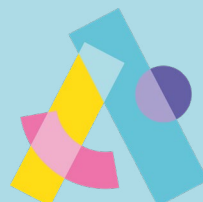


Sometimes Happy, Sometimes Sad

Early Years in Mind Story and Guide



Anna Freud
building the mental
wellbeing of the
next generation

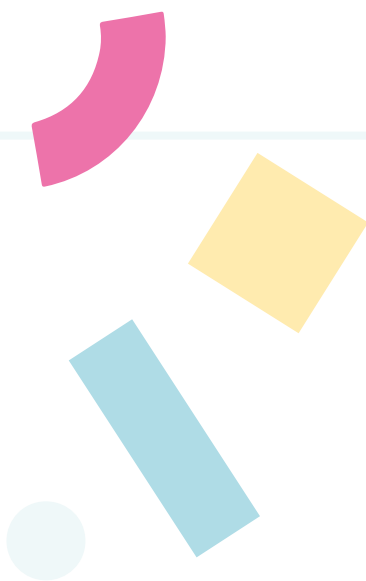
Foreword

We all have mental health, and it fluctuates. The foundations of mental health and emotional development are laid out in our earliest years through the bonds we form with those around us. Babies and young children form these bonds to feel safe and secure, and to survive.

At Anna Freud we've been supporting children and young people's mental health for over 70 years. We listen to and learn from their diverse voices, and integrate this with learnings from our science and practice to develop and deliver mental health care. We know that mental health is influenced by many factors, including the quality of our relationships, our environment and our physiology. For babies and young children, being mentally healthy is a positive state of wellbeing as well as developing socially, culturally, and emotionally. Supporting young children to be mentally healthy helps them to regulate, play, learn, imagine, relate and enjoy life.

In *Sometimes Happy, Sometimes Sad*, you'll meet Jackson, a young child, and Bilal, an early years teacher.¹ Their relationship highlights the power that teaching and learning, co-regulation and compassion can have in the early years. This book can also prompt discussions about mental health with young children so teachers, parents and carers feel more confident recognising the different ways children experience and cope with their mental health. We have unpacked parts of the story to help you reflect on how you can support young children with their mental health.

Dr Abi Miranda and Claudia Coussins



Sometimes Happy, Sometimes Sad



Laura Henry Allain MBE
Creator of Jojo and Gran Gran

Illustrated by Zenovia Grant

¹ We recognise the variety of people who make up the early years workforce. Teachers, childminders, practitioners, parents and carers are all early years educators. Although in this story we use the word 'teacher' to describe Bilal, the learnings in this story are applicable to everyone who works with or cares for young children.

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A **big** welcome to Jackson.
Jackson is feeling full of **fizz**

and **whizz**
and **giggles**
and **wriggles!**



Bilal is Jackson's teacher.
He understands these **fizzy, whizzy,**
giggly, wriggly days that Jackson has.



Sometimes Jackson feels so full
of **fizzy, whizzy** energy
that he just can't keep still at all.

And sometimes the **fizzy, whizzy**
energy makes him
SHOUT!



When his friends are playing with the sand . . .



When it is snack time . . .



When Jackson sees one of his friends . . .



And when it is story time . . .

WRIGGLE!



“**SHHhhhhh!**” say the children.
We’re listening to the story.”

But Jackson can’t shush.

AAGGHHH!
he shouts.



Jackson is probably the **fizziest, whizziest,**
most **giggly, wriggly** boy in the world!



But one day, Jackson wasn't feeling **fizzy**.
Jackson wasn't feeling **whizzy**.

"We can ride on the bikes!" Bilal said.
Jackson sat on the bike, but he didn't
whizz around like the others.



Jackson wasn't feeling **giggly** . . . or **wriggly**.



“We can make cakes!” Bilal said.



Jackson held the spoon but didn't do any whizzy whisking like the others.

“We can play on the instruments!” Bilal said.



Jackson had a **BIG** tambourine. But he didn't jiggle it, not even a little bit.

Jackson's friends Fatima and Nathan tried to cheer him up.

