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CHILDREN'S
MENTAL HEALTH
WEEK

This is My Place

Children's Mental Health Week 2026

An early years guide to supporting
belonging through emotionally
safe, relational practice

9th–15th February 2026



Introduction

Children's Mental Health Week is a chance for early years settings to pause and reflect on children's emotional wellbeing.

Each year, the week brings a different focus. In 2026, the theme '**This is My Place**' invites us to think about belonging — and how young children experience their setting as a place where they feel safe, welcomed, and cared for.

For young children, their early years setting is one of the most important places in their lives. It's where they play, explore, form relationships, and begin to understand themselves and others. How children feel in this place matters.

This guide has been created to support early years practitioners to explore this year's theme in practical, relational ways. It includes simple activities, circle time plans, and everyday approaches that can be adapted to suit your children, staff, and setting.

You do not need to do everything. Small moments, repeated consistently, make a meaningful difference.

Here at Thrive, our focus for this year's theme is that **belonging begins with emotional safety — and grows when children feel they matter.**

Emotional Safety, Belonging and Mattering

In the early years, belonging is built through everyday experiences — how children are welcomed, how adults respond when feelings are big, and how safe children feel to be themselves.

This year's theme encourages settings to notice and strengthen these moments, helping children experience their setting as a place where they feel secure, included, and valued.

Our key messages for the week:

- Belonging grows from emotional safety.
- Small relational moments make a big difference.
- Calm, attuned adults help children feel safe.
- Feeling seen and valued supports wellbeing and learning.



Understanding emotional safety, belonging and mattering

What do we mean by emotional safety?

In the early years, emotional safety means children feel safe, accepted, and cared for. It's the sense that they can share feelings, make mistakes, ask for help, and be themselves — knowing that adults will respond kindly and fairly.

When children feel emotionally safe, they are more able to explore, play, learn, and build relationships.

What do we mean by belonging?

Belonging is the feeling of being part of a place where you are accepted for who you are. For young children, this comes from warm relationships, familiar routines, and environments where they feel welcomed and included.

When children feel they belong, they are more confident to join in, play alongside others, and engage in learning.

What do we mean by mattering?

Mattering is the feeling that you are noticed, valued, and important. Children feel they matter when adults know their name, listen to them, respond to their ideas, and show interest in what matters to them.

When children feel they matter, they are more likely to try new things, keep going when something feels tricky, and build positive relationships.

In summary

- Emotional safety helps children feel secure.
- Belonging helps children feel they fit.
- Mattering helps children feel important.



Relational Moments That Support Belonging and Mattering



Belonging in the early years is built through everyday interactions between adults and children — often in small, easily overlooked moments.

At Thrive, the ideas below reflect relational practices used in our work with early years settings. They support adults to build trusting relationships, helping children feel emotionally safe, seen, and valued.

What can I say except 'You're welcome!'

How: Welcome each child warmly at the start of the day using their name and a personal comment. For example: "George, it's so lovely to see you today." "I noticed your dinosaur jumper — it made me smile."

Why: A warm, personal welcome helps children feel noticed and valued, sets a positive tone for the day, and helps adults notice and remember what matters to each child.

Relational moments that support belonging and mattering

Holding children in mind

How: Let children know you have thought about them outside the immediate moment. For example: "I saw a big digger on the way to work and it made me think of you."

Why: This shows children they matter beyond tasks or behaviour and strengthens feelings of connection and trust, both when you are together and when you are apart.

Curious responses

How: When children are upset or struggling, respond with curiosity rather than correction. For example: "I can see putting your shoe on feels really tricky. That can feel frustrating. Shall we try together?"

Why: Curious responses reduce distress and help children feel understood and supported when emotions are big. They help children feel less blamed or embarrassed, and show them that you are alongside them when things feel hard.

Listening with attention

How: Pause what you are doing and give children your attention when they want to share. Use eye contact, nodding, open body language, and simple reflections. If you can't listen straight away, let them know when you will.

Why: Being listened to helps children feel valued and reassures them that what they say matters.

