



How to talk about children's mental health

A toolkit to build understanding of the factors shaping children's mental health and drive support for change

In partnership with:

Impact
on **Urban**
Health

About this guide

This framing guide was written by [FrameWorks UK](#) with support from Impact on Urban Health.

It is a guide for anyone working in, or communicating about, children's mental health; particularly those who want to address the causes of poor mental health in children including the role of poverty and racism.

It is also for those who want to build greater understanding of the role of prevention and drive support for action to create good mental health for children.

These framing insights are based on qualitative and quantitative research with more than 1,000 people across the UK by FrameWorks UK in 2025/26. The research revealed the mindsets underpinning how people think about children's mental health. The framing recommendations in this guide help communicators to navigate these mindsets to tap into the productive ideas people already hold – and avoid triggering the less productive ones.

What is framing?

Framing is the **choices we make about the ideas we share, and how we share them.**

This includes what we choose to **emphasise**, how we **explain** things and what we **leave unsaid.**

These choices change how people **think, feel and act.**

Framing recommendations at a glance

- 1. Show what good mental health is and enables children to do.** Good mental health is vital for children's development, day-to-day lives and supports their ability to withstand life's shocks and challenges
- 2. Explain how children's surroundings shape their mental health.** To build understanding of the drivers of poor mental health in children, we can use step-by-step explanation, specific metaphors and housing as an example.
- 3. Explain how racism shows up in our children's lives.** Give tangible examples of how racism is built into the institutions and systems surrounding our children, and how this can impact mental health.
- 4. Show change is possible.** Show there are concrete things we can do to create good mental health in children and explain how they work.

**How do people
think about
children's mental
health?**



Cultural mindsets guide our thinking

- They are assumptions, **shared patterns of thinking**, that shape how we see the world.
- They sit below the level of opinion or talk – helping to explain not just ***what*** we think but ***why*** we think it.
- They're **activated** by what we **see and hear**.



What cultural mindsets do we hold about children's mental health?

- **Quality of Relationships = Quality of Mental Health** Children's mental health is determined *only* by the relationships in their lives, particularly parents.
- **Environments = People** Wider systems and surroundings, and how they shape children's mental health, are often missing from view.
- **Mental Health = Mental Illness** An issue we only consider when someone is experiencing poor mental health.
- **Babies are Blank Slates** suggesting babies and young children don't have mental health.
- To create good mental health **All Children Need is Love**
- When children struggle with their mental health, we sometimes think using **Determinism** - that damage done is damage done.

**Quality of
Relationships
= Quality of
Mental Health**

Environments
= People

Family Bubble

All Children
Need is Love

Why we need a new story

Many of the dominant assumptions, or mindsets, we hold about children's mental health make it harder to see the role that children's surroundings play in shaping their mental health. From whether they have a safe, warm home, to a neighbourhood with space to run and play. This makes it harder to build support for solutions to promote children's mental health.

The focus of children's mental health advocates tends to be on the scale of mental health problems - and because people think of mental health in terms of mental illness, it makes it harder to build support and drive action which can prevent poor mental health in the first place.

In short, children's mental health feels to many of us like a problem that is too big or difficult to solve.

We need a new story that shows what good mental health is and how it can be created. A story which explains the factors shaping children's mental health today. A story that shows how we can prevent poor mental health, and provide the right support, at the right time, to help children thrive.

4 ways to tell a new story about children's mental health



Recommendation #1

**Show what good mental health
is and enables children to do**

Show what good mental health is and enables children to do

1. Provide a clear definition of what **good** children's mental health is
2. **Explain** how good children's mental health is created from pregnancy onwards
3. Be specific about the age of children we're talking about. Explicitly talk about **babies and toddlers** when talking about mental health in young kids so that people don't 'age up'.



Provide a clear definition of what good children's mental health is

We tend to assume that when we're talking about mental health, we're talking about mental illness. It's something we only think about when someone is already struggling. To build greater support and action to prevent poor mental health in the first place, we need to help people see what good mental health is and how it can be created.

How to do it

- Describe **good** mental health and talk about what it **enables** children to do
- Emphasise the role of **good mental health** in **children's development, day-to-day lives** and how it supports their ability to withstand life's **shocks and challenges**

Before

More and more children are experiencing mental health issues, including very young children. This is an important issue that must be tackled as a priority.



After

When toddlers and young children have good mental health, it means they are able to learn and develop, build strong relationships, and cope with life's challenges, big and small.