"Jackson, Jackson, shall we do your special **wiggly** dance?" they said at the same time, shaking their bodies.



"No!" replied Jackson.

"Jackson, Jackson, shall we make your favourite mud pies?" they asked, as they pretended to eat the mud pies they'd made.



"No!" said Jackson.

“You don’t seem your normal **fizzy, whizzy, giggly, wriggly** self today, Jackson,”
said Bilal. “Why is that?”



“I just feel sad,” Jackson said.
“Do you know why?” asked Bilal.

Jackson thought for a while.



He thought some more.



But he just didn’t know.

Bilal sat down next to Jackson.
“We can feel sad for different reasons,” he said.
“When someone we love dies.”



“When we hear people we care about shouting.”



“When our favourite people
are not with us.”



“When we can’t do something.”



“When we are scared.”

Jackson lifted his head.
“No, it’s not any of those reasons,” he said.



Bilal looked at Jackson. “Sometimes we may not know the reason we are sad.”
Jackson nodded. “My sadness feels like a big sad cloud over my head,” he said.



“Is the big sad cloud like a marshmallow, Jackson?”
Fatima asked.

“Or does the cloud feel like rain stones on your skin?” Nathan said.



Bilal smiled. “You mean like hailstones, Nathan?”

“Yes!” said Jackson.
“It does feel like hailstones!”



Bilal thanked Nathan and Fatima for helping Jackson explain how he was feeling.



A tear ran down Jackson's cheek. Bilal gave Jackson a cuddle. He told him it was okay to cry and be sad.

“And when you are sad you can sit by yourself,” said Nathan.

“And you don't need to talk to anyone if you don't want to,” added Fatima.



“Your feelings, your choice, Jackson,” Bilal said softly. “**You** are **loved** when you are full of fizz, Jackson, and **you** are **loved** you when you are under your grey hailstone cloud, Jackson!”



“Why are you all looking so serious?” he laughed. “Let’s ride bikes and make mud pies!”

And off he **whizzed!**

And just hearing those kind words made Jackson feel that delicious **fizzy, whizzy, giggly, wriggly** feeling fill his body again.

Laura Henry-Allain MBE is an award-winning international educationalist, storyteller, producer and consultant.

She is the creator of the well-loved, award-winning, first Black British animation, *JoJo and Gran Gran* global series, developed and produced by CBeebies, and is the series producer. Laura has a new children's animation that is currently in development.

Laura has worked with several global brands, including Paramount, Mattel, Moonbug, Hasbro, John Lewis, Comic Relief and Bafta.

Her bestselling children's books include *My Skin, Your Skin* and *My Family, Your Family*. Her new book, *Maya and Marley*, centres on an Adventure Playground.

Laura is a board member of the Children's Media Foundation and vice president of The British Association of Early Childhood Education. She is also a patron of the Grenada Community Library, mentor to the Grenfell Memorial Quilt and an Expert Commissioner on the National Inquiry into Play.

Zenovia Grant is an illustrator, award-winning community advocate and SEND Specialist. She has a passion for creative arts in all formats and enjoys supporting children and young people's development. She uses colourful, fun, interactive illustrations to widen the worlds and the learning moments of the readers and believes that representation is important because 'if you can see it, you can be it'.

Jane Riordan is an editor and children's book author. She originally trained as a primary school teacher, but her love of children's books led her to a career in publishing. She wrote the official *Winnie-the-Pooh* sequel, *Winnie-the-Pooh: Tales from the Forest*, published by Farshore, an imprint of Harper Collins.

Dr Abi Miranda is the Head of the Early Years and Prevention Department at Anna Freud. Abi trained as an Educational and Child Psychologist working with those aged 0-25 years. Abi specialises in working with children in the early years who have additional educational needs. As a mother of two children, Abi is passionate about making psychological advice accessible so that parents, teachers and practitioners have the know-how to support children in their care.

Claudia Coussins is a psychotherapist and researcher who works in a variety of mental health contexts, including at Anna Freud. Claudia's professional practice is rooted in the understanding of mental health and wellbeing existing in wider social contexts as well as in the minds and bodies of individuals. Her integration of clinical, applied research, and policy and practice knowledge supports her professional goal to develop equitable and accessible mental healthcare systems.

