



Discussion Questions

For children aged 5 and under, it is best to avoid the clinical term "mental health" entirely. Instead, phrase it in terms they can already see and feel, like **"how your brain feels"** or **"taking care of your inside-feelings."**

Simple Definitions to Use

When you need to explain what it is, try these simple phrases:

- **The "Brain and Body" Connection:** "Just like you take care of your body by eating broccoli and washing your hands, mental health is how we take care of our minds so we can feel happy and calm."
- **How We Feel and Act:** "Mental health is how we think, feel, and act every day."
- **A "Feeling Thermometer":** Explain that everyone has "inside weather" that changes. Sometimes it's sunny (happy), and sometimes it's stormy (angry or sad), and mental health is learning how to handle those storms.

Comparing it to Physical Health

Comparing "feeling sick in the head" to "feeling sick in the tummy" is often the most effective way to help a preschooler understand.

- **Visible vs. Invisible:** "If you scrap your knee, I can see the boo-boo and put a Band-Aid on it. Mental health is like a boo-boo on the *inside* that we can't see, but we can still help it feel better by talking or resting."
- **The Brain's Job:** "Your brain has a big job—it helps you learn, play, and feel. Sometimes the brain gets 'tired' or 'grouchy' and needs a little extra help to feel better, just like when you have a cold."

Reassuring Phrases

If a child is worried about their own feelings or those of a family member, use these "anchor" phrases:

- **"It's not your fault":** Young children often blame themselves when they or those around them are unhappy. Always emphasize that feelings are just things that happen and aren't caused by them.
- **"Feelings are like visitors":** "Sadness or anger might come to visit for a little while, but they always leave eventually. They don't stay forever."
- **"We are a team":** "Whenever your 'inside-feelings' feel too big or scary, you can always tell me, and we will work on them together."

For children aged 5 and under, "mental health" isn't a concept they can grasp yet. Instead, the goal is to help them **identify emotions** and **visualize** how they feel using simple, concrete comparisons.

1. Daily "Internal Weather" & Mood Questions

Since young children can't always describe complex feelings, use visual metaphors to help them express their internal state.

- **"If your mood were the weather right now, what would it be? Is it a sunny day, a little bit cloudy, or a thunderstorm?"**
- **"What color are you feeling like right now?"** (e.g., "Red" for angry, "Blue" for sad).
- **"What was the 'best' part of your day? What was the 'hard' part?"**
- **"Who did you have fun playing with today?"**

2. Using "I Wonder" Statements

Preschoolers often respond better to observation than direct questioning. This removes the pressure of having to find the "right" answer.

- **"I see your tummy feels tight. I wonder if you might be feeling a little bit worried?"**
- **"You're making a very big frown. I wonder if you're feeling frustrated that we had to stop playing?"**
- **"I noticed you were very quiet during lunch. I wonder if anything made you feel sad?"**

3. Check-ins Through Play & Storytelling

Children under 5 primarily process their world through **play**. Use toys or books to distance the emotion from the child, making it safer to discuss.

- **With Toys:** "How is your teddy bear feeling today? Is he feeling brave or maybe a little bit scared?"
- **During Stories:** Pause while reading and ask, "Look at the character's face. How do you think they are feeling right now?"
- **Mirror Play:** Make funny or sad faces together in a mirror and ask, "What does it look like when someone is happy? What about when they are angry?"

4. Body Connection Questions

Young kids often experience emotions as physical sensations. [1, 9]

- **"Where in your body do you feel the 'mads'?"** (Pointing to chest, head, or stomach).
- **"Is your heart beating fast like a drum, or is it quiet?"**.
- **"Do your hands feel like they want to squeeze something or are they relaxed?"**.

Quick Interaction Tips

- **Sportscasting:** Narrate what you see ("I see you're stomping your feet, it looks like you're very angry") to help them learn the vocabulary for their actions.
- **Model Calming:** Instead of just telling them to calm down, model it: "I'm feeling a little frustrated, so I'm going to take three big 'belly breaths' to help my body feel better".

Using books to talk about feelings can take the pressure off a young child, allowing them to project their emotions onto a character rather than having to explain themselves directly.

Here are some highly-rated books for children aged 5 and under that focus on identifying and managing big emotions.

Top Recommendations for Toddlers & Preschoolers

[The Color Monster](#) by Anna Llenas: A popular choice for this age group, this book uses different colors to represent emotions (e.g., yellow for happy, blue for sad). It is available at retailers like Walmart and [Barnes & Noble](#).

[In My Heart: A Book of Feelings](#) by Jo Witek: This beautifully illustrated book describes how different emotions—like bravery, sadness, and happiness—feel physically inside a child's heart.

[The Rabbit Listened](#) by Cori Doerrfeld: This gentle story highlights the importance of simply being present and listening when a child is going through a difficult time.

[The Feelings Book](#) by Todd Parr: Known for its vibrant, simple illustrations, this book normalizes a wide range of everyday feelings, from being silly to feeling lonely.

[Ruby Finds a Worry](#) by Tom Percival: Part of the *Big Bright Feelings* series, this book personifies a "worry" as a growing scribble, teaching kids that talking about their anxieties helps make them smaller.

Managing Specific "Big" Emotions

- **Anger:** [When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry...](#) by Molly Bang shows a little girl using nature and quiet time to calm her body after a meltdown.
- **Grumpiness:** [Grumpy Monkey](#) by Suzanne Lang tells the story of a monkey who is having a bad day and reminds readers that it's okay to just feel grumpy sometimes without being forced to "cheer up".
- **Nervousness:** [Wemberly Worried](#) by Kevin Henkes is an excellent resource for children who feel anxious about new situations, like starting school.
- **Calming Down:** [Breathe Like a Bear](#) by Kira Willey offers 30 short mindfulness and breathing exercises specifically designed for young children to find focus and calm.

Interaction Tip

When reading these together, ask **open-ended questions** like, "*Have you ever felt like the Color Monster did on this page?*" or "*What do you think helped the character feel better?*" This turns the story into a natural bridge for them to share their own experiences.