Explain how good children's mental health is created from pregnancy onwards

- Describe how we can support children's mental health from **before they are born, through their first years and beyond**
- Talk about the things we can do which **help to create good mental health** in the early years from quality maternity support to reduce stress during pregnancy to children and family centres offering a range of advice, support and connection

For example:

“The experiences children have as babies and toddlers lay the foundations for their future learning, health, and wellbeing. We can support children's mental health from conception by providing access to good maternity support and high-quality childcare.”

Be specific about the age of children we're talking about

People assume that babies and young children don't have mental health, and that it is something that develops over time as children get older. This means that when we're talking about children's mental health, people will assume we are talking about older kids and teenagers.

How to do it

- If we are talking about younger children, be specific. Talk about **babies and toddlers** or state the specific age – **children under 5** or **primary school age** children.
- If you're talking about mental health across the whole of childhood and adolescence, consider using phrases like “**mental health from birth to adolescence...**” rather than only talking about children's mental health to help show that children and young people of all ages have mental health.

Recommendation #2

**Explain how children's
surroundings shape their
mental health**

Explain how children's surroundings shape their mental health

1. Explain **step-by-step** what is shaping children's mental health
2. Use the metaphor the **building blocks of mental health** to explain the wider factors shaping children's mental health
3. Talk about **homes** as a route in
4. Connect parents' financial struggles to **the bigger picture**
5. Use the **overloaded** metaphor to build understanding of what happens when parents are weighed down by financial worries



Explain step-by-step what is shaping children's mental health

The factors which shape poor mental health in childhood, and how we can create good children's mental health are not well understood.

When we explain step-by-step, it builds understanding of how children's surroundings shape their mental health and helps point towards more upstream solutions.

How to do it

- Don't assume your audience has knowledge of the factors shaping children's mental health
- Spell out **step-by-step** how one thing leads to another
- Use words which explicitly link cause and effect: this **leads** to, this **means**, this **causes**, this **results** in etc
- Focus on just one driver of children's mental health at a time

What this looks like

Cause: When local wages are low or only offer irregular hours



Step 1: It **means** that it is harder for families to afford the things we all need like a decent home, healthy food and money to pay the bills.



Step 2: When families are constantly worried about making ends meet, it can **lead** to increased stress and anxiety for adults and children alike.



Consequence: This can contribute to poor children's mental health.



Solution: To support good children's mental health, we need to improve wages and job security.

Step-by-step example

When local jobs are scarce, and wages are low, it makes it harder for families to afford the things we all need like a decent home, healthy food and money to pay the bills. Constantly worrying about making ends meet can **lead** to increased stress and anxiety for parents and children alike. To improve children's mental health, we need to lift more families out of poverty, and that starts with boosting wages and creating local jobs.

The building blocks of mental health

Talk about the **building blocks of health and wellbeing** or the **building blocks of mental health** to explain the things all children need to be mentally healthy.

