

This is My Place

Children's Mental Health Week 2026

A secondary school guide to
supporting belonging through
emotionally safe, relational practice

9th–15th February 2026



Introduction

Children's Mental Health Week offers schools a moment to pause and reflect on young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Each year, the week brings a different focus. In 2026, the theme **'This is My Place'** invites secondary schools to think about belonging — and how students experience school as a place where they feel safe, included, and valued.

For many young people, school is one of the most significant places in their lives. It is where friendships develop, identity grows, learning happens, and trusted relationships with adults can make a lasting difference. How students feel in this place matters.

This guide supports secondary schools to explore the theme in a practical, relational way. It includes short tutor-time activities, relational strategies, and two assembly plans that can be adapted for your context.

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

Here at Thrive, our key 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

At Thrive, we understand that belonging begins with emotional safety and grows when young people feel that they matter.

Belonging is not created through one-off activities alone. It's built through everyday interactions — how students are greeted, how adults respond when things feel hard, and how students experience connection with peers and staff across the school day.

This year's theme encourages schools to notice and strengthen these everyday moments, helping children say with confidence:

“This is my place.”

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 and included.
- Feeling seen, safe and that they matter supports children's wellbeing and readiness to learn.



Understanding emotional safety, belonging and mattering.

What do we mean by emotional safety?

Emotional safety refers to a student's sense that they are accepted, respected, and able to express their thoughts, feelings, and needs without fear of shame, punishment, or exclusion. In an emotionally safe secondary environment, students feel secure enough to make mistakes, ask for help, and be themselves, knowing that adults will respond with care and fairness. This is important because emotional safety is the foundation for learning, wellbeing, and positive behaviour: when students feel safe, they are better able to concentrate, regulate their emotions, build relationships, and engage confidently in learning.

What do we mean by belonging?

Belonging is the felt sense of being part of a group where you are accepted as your true, authentic self. When students feel this way, they are more able to engage with others, access learning, and feel confident in themselves. Secondary school is a place where young people spend a significant amount of time across the week, moving between lessons, spaces, and relationships, and it is important that they feel accepted, valued, and included throughout the school day. Belonging is supported through positive relationships with staff and peers, celebrating individuality, creating an open school community, and establishing safe and welcoming spaces.

What do we mean by mattering?

Mattering is the feeling that you are noticed, valued, and important to others. Students feel they matter when adults listen to them, remember them, and recognise them for who they are — not only for what they achieve. Mattering is important because it strengthens self-worth, motivation, and engagement in learning; when students feel they matter, they are more likely to participate, persevere, build positive relationships, and develop a strong sense of belonging and wellbeing.

In summary

- Emotional safety allows young people to show up as themselves.
- Belonging helps students feel they fit.
- Mattering helps students feel important.



Relational Moments That Support Belonging and Mattering



Belonging is built through everyday interactions between adults and students — often in small, easily overlooked moments.

At Thrive, the ideas below reflect relational strategies used as part of our approach and training. They support adults to build trusting relationships, helping students feel emotionally safe, seen, and valued, and can be used throughout Children's Mental Health Week and beyond.

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

How: Greet students in a friendly, personalised way as they arrive at school, after breaks, or at the start of lessons. This might be a nod, a consistent phrase, a smile, a brief comment, or another small gesture that recognises the individual.

Why: A warm, personalised welcome helps students feel noticed rather than managed and sets a positive tone for learning and connection.

Relational moments that support belonging and mattering

Holding in mind

How: Let students know you have thought about them outside the immediate moment. For example: "I saw something at the weekend that made me think of you — it reminded me of your interest in..."

Why: This shows students they matter beyond tasks, behaviour, or outcomes, and reinforces the value you place on the relationship.

Listening with attention

How: Give students your full attention when they want to talk, even briefly. Pause other tasks where possible, offer open body language, and show interest by reflecting back what you've heard. If you can't listen fully in the moment, let the student know when you will and follow it up.

Why: Being listened to helps students feel valued, respected, and connected — strengthening their sense that they matter.

Playful connection

How: Share moments of appropriate humour, warmth, and shared enjoyment with students throughout the day. This might be through a light comment, a shared joke, showing interest in their hobbies, or noticing what matters to them. Stay open and available, tuning in to cues and responding in ways that feel respectful and genuine.

Why: Playful connection helps students feel relaxed, safe, and emotionally connected to the adults around them. When students experience adults as interested, accepting, and alongside them, relationships strengthen and belonging grows.

Curious responses

How: When students struggle or show signs of distress, respond with curiosity rather than judgement. For example, instead of "Why did you do that?" or "You know that's not okay," try: "I noticed it was hard to get started on that task — I wonder if something was getting in the way. That can feel really frustrating."

Why: Curious responses reduce shame and help students feel understood and supported. Taking time to respond to distress with care reinforces that they are important and worth support.

Tutor-Time Classroom Activities



Supporting belonging through everyday tutor-time moments

These activities are short, flexible, and suitable for KS3 and KS4. Each can be delivered in 10–20 minutes, with minimal resources.