Playful connection

How: Share moments of playfulness and enjoyment throughout the day — joining in play, copying a child's idea, sharing a smile, or following their lead. Notice children's cues and respond in ways that feel warm and accepting.

Why: Playful connection helps children feel relaxed, safe, and emotionally close to adults, strengthening relationships and trust.

Gentle emotional check-ins

How: Use simple visual check-ins such as weather, animals, or colours. Ask: "What feels like you today?"

Why: These offer a low-pressure way for children to share feelings and help adults notice who may need extra support. Over time, they also help adults notice patterns and respond early when a child may be having a tricky start to the day.

Daily Classroom Activities



Classroom activities

The following activities are short, flexible, and suitable for early years settings. Each can be completed in 10–15 minutes, with minimal resources, and adapted to suit your children.

Each activity takes a relational approach, supporting connection between children and adults and helping children feel that they belong and are valued.

You may choose to:

- Use all five across the week.
- Select one or two.
- Repeat the same activity daily.

Choice helps children, and adults, feel safe.

Day 1: Metaphor Check-In

Purpose:

Simple metaphors offer children a playful, low-pressure way to share how they are feeling — without needing to explain or label emotions. Used regularly, check-ins also help children build feelings, language and help adults notice who may need extra support.

How to run it:

Choose one theme for the week (for example: weather, animals, colours, transport) and prepare 4–6 visual options children recognise.

Bring children together (or use this at arrival). **Ask:** “What is your weather like inside today?” or “Which one feels like you today?”

Children can respond by:

- Pointing.
- Holding up a card.
- Placing their name/photo beside an image.
- Using a gesture or single word.

Model your own response first if helpful: “Today I feel a bit cloudy — I needed a slow start.”

Adults respond with gentle curiosity, without pressure to explain: “I notice you chose stormy today — would you like to stay close to a grown up, or choose a quiet activity to start?”

Use this as a regular routine during the week (or daily beyond the week) so children learn what to expect.

Adaptations:

- Visuals are just prompts — children can offer their own ideas if they want to.
- If metaphors feel tricky, use faces, emojis, colours, or a feelings puppet instead.
- For some children, a “check-in board” works well: children place their photo/ name as they arrive.

This can help children to:

- Share how they feel in a safe, familiar way.
- Build emotional awareness and language.
- Feel noticed and supported by adults.

Day 2: Belonging Poem

Purpose:

Exploring what belonging feels like helps children notice what makes them feel happy and safe in their setting. Creating something together also strengthens shared identity: "This is our place."

How to run it:

Introduce the idea simply: "Belonging means feeling happy and safe here — like you are important." **Ask:** "What makes you happy here?" Children can talk to a partner, share with an adult, or contribute as a group.

Write children's ideas as single words or short phrases to create a shared class poem (for example using **BELONG** or **OUR PLACE** depending on your group).

Read the finished poem together.

Then offer a simple follow-on:

- A drawing table (draw "something that helps you feel happy here") or,
- A free flow 'belonging' station (playdough, blocks, collage) where children can return to the idea through play.

Add children's pictures/photos of creations to the poem display.

Adaptations:

- For younger children, you can focus on: "What do you like to play with here?"
- Children can contribute by pointing to photos/objects rather than speaking.

Use a camera/tablet to photograph models and add them to the display.

This can help children to:

- Recognise what belonging feels like in their setting.
- See that their ideas matter to the group.
- Feel proud of shared work and displays.



Day 3: Keep a Straight Face!

Purpose:

Playful interaction builds connection, confidence, and trust. Shared laughter supports emotional safety and helps children practise turn-taking, boundaries, and noticing non-verbal cues.

How to run it:

Bring children together and pair them up (adults support children to choose or find a partner).

Set simple boundaries first:

- Kind faces only.
- Hands to our own bodies.
- It's okay to laugh.
- No winners — this is just for fun.

Explain:

1. "One person makes a funny face. The other person tries not to laugh."
2. Model first with a safe, silly face.
3. Children take turns for a short time, then swap roles.
4. Bring the group back together and invite children to share a favourite funny face if they want to.
5. Finish with a light adult-led moment to reset and reconnect.