Why it works

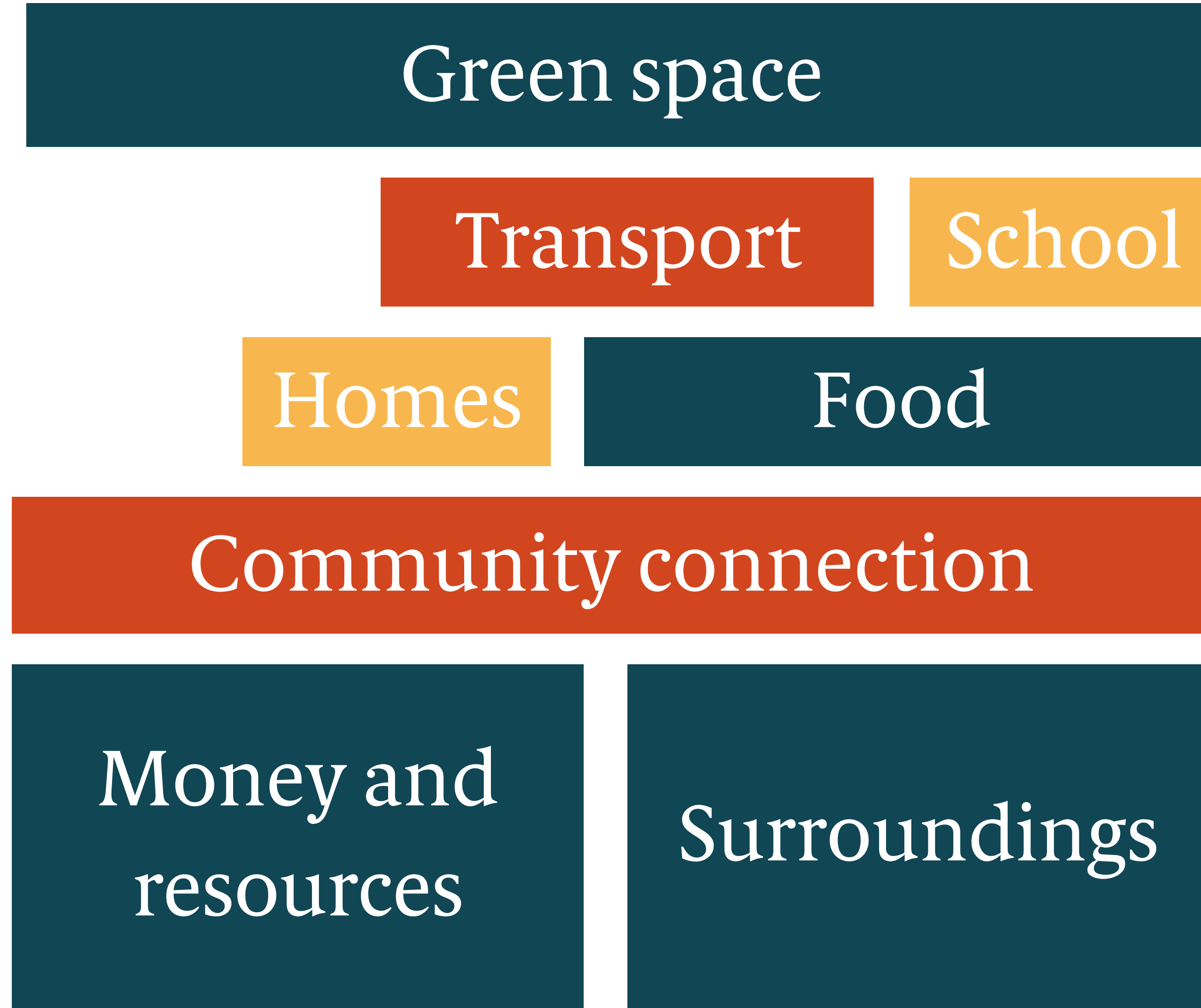
Metaphors are a powerful way of explaining something complex. They create a vivid mental picture which makes it easier to understand.

How to do it

- Compare building thriving childhoods with that of constructing a sturdy building.
- Each building block represents one thing all children need to be mentally healthy. Things like: a secure home, a good school, family income that covers the bills, and green space to run and play.

“For every child to thrive, we need the right **building blocks of health and wellbeing** in place: secure homes, stable incomes, good schools, community connection and access to green space.

For too many families, **blocks are missing**. It’s time to fix the gaps.”



Connect parents' financial struggles to the bigger picture

Draw links to the wider cost-of-living crisis, to show that these aren't the struggles of one family alone.

For example:

“Right now, our economy isn't designed for families to succeed. The rising cost of housing, food, heating, and high childcare costs means too many of us are struggling to make ends meet. This is leading to increased worry, stress, and poor mental health for both parents and children. It's time to redesign our economy, starting with increasing the amount of affordable housing.”



Use home as a route in

Often one of the best ways to explain something is to provide an example. Housing can be a useful route into talking about how children's wider surroundings shape their mental health, because it's already an idea that people are familiar with.

How to do it

- Describe how having a **safe, secure, warm home** is vital for children's mental health
- Talk about **homes** rather than **housing**
- Explain **how** a home shapes a child's mental health from the security of knowing where they're going to sleep each night, to having a safe space to learn and study
- Be clear that home is the **foundation** from which children can grow and thrive
- Use words that link cause and effect: this means, this leads to, this results in etc



Having a secure home **means** that a child has a safe space to put down roots. It **means** that they are not constantly worrying about where they are going to sleep. A secure home **leads** to reduced stress and improved mental health.

Use the overloaded metaphor

Use the **overloaded** metaphor to explain how parents can struggle when different challenges add up and how this impacts children's mental health. This metaphor works by showing that our circumstances shape our behaviour.

How to do it

- Describe how challenges like a job loss, money worries or illness can **overload** parents
- Use words like **overloaded** or **weighed down** to show how these challenges combine – and how the right supports can help to **lighten the load**.
- This is particularly useful for talking about the impact of stress on parents and how it affects their ability to be the parents they want to be.



When parents are **weighed down** with stresses like money worries, these problems can **overload** their mental and emotional capacity to take care of their children's needs. Over time, carrying and managing **heavy loads** puts a strain on families, weakening parents' abilities to support their children, and increasing stress and anxiety for kids.