Each activity takes a relational approach — strengthening connection between students and adults and supporting students to feel safe, included, and 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:

Metaphors give students a playful, low-pressure way to notice and share how they are feeling, without needing to label feelings directly. This supports emotional expression, empathy, and relational connection.

How to run it:

1. Explain this is a brief daily check-in.
Passing is always okay.
2. Offer a prompt, e.g.,
 - a. "If you were weather today, what would you be?"
 - b. "If you were a type of transport today, what would you be?"
3. Model your own response briefly.
4. Invite students to share with a partner, then optionally with the group.
5. Wonder gently alongside (no pressure to explain): "I wonder if that feels fast or slow today."
6. Adults note themes and check in privately where needed.

Adaptations:

Use emojis/colour cards for students who prefer concrete options.

This can help students to:

- Feel noticed and listened to.
- Build emotional vocabulary.
- Experience a safe, non-judgemental routine.



Day 2: Acrostic Poem — Belonging or Mattering

Purpose:

Exploring what belonging and mattering feel like helps students recognise what supports connection, inclusion, and wellbeing in school.

How to run it:

1. Write **BELONGING** and **MATTERING** on the board.
2. **Ask:** What do these words mean in school? Take a few responses.
3. **In pairs:** Where do you feel most comfortable in school? What helps you feel you matter?
4. Model one line together (e.g., “B = Being yourself around people who help you feel safe”).
5. Students create an acrostic for either word (words or short phrases).
6. Optional: a small drawing to represent one line.
7. Display or share anonymously.

How to run it (KS4 adaptation):

1. Add discussion prompts:
 - a. “Can you belong somewhere if you don’t feel you matter?”
 - b. “What affects whether students feel their voice matters here?”
2. Set expectations for fuller phrases and more precise language, rather than single words.
3. Close with a solution-focused reflection:
 - a. “What might stop students feeling a sense of belonging in school — and what could help?”

Adaptations:

- Students work in small groups (3–4).
- Alternative formats allowed: paragraph, poster, different poem style.
- For SEND or students working below age-related expectations, use the KS3 structure with visual supports.

This can help children to:

- Reflect on what belonging and mattering mean to them in school.
- Recognise and respect different experiences of belonging.
- Feel valued through shared ideas and collective reflection.

Day 3: Keep a Straight Face/ The Still Face

Purpose:

Non-verbal communication plays a powerful role in how we connect with others. This activity helps students notice facial expressions, eye contact, and emotional cues, and reflect on how these shape feelings of connection, safety, and belonging.

Students also gain a lived experience of **matter**ing — recognising that their attention, expressions, and responses affect how someone else feels. Choice, shared responsibility, and clear boundaries support emotional safety, while playfulness helps relationships feel more relaxed and human.

KS3: Keep a Straight Face

How to run it:

- Set clear boundaries together: polite humour only, no touch or physical gestures, opting out is always okay, mirrors available if helpful.
- Briefly explore non-verbal communication with the group (e.g. facial expression, eye contact, posture).
- In pairs, students label themselves A and B and sit facing each other.
- Partner A keeps a neutral face. Partner B has 30–60 seconds to try to make them smile or laugh using facial expressions only.
- Swap roles and repeat for a few rounds.
- Optional challenge: use only the top half or bottom half of the face.

Adaptations:

- Mirror option: sit side-by-side with a mirror if direct eye contact feels uncomfortable.
- Observer role: students can observe and contribute to reflection questions.
- Adults may join in to model playfulness, safety, and inclusion.

Reflect together:

- What felt easy or tricky?
- How did you notice your partner's cues?
- What helped your partner feel comfortable?
- Close with a brief, light adult-led moment to reset and reconnect.

KS4: The Still Face

How to run it:

1. Introduce non-verbal communication and emotional cues, linking this to how connection is built or disrupted.
2. If appropriate, refer back to the Still Face experiment shown in Assembly 1 (staff discretion).
3. In pairs, students label themselves A and B and sit facing each other.
4. Partner A talks about an interest (e.g. a hobby, activity, or place they enjoy).
5. Partner B responds in stages:
 - a. **30 seconds:** active listening using facial expression, posture, and eye contact (no verbal responses).
 - b. **30 seconds:** a disengaged or "still face" response.
 - c. **30 seconds:** re-engaging warmly and attentively.
6. Swap roles so both students experience each positions.

Adaptations:

Same as KS3: mirror option, observer role, and adult participation where helpful.

Reflect together:

- How did disengagement feel?
 - What changed when connection returned?
 - How did you notice the shift?
- Link explicitly to mattering — being noticed, heard, and emotionally responded to.

This can help students to:

- Notice how attention and facial expression affect connection and safety.
- Experience shared playfulness within clear boundaries.
- Feel that they matter through being noticed and responded to.
- Build empathy and confidence in social interaction.



Day 4: Creating My Place

Purpose:

Students explore what emotional safety, belonging, and mattering mean in a practical way — without needing personal disclosure. Creating an “ideal place” allows students to express needs safely, while shared themes help staff understand what students value and what supports their wellbeing.

How to run it:

Revisit the theme This is My Place and share simple definitions:

- Emotional safety helps me show up as myself.
- Belonging helps me feel I fit.
- Mattering helps me feel important.

