Discussing Mental Health with Your Child Through Picture Books

Picture books are an excellent way to start conversations with young children about mental health issues that affect us all. It can be a difficult topic to approach, especially if you are not sure how to initiate or explain the subject. In this episode, our podcaster will share their top picture book recommendations for discussing mental health with children, as well as why addressing it is important for their emotional intelligence.

Alex’s Picture Book Recommendations:

*When Sadness Comes to Call* by Eva Eland (2020)

“The beautiful debut by author-illustrator talent Eva Eland takes a poignant but uplifting look at dealing with sadness.” (Waterstones, 2020)
When Sadness Comes to Call by Eva Eland. Published by Andersen Press.


“A book to bring people together, Charlie Mackesy’s inspirational paintings and delicate calligraphic text are a celebration of kindness, compassion and understanding, conveying an essential message for our time.” (Waterstones, 2019)
"What is the bravest thing you’ve ever said?" asked the boy.

"Help," said the horse.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"Kind." said the boy.
Jestem. Filozoficzne pytania, które zadaja sobie dzieci by Hanna Lupinska (2021)

“Your child will create this book with you. Together, you will go to the land of unanswerable questions. Questions so unpredictable and difficult that only children ask. Or philosophers.” (Empik, 2021)
Children’s Mental Health Resources:

Addressing Sensitive Issues through Picture Books by Dorothy N. Bowen and Melissa Schutt.

Children’s mental health – Every Mind Matters - NHS

How Board Books Help Kids Develop Emotional Intelligence by Dan Yaccarino.

How to talk to your child about emotions by CBeebies.

Support your child’s mental health by Place2be.

YoungMinds | Mental Health Charity for Children and Young Adults
PODCAST SCRIPT

Introduction

Hello, and welcome to OICP’s new series in which we discuss topics related to children’s and YA publishing. I’m Alex, and today (22/10/2021), we’re going to talk about how adults can use picture books to initiate conversations with children about mental wellbeing. Make sure to listen all the way through as there are great book recommendations at the end. Let’s get started!

Mental Health:

So why is it important to address mental health issues at an early age? According to Anxious Minds (2021) in 2020, “one in six (16%) children aged 5 to 16 were identified as having a probable mental disorder.”\(^1\) Given the ongoing events of last year – the pandemic – things can appear daunting. Many children are most likely struggling with all the changes in their social and personal lives – homeschooling, being unable to socialise with friends, the loss of family members, and so on. It is our responsibility as adults to help with our children’s mental health by maintaining good dialogue with them about being open to discuss any concerns they may have. I think that reading is one of the best ways to improve communication with children. Reading increases the child’s emotional intelligence as well as their ability to develop language to describe their feelings. By being able to address and be open about their emotions, we adults can provide them with appropriate help and ways to cope with those emotions before they get worse.

Picture Books:

So why picture books? I think they are a wonderful way to explain sensitive themes to youngsters while also teaching them important lessons in an easy-to-digest and enjoyable manner. Stories are an excellent tool for demonstrating how to recognise and deal with the emotions that arise when encountering something new. Sensitive Matters (2021) mention that “children’s books [...] can help show your child that they aren’t alone and help them understand and process their emotions around the situation.” Seeing characters go through similar circumstances allows them to relate and realise they are not alone in this situation. Thus, demonstrating how picture books are a good starting point of discussion – if a child recognises a similar feeling or event in the book that they are experiencing themselves, then they have the opportunity to explore the topic further while having this one-on-one time with an adult. This is a time where all the focus is on the child, so this is the chance for them to be honest about their feelings because, at this moment, they feel supported and listened to.

Book Recommendations:

The theme of mental health in children’s books is becoming increasingly popular, and publishers are keeping a keen eye on it. Pam Smy (2021) wrote in the Bookseller that “as mental health issues are being discussed more openly in society generally, a wider range of books that look at emotional wellbeing are being made by students and welcomed by publishers.” Publishers are realising that it is important for children to see familiar situations or emotions and be able to relate to them so that they do not isolate themselves or think of themselves as damaged.

You may ask yourself, where do I begin, what books do I choose? Look no further because I will provide you with my top 3 picks. Here they are:

\(^1\) https://www.anxiousminds.co.uk/
1. *When Sadness Comes to Call* by Eva Eland (2020)

This touching picture book introduces the notion of mental well-being and teaches children how to recognise and understand tough emotions. It carefully allows young children to address and control their anxieties, as well as build empathy for others who may be suffering from depression.

2. *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox, and the Horse* by Charlie Mackesy (2019)

The tale follows the blossoming of a surprising friendship between four unlikely characters. Through a series of brief but insightful conversations, they emphasise the themes of vulnerability, kindness, hope, friendship, and love. The four friends’ shared adventures and important conversations are packed with life lessons that will resonate with readers of all ages.

3. *Jestem. Filozoficzne pytania, które zadają sobie dzieci.* [I am. Philosophical questions, that children ask themselves] by Hanna Lupinska

This is the perfect book to help children master the art of holding discussions, arguing their perspectives, listening, and respecting other people’s views. Although it is not strictly about mental health, *Jestem* is a great book for children to work on their imaginative thinking and improve their confidence in sharing their opinions. It will help to develop their awareness, sensitivity, and curiosity. The illustrations included in the book help to stimulate children further in their discussions. For example, when the book asks the question “Does the world really look the way I see it?” (Lupinska, 2021:12), the corresponding illustration is that of a potted plant, tulip I believe, but its shadow is a potted cactus, prompting the question, is everything really what it seems?

**Conclusion**

So here it is! I hope everybody enjoyed this episode. Please feel free to check out the website for further resources on children’s mental health and a sneak peek to some of my favourite illustrations from the books.

Thank you for listening and have a great week!
Assignment 1: Children’s and YA podcast
Student Number: 19037525

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