Adaptations:

- Mirror option: children sit side-by-side and use a mirror if eye contact feels difficult.
- If a child opts out, they can be an observer and choose the "funniest face" (with adult support).

If children become over-excited, follow with a calming activity (quiet corner, breathing, sensory tray).

This can help children to:

- Enjoy shared laughter and connection.
- Practise turn-taking and respectful boundaries.
- Build confidence in social interaction.



Day 4: Feather Face Painting

Purpose:

Gentle sensory activities support calm, trust, and mindfulness. They offer children a safe experience of closeness and regulation, strengthening relationships with adults and peers.

How to run it:

- Introduce the resource:** "This is a soft feather/brush. We use it gently."
- Model first on your own hand or arm.
- In pairs (adult-child or child-child with close adult support), children take turns "painting" a hand or arm softly.
- Consent and choice are essential. Adults model language such as:
 - "Is it okay if I do your hand?"
 - "You can say stop any time."
- Invite children to notice how it feels ("soft", "tickly", "calm").
- Acknowledge differences:** "Some people like it, and some people don't — that's okay."

Adaptations:

- Children can choose to paint their own hand/arm using a mirror.
- If touch feels difficult, children can feather-paint a soft toy.

Eyes closed can be offered, but never required.

This can help children to:

- Feel calm and settled in their bodies.
- Practise choice and consent.
- Build trusting relationships through safe interaction.



Day 5: Appreciation Circle – This is My Place

Purpose

Reflecting on positive experiences helps children notice moments of safety, support, and belonging. It strengthens community and helps children feel valued within the group.

How to run it:

Sit in a circle. Introduce a soft object (teddy/ball): “When you’re holding the teddy, it’s your turn.”

Model first with a simple sentence:
“I felt happy when...”
“I felt safe when...”

Pass the object around the circle. Each child is invited to share one moment from the week when they felt happy, safe, or supported.

Children can:

- Say a word or short phrase.
- Point to a picture/feelings card.
- Nod or smile.
- Pass.

Respond warmly to each contribution:

“Thank you for sharing.”
“That helped you feel safe.”

Close with a simple reminder:

“We help each other feel safe by being kind and listening.”

Adaptations:

- If ideas repeat, reflect the strength of the pattern (“Lots of you felt safe when...”), rather than asking for different answers.

For some children, sharing in a small group first may feel easier.

This can help children to:

- Recognise moments of safety and kindness.
- Feel heard and valued by adults and peers.
- Strengthen a shared sense of belonging.



Circle Time Plans



Circle Time Plans

Circle times offer a shared space for children to explore this year's theme '**This is My Place**' in a developmentally appropriate way. They can be used as planned sessions, or broken into shorter moments across the day.

Introducing Children's Mental Health Week: This is My Place

Purpose:

Children may not yet understand the word belonging, but they do have a strong felt sense of safety. This circle time uses stories, props, and gentle wondering to help children recognise what it feels like to be included and cared for — and what they can do to help others feel welcome.

Preparation:

Choose a picture book linked to belonging and safety.

Examples include:

- *Elmer* (David McKee)
- *Lost and Found* (Oliver Jeffers)
- *The Rainbow Fish* (Marcus Pfister)
- *Ten Little Fingers and Ten Little Toes* (Mem Fox)

Optional: puppets, a soft toy, simple props.

How to run it:

Sit children and adults together in a circle. Begin with a familiar welcome (song/routine if you have one).

Explain simply:

"This week we are learning about feeling happy and safe in the places where we play and learn."

Read the story. Pause gently to wonder:

- "How do you think the character feels here?"
- "What made them feel sad or left out?"
- "What helped them feel better?"

Bring it back to your setting:

- "What helps us feel happy and safe here?"
- "What could we do if we notice someone looks left out?"

Close with a clear, warm message:

"We all belong here. We are important. We are kind to each other."

Invite children to turn to someone nearby and give them a wave or smile.

This can help children to:

- Recognise feelings of safety and comfort.
- Begin to understand inclusion through stories.
- Notice ways to help others feel welcome.