Invite students to think about places in their lives that support these needs (without sharing personal details).

Students design an “ideal place” that may include:

- Physical features (spaces, objects).
- Relational features (how people behave).
- Emotional needs (calm, choice, fairness, being known).
- Metaphorical features (light, weather, music, colour).

Collect work and identify common themes anonymously. Share these themes through displays or in the celebration assembly.

Adaptations:

- Offer templates (room outline, mind map, labelled sections).
- Allow collage, keywords, or symbols rather than drawing.

This can help students to:

- Recognise what helps them feel safe, included, and valued.
- Express needs without pressure to share personal experiences.
- Feel that their views and voices matter within the school community.
- Develop a clearer sense of belonging and wellbeing.



Day 5: Guided Visualisation

Purpose:

Guided visualisation supports regulation and emotional safety through a shared, low-pressure experience, showing students that their wellbeing matters.

How to run it:

Invite students to sit comfortably, with feet on the floor, hands resting and eyes closed.

Read the script slowly and calmly:

- Take a slow breath in... and gently breathe out, letting the out-breath be longer. Repeat this three times.
- Imagine yourself at the edge of a wide open space. The air feels gentle and you notice the ground beneath you.
- You begin to walk along a path, noticing what you can hear, smell, and see.
- You reach a place that feels steady and calm. Pause here for a moment.
- When you're ready, walk back along the path to where you began.
- Bring your attention back to the room. Notice your breathing and your body in the chair. When you're ready, open your eyes.

Offer optional reflection prompts (no pressure to share):

- What stood out?
- What helped the place feel comfortable?
- What helps you feel calm and settled in school?

Briefly link back to emotional safety — feeling safe enough to focus, ask for help, and learn.

Adaptations:

Eyes open, different imagery, or a shorter version can be used if needed.

This can help students to:

- Feel calm and regulated in a shared, safe way
- Develop ways to settle themselves during stress
- Feel that their wellbeing is noticed and valued
- Reflect on what helps them feel safe at school

Assemblies



Exploring 'This is My Place'

Assemblies offer a shared space for students to explore the theme 'This is My Place.'

They are designed to be used in:

- **Assembly 1:** early in the week (launch)
- **Assembly 2:** later in the week (reflection/celebration)

These assemblies bring learning together and support students to feel proud of school as a place where they are safe, included, and valued.

If you plan to hold Assembly 2, let staff know in advance so students can prepare a small example from one activity. Keep sharing focused on belonging, connection and safety, not performance.

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

Purpose:

To introduce Children's Mental Health Week and build a shared understanding of emotional safety, belonging, and mattering — using clear examples and gentle reflection.

Session outline:

1. As students enter, greet as many as possible verbally and non-verbally to create a warm, welcoming atmosphere.
2. Introduce Children's Mental Health Week and this year's theme, This is My Place (slide 3).
3. Use the slides to explore emotional safety, belonging, and mattering, using student-friendly language and examples.
4. Use the provided clips or examples to explore belonging and mattering in practice:
 - a. Examples of connection being missed and repaired (KS3), and/or
 - b. Reflection linked to the Still Face experiment (KS4).
5. Invite brief pupil responses, such as:
 - a. "Where in school do people feel they belong?"
 - b. "What helps someone feel that they matter?" Acknowledge responses and, where helpful, note common themes.
6. Close using the final slide to encourage students to be self-aware and intentional, noticing their own experiences and looking out for small ways to help others feel included and valued throughout the week.

[Download KS3 Slides](#)

[Download KS4 Slides](#)

Celebrating the Week: This is My Place

Purpose:

To reflect on learning from the week and reinforce that belonging grows through everyday actions.

Preparation:

- Add photos (with permission) that show belonging and mattering in action across the week.
- Identify 4–6 students or tutor representatives to share a short example (or tutors may share on behalf of groups).

Session outline:

1. **Welcome students into the space and set a warm, reflective tone.**
2. Using the reflection slide, invite around 60 seconds of quiet thinking:
 - a. Something you noticed about belonging this week.
 - b. A moment you felt included or supported.
 - c. Something small that made a difference.

3. Share brief feedback on what staff have noticed across the week that has helped foster a sense of belonging and mattering within the school.

4. Share photos (if using), inviting students to notice what they can see: "What shows belonging or mattering here?" (e.g. working together, creating calm spaces, supporting one another).

5. Invite short shares from students or tutor representatives.

This might include:

- a. A creative piece
- b. A metaphor check-in example
- c. A brief reflection from an activity

Keep sharing brief and focus on connection, relationships, and belonging, rather than outcomes or performance.

6. Close with a reminder that school is one of their places, and conclude with the shared quote or motto that captures the week's learning.

Download KS3 & KS4 Slides



Keeping the work going

Children's Mental Health Week is a powerful moment — but belonging grows through what happens every day.

This guide offers a snapshot of how emotionally safe, relational practice can support young people to feel included and valued during the week and beyond.

At Thrive, we support schools to embed this work throughout the year.

Through training, tools, and whole school approaches, we help staff respond with confidence and consistency — so every student can feel safe, included, and able to thrive.

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