Notes for adults



The book was developed to highlight the importance of promoting positive mental health and wellbeing with young children.

Half of mental health conditions start before the age of 14, and many of these develop in the early years.² This highlights the importance of early intervention, and a need to have strategies in place to support young children's mental health and wellbeing.

We've picked out three key parts of the story to explore theory, tips and reflection questions. Jackson and his relationships with other characters show us how we can support children to:



Express and make sense of emotions



Accept unique emotional experiences



Soothe through the senses and the body

² Royal College of Psychiatrists. (2023). *College Report CR238 - Infant and early childhood mental health: the case for action*. https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/improving-care/better-mh-policy/college-reports/college-report-cr238---infant-and-early-childhood-mental-health.pdf?sfvrsn=1d8d5efd_18

Expressing and making sense of emotions

Example

In the story, Bilal noticed changes in Jackson's behaviour. Bilal wondered if Jackson was acting differently to his usual self because his mood was low. Bilal used this as a clue about how Jackson might have been feeling.

Theory

We might think that young children only feel happiness, sadness and anger, but they can experience a full range of emotions. They can find it harder to express them because they're still developing their language skills and their ability to recognise and name different sensations and feelings. This is known as interoception. As their language and interoceptive abilities develop, children become more able to interpret and describe a wider range of emotions. We can only tell someone else how we feel when we're aware of our own emotional state.

When we are caring for babies, we make considered guesses about how they feel by interpreting their cries, facial expressions and movements. These guesses are influenced by our own experiences, what's going on in our lives and how we are feeling. This is known as 'mentalizing'.

When we are in a calm and regulated state, we tend to be better at being curious about how others are feeling. Professional curiosity is key to understanding children's needs as they do not always show clear indicators of low mood like crying.

Tips for practitioners and caregivers

We can express our care and curiosity through words and asking questions. Creating a common language can help children understand their emotions – this can be used at different points and shared with other important people in the child's life.

You could use images, colours or temperatures. Remember how Fatima referred to marshmallows and Bilal mentioned hailstones when Jackson said his sadness felt like a big, sad cloud? This relational exchange is child-centred and specific to Jackson's current state – it uses his images and a language that makes sense to him.

Reflection questions

- ▶ How does your upbringing, culture, workplace and societal norms shape how you show your emotions?
- ▶ Are there words or phrases that families use at home to describe different emotions?
- ▶ What approaches do you use to encourage children to understand and express their emotions?





Accepting unique emotional experiences

Example

In the story, Bilal tried to cheer Jackson up, but Jackson did not respond to Bilal's efforts. Bilal affirmed how Jackson was feeling and did not encourage him to move from sadness to happiness. Allowing Jackson to feel the full range of his emotions eventually helped Jackson feel better.

Theory

It is normal for moods and emotional states to change. All emotions are transient; they come and go. This should not make adults feel concerned. If a child remains stuck in an emotional state, it may suggest they're dealing with something difficult and need extra help.

As adults, we often try to make someone feel better because seeing someone feeling sad also makes us feel sad or helpless. This is known as 'emotional contagion'. We are more susceptible to mirroring how others are feeling when our own physiological, emotional and social needs are not well met.

Our relationships are strengthened when we accept people when they are feeling their worst as well as their best. It can increase the intensity of emotions if a person is feeling upset and then they feel misunderstood or dismissed by people they go to for help or connection. Conversely, we can feel more connected to others when they show understanding of how we might be feeling.



Tips for practitioners and caregivers

Mirroring the child's experience back to them is a form of validation. It shows the child that adults recognise what they are feeling, which can help them tolerate more uncomfortable or distressing emotions. You might mirror using words or body language. This is a practical way to help the child manage 'what is' rather than trying to change the way they feel.

Reflect on how you can adapt to the child rather than hoping that the child will adapt to your expectations, which may be influenced by constructs that favour neurotypical development. For example, sitting down reading for a long period of time might indicate a child feels calm. For another child, this might indicate that something isn't right.