Celebrating the Week: This is My Place

Purpose:

Shared music and movement creates togetherness in a way that is meaningful for young children. Copying one another, taking turns to lead, and finishing with warm adult noticing reinforces: "We belong here, together."

Preparation:

Choose music that supports belonging and togetherness (setting preference and licensing considered).

Prepare a space where children can move safely.

How to run it:

Warm up by "travelling" around the room in different ways: tiptoe, hop, skip, slow walk, jump, creep.

Bring everyone into a circle.

Explain: "When the music starts, I'll do a move — and you can copy."

Play music in short bursts (around 5–10 seconds), stopping and restarting a few times so it stays manageable.

Invite children (one at a time) to step into the middle and choose a move for everyone to copy. Participation is optional.

Finish seated in the circle. Name what you noticed:

"I saw lots of smiling."

"I noticed careful turn-taking."

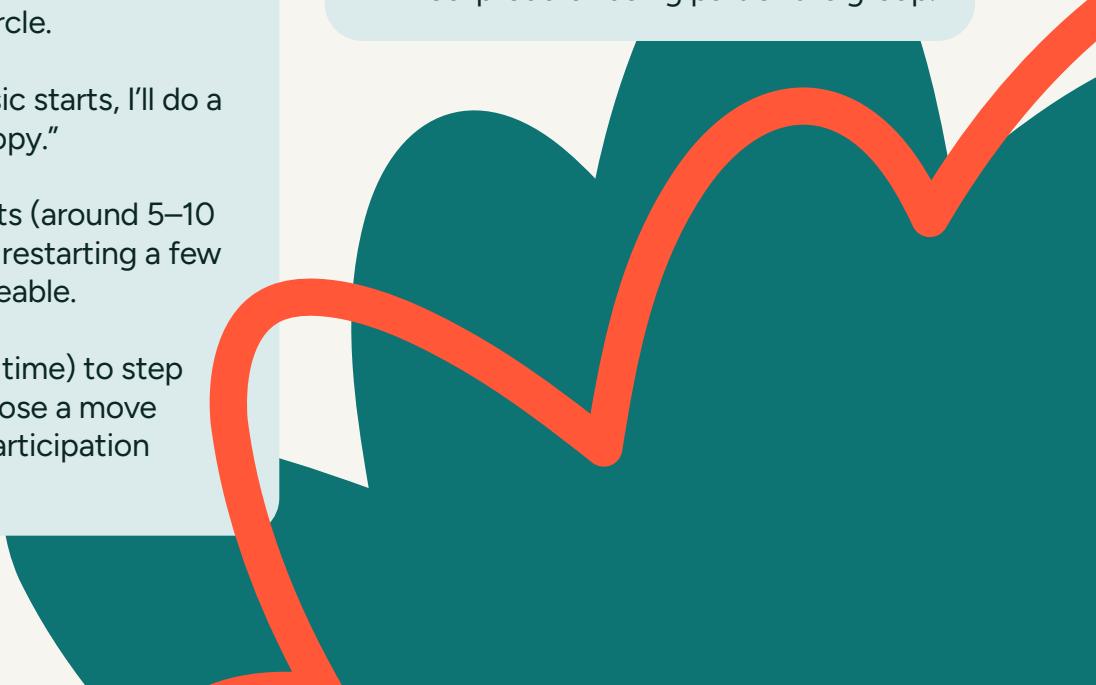
"I heard kind giggles and good listening."

Close by repeating the week's message:

"We all belong here. We are important and kind to each other."

This can help children to:

- Experience togetherness and inclusion.
- Build confidence through turn-taking and leading.
- Feel proud of being part of the group.





Keeping the work going

Children's Mental Health Week is an important moment, but belonging grows through what happens every day.

The ideas in this guide offer simple ways to support emotionally safe, relational practice throughout the year. At Thrive, we support early years settings to embed this work through training, tools, and whole setting approaches — so every child can feel safe, valued, and able to thrive.

To find out more about Thrive and how we work with schools, visit thriveapproach.com