and a further 45.5% (n=10) felt 'very confident'.

"We will be able to reassure them (parents) a lot more. We will be able to say to them, 'you know you are anxious the child knows that you are anxious, the child can feel that you are anxious but go the child will be fine' you know. I think we have the tools now as well to be able to do that" [B9].

Self-regulation for practitioners: Reflecting on their own emotions when interacting with children

Several EYPs identified their own emotional state as an importance influence on how they react to children's emotionally dysregulated behaviour:

"An adults own mental health & wellbeing contribute to their reaction to a child when they are experiencing strong emotions" [Participant B8].
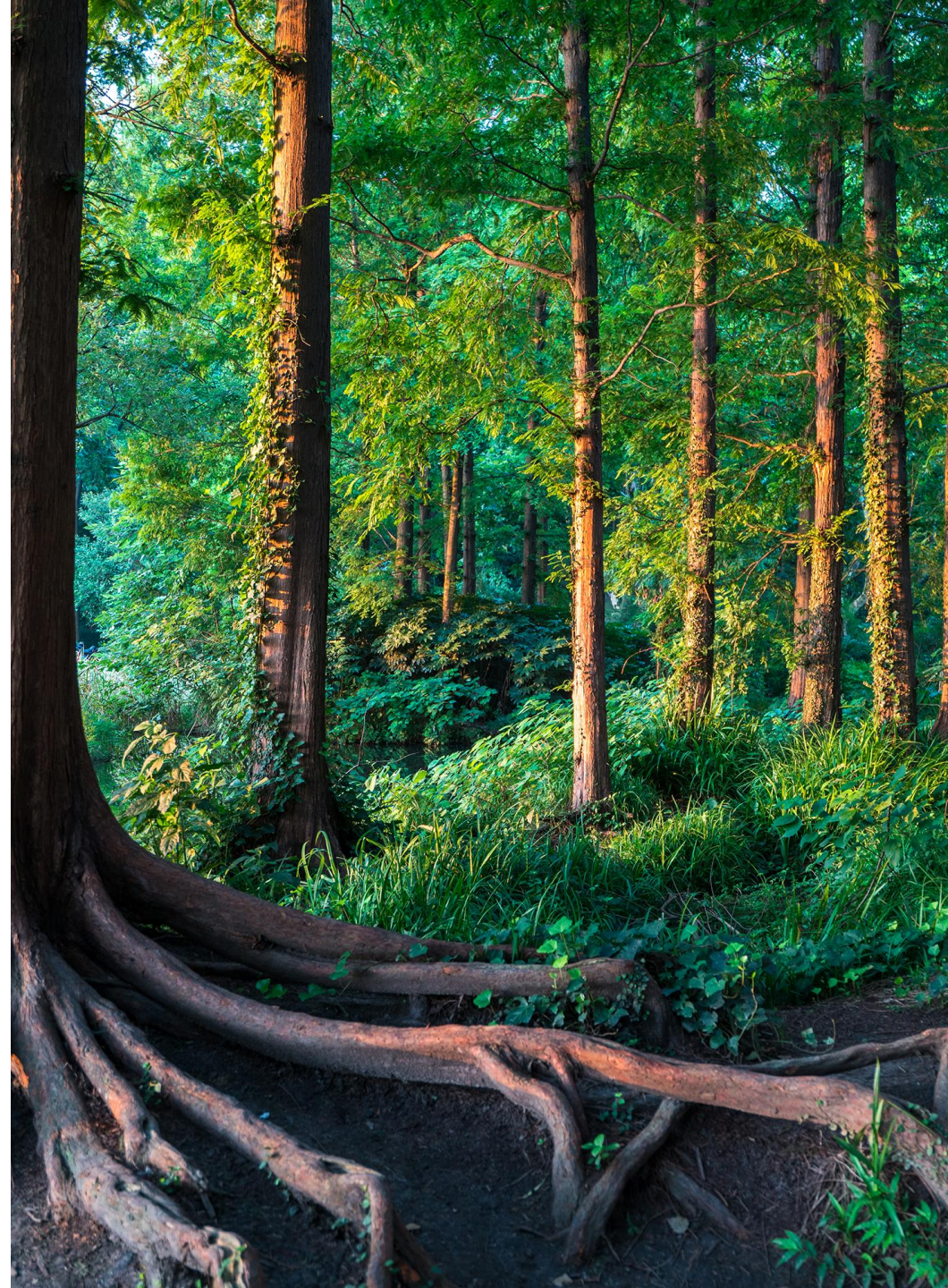
Self-regulation for practitioners: Reflecting on their own emotions when interacting with parents and caregivers