We can **take the weight off** families by providing more financial support like increasing child benefit payments and ensuring that child-related benefits go up with inflation.



When parents become **overloaded** by things like job loss, debt, or money worries they can have a hard time staying on track – and giving children the care and attention they need to thrive.

Financial advice, support and a listening ear, like those offered at family hubs, can help by **lightening the load** on parents.

Recommendation #3

**Explain how racism shows up
in our children's lives**

Explain how racism shows up in our children's lives

1. Don't rely on technical terms like systemic racism, instead **explain** what they mean
2. Give **concrete examples** of how racism shows up in our children's lives



Don't rely on technical terms, like systemic racism, instead explain what they mean

People tend to think of racism **interpersonally**, as one person being cruel, or prejudiced, to another because of the colour of their skin. This makes it harder for people to see how **systems** and **institutions** can be **racist by design**. To build understanding, we need to instead *explain* what this looks like.

Explain what terms like systemic racism mean and how they work with real-life examples:

“Underlying racism is a system of ideas, laws and customary ways of doing things. These systems have been designed in ways which shut out Black and other minoritised people, limiting key opportunities and freedoms.

For example, studies have shown biases in hiring mean that equally qualified Black and other minoritised candidates are less likely to be invited to interviews than their white peers.”

Give concrete examples of how racism shows up in our children's lives

Use examples which point to how systems, structures and institutions are racist by design, explaining how they work and how this affects children's mental health.

Example 1:

Young Black boys are more likely to be stopped and searched by the police than their white peers due to racist stereotypes and attitudes across the police. This constant surveillance, suspicion, and stigmatisation, and the negative experience of being stopped and searched, can **lead** to increased stress and anxiety and higher rates of self-harm.

Example 2:

Black families are more likely to be in temporary accommodation and be there for longer than white families. This is **caused** by a number of factors from discrimination in the private rented sector making housing insecurity worse, to racism and stereotyping when applying for social housing.

More than 1 in 3 children don't have a bed of their own in temporary accommodation, and nearly half have to move school as a result of becoming homeless. This lack of a safe and stable home can **lead** to increased stress and anxiety and worsen children's mental health.

Recommendation #4

Show change is possible

Show change is possible

1. Talk about the fact that **we can** improve children's mental health and **mention solutions early and often** in our communications
2. Explain **how** solutions can create **good mental health** and prevent poor mental health from happening in the first place — including **the role of government and wider society**



Talk about how to improve children's mental health early and often in our communications

How to do it?

- Talk explicitly about the fact that **we can** prevent poor mental health in children
- Talk about **concrete solutions** to improve children's mental health. Make sure we talk about **systemic, upstream solutions** at least as often as we talk about individual support
- Mention solutions **early and often** in our communications
- Balance **urgency** (we need to act) with **efficacy** (we can fix this) by using the 2:1 ratio. For every dose of urgency in our communications, we need at least two doses of 'we can do something about this'.

Before

Over the past decade, mental health problems among young people have risen dramatically. It raises urgent questions about the root causes of this growing crisis.



After

By addressing the root causes of poor mental health — from supporting families weighed down by money worries to investing in spaces for community connection — **we can** reverse the dramatic rise in mental health problems among young people.

Explain how solutions can create good mental health

The only solutions to improving children's mental health that are top of mind for people are talking therapies and medication. How we could act to prevent poor mental health in the first place, is often missing from view. By *explaining* how upstream solutions work, we build understanding and bring this thinking to the foreground.

How to do it

- Don't assume people will immediately make the links between things like reducing poverty and improving children's mental health
- Spell it out using words that link cause and effect: this means, this leads to, this results in
- Consider bring solutions to the beginning of communications

Before

The mental health crisis among young people is not an isolated issue. We need to address the fundamental factors that cultivate good mental health, from nurturing supportive relationships to building resilience and creating environments that reduce unnecessary stress.



After

By building more social homes and improving renters rights, the government can support more young people to grow up in safe, secure homes. When young people don't have to worry about where they are going to sleep, and have a space to learn and socialise, it leads to reduced stress and improved mental health. This is one of the ways we can create environments that cultivate good youth mental health.

Further resources

- Castellina, M, Shaw, C, John, J, Miller, T (2026) How do people think about children's mental health? Implications for communicators, FrameWorks UK.
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- NSPCC (2021) Sharing the Brain Story: Using Metaphors to Explain Child Development <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/2547/sharing-the-brain-story-metaphors-summary-booklet.pdf>
- O'Neil, M, Pineau, M.G. & Hyatt, T. (2020). Each and every child: How to talk about care experience in Scotland, FrameWorks Institute.



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