Normalising feelings of sadness

Bilal gives different examples to normalise sadness, such as when someone we love dies, when we hear people we care about shouting, when we can't do something and when we are scared. You might even feel comfortable to share something from your own experience – "sometimes I feel scared when...". This is known as 'modelling', which will help children to observe and think through a skill before they start to do it themselves.

Remember, young children have fewer experiences to make use of than older children or adults. Something that we feel is a small issue may make them feel sad. Try to see things through their perspective and avoid comparing them to other children.

Reflection questions

- ▶ What do you do when you are feeling sad? What do other people do that is helpful or unhelpful for you?
- ▶ Can you think of a time when you were upset, and someone told you to cheer up or that it wasn't that bad? How did that make you feel?
- ▶ Can you think of different ways that children show that they are sad, aside from crying? How do these behaviours make you feel?



Soothing through the senses and the body

Example

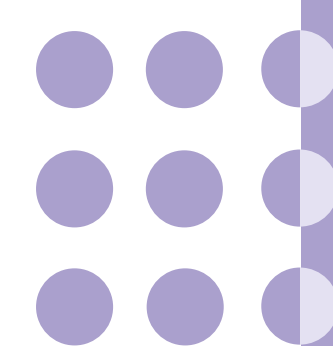
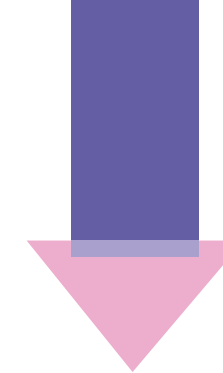
In the story, Bilal gives Jackson a cuddle after he notices Jackson crying. Bilal then validates the tears and the sadness. Significantly, Bilal emphasises that it's "your feelings, your choice" and says that Jackson is loved whatever his emotional state.

Theory

Creating a physical connection can feel soothing to the child, which helps to regulate their nervous system, and cultivates feelings of safety and security. Just as you might instinctively rock a baby in your arms, you might give a child a cuddle or gently place a hand on their shoulder. Some children might find physical contact threatening or uncomfortable – use your judgement and treat each child as an individual.

Not all ways to help a child soothe and regulate their emotions involve slowing them down. Movement and rhythmic activities like dancing and listening to music might be what they need. Although it might not work all the time, Jackson's friends understood that sometimes a "special jiggle dance" helps to cheer him up.

We need to look out for when a child might hide their natural emotions and behaviours to conform to conventional standards. This is known as 'masking'. We want to avoid viewing some behaviours (such as shouting or moving a lot) as 'bad' and others (such as sitting quietly in circle time) as 'good', because children need different levels of movement at different times to feel calm. We want to be curious and accepting about all behaviours, understanding that there is a place for both movement and stillness.



Tips for practitioners and caregivers

Remember that it's possible to co-regulate and help a child self-soothe using all the senses. Consider how you are talking to the child. You may instinctively know when to use a more 'sing-song' lulling voice or you might recognise that a different tone might help a child feel safe.

It may help to experiment and get to know what works for each individual child. In doing so, remember we can hold biases towards children based on many characteristics, such as their race, if they are neurotypical, and even if they remind us of someone in our own family. These biases can cause us to treat a child more favourably or sometimes, more harshly.

Showing the child that they can make choices and that their choices will be respected is important in validating their sense of self. Building on the shared language you are developing, you might say, "I notice you are sitting by yourself today. Does that mean you're feeling in a 'hailstones' mood today? Does this mean you might want to do something a bit differently?"

Reflection questions

- ▶ How do you use physical contact to soothe or be soothed?
- ▶ When you are stressed, where do you feel it in your body?
- ▶ How do you self-soothe?



Summary

It's normal to feel down some days, and young children might not know why they feel this way. We might see a range of behaviours that suggest a child is feeling upset or dysregulated, and that doesn't always involve crying.

We can help a child feel better by letting them know that they are cared for no matter how they feel. We do not always have to know the 'right' thing to say, but just being there can help. We are most able to do this when we are calm and supported ourselves

Children's emotions and behaviours can fluctuate for many reasons. Be