Commenting on the benefits of considering their own feelings when interacting with parents and caregivers, one participant said:

"I feel by considering my own feelings and being in a good place, I can better connect with parents and support them to help the children and themselves. This helps develop trust and a good relationship (professionally)."
[Participant B9].
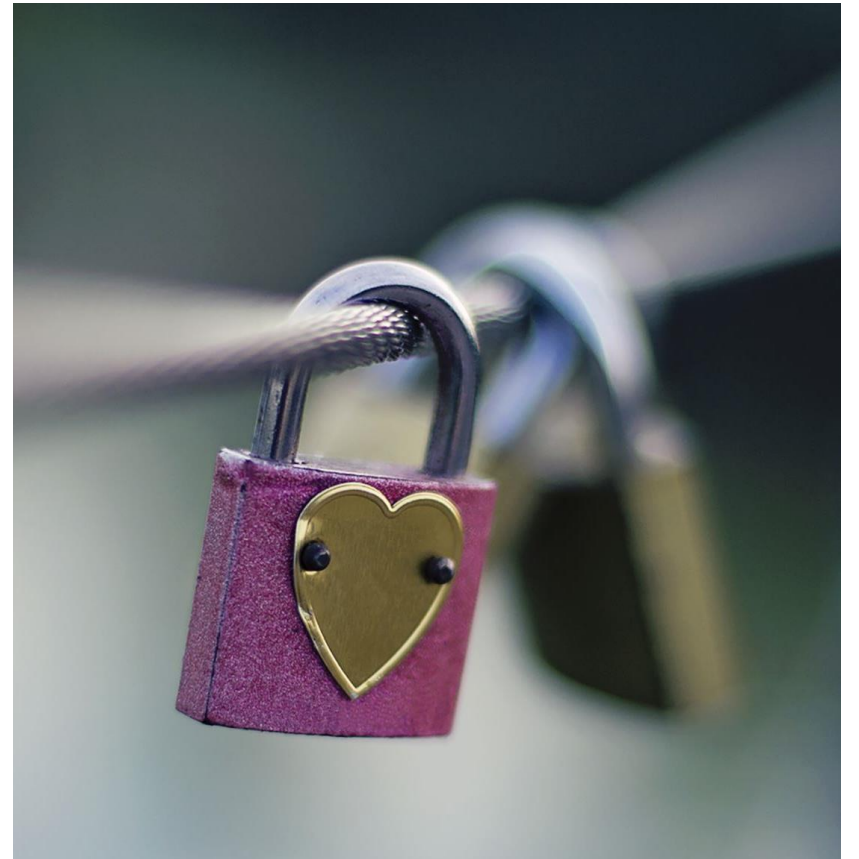
Some conclusions

- Successful building of EYPs existing competencies and confidence in IECMH concepts and their application to practice - meets training objectives.

- Training provided practitioners with a common language through which to share observations, build cohesion among teams, and to further support the relational health of children.

- CCIS observation results reveal the largest impact for staff who have had less exposure to this type of capacity building – this demonstrates the value of the LGT programme.

- EYPs demonstrated strong knowledge of oral/language communication - impact of other LGT capacity building (Hanen programmes) - core aspect of the strategy.

- The role of the Early Years Mentor was central to the implementation and success of the programme and this relationship is highly valued by the EYPs.

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