THE CATALYST

5 movies to help you talk to your kids about mental health

Even children can struggle with mental health challenges. But how do you explain mental health to children in an age-appropriate way? It's got to be engaging, it's got to be fun, and it's got to be relevant. My 10-year-old son gets a lot of mental health messaging from me, his "StigmaCrusher" mom, but I'm "just his mom" so I lean on the power of media.

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Even children can struggle with mental health challenges. But how do you explain mental health to children in an age-appropriate way? It's got to be engaging, it's got to be fun, and it's got to be relevant. My 10-year-old son gets a lot of mental health messaging from me, his "StigmaCrusher" mom, but I'm "just his mom" so I lean on the power of media.

While their older siblings may turn to TikTok and YouTube for information about mental health (with sometimes questionable success), you can reach younger children through books and movies that you can watch together. It's a good idea to preview the story and make sure the information is sound and the messaging is appropriate.

So, here are my top 5 recommendations for movies for the 5–10-year-old set that inspire teachable moments about mental health.

1. **Inside Out**
   You knew it was coming. This Disney Pixar movie about the inner life of a 11-year-old Riley features the five basic emotions personified – and depending on the age of your little one a variety of conversations can follow. Whether they need help identifying their feelings or are starting to question the subtle interplay of their emotions (like Riley learns to do in the film) Inside Out is the quintessential film about childhood mental health.
2. **Finding Nemo**
   Marlin is struggling with grief and anxiety, Nemo is on a journal of self-discovery, the sharks are in treatment for addiction, Dory is working with ADHD and memory loss and Gill can be talked about in the context of depression. This action-packed feast for the eyes is full of conversations about mental health and mental illness (just search "Finding Nemo and Mental Health" if you don't believe me!) that even the youngest of viewers can understand – and with entertaining characters and a quick-moving plot even parents will look forward to revisiting it again and again as kids grow up.
3. **Frozen**
   "Be the good girl you always have to be/ Conceal, don't feel/ Don't let them know" – Frozen

is an excellent portrait of mental health stigma and the gradual overcoming of self-stigma. Kids know when they're "different" and so do their classmates and friends. And when that difference is a mental health issue – theirs or a family member's – the stigma against mental illness can cast a shadow of shame causing them to conceal what they are going through. As Elsa learns that what makes her different isn't bad, but very manageable (and even a superpower sometimes!) kids of every age can relate to their own struggles. Beautiful princesses, likeable characters and a killer soundtrack keeps everyone entertained.

4. **Christopher Robin**
   Eeyore is sad, Piglet is worried, Tigger is hyper – the world of A.A. Milne is a treasure trove of mental health archetypes. By entering into that world through the tale of Christopher Robin, children and adults alike are invited to join Pooh and the gang in helping the titular character find himself by escorting them back to 100 Acre Woods. With enough plot to keep older children and adults engaged, and the timeless characters to mesmerize the younger set, this film sets up conversations about feelings, friendship and growing up.
5. **Up**
   Grief and loss are aspects of mental health that we often don't think of young children as experiencing – but they do, in so many ways. Whether it is the loss of a loved one, a beloved pet, a cherished toy or even through moving homes or schools, children experience loss and grief and are often ill-equipped to work through it. Up is the story of one man overcoming loss, grief, and disappointment not by "smiling through it" but through true catharsis and working through it, showing children that the journey of recovery is long and hard, but well worth it in the end.

Honourable mention: Ron Gone Wrong

- This one is less of a blockbuster but no less worthwhile than the other entries in this list. Tackling the issues of poverty, self-esteem, bullying, social media use and friendship, Ron Gone Wrong is funny, poignant, and distinctly on-trend for technology-obsessed youth. Our little digital natives are growing up in the age of TikTok trends and in a world where Apple and Android have replaced Fisher Price and Tonka, and their mental health does and will depend on their ability to navigate a digital landscape. This movie is a gateway to starting these conversations before algorithms take over their social feeds.

These aren't the only stories that will prompt great conversations with young people about mental health – in fact, whatever the teachable moment you are looking for, I am willing to bet you can find it with a little detective work. But if you are looking for a place to start, I highly recommend them for their accessibility, entertainment factor, relatability, and wholesome fun.

Happy watching! And if you would like to comment on this post, please feel free to reach out.

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BSc, PhD, *aka the StigmaCrusher*, is a mental health advocate and keynote speaker with a rare blend of academic expertise and lived experience. Equipped with a doctorate in experimental psychology and firsthand knowledge of bipolar disorder, she's both heavily educated and, as she likes to say, heavily medicated. Crazy smart, she's been crushing mental health stigma since 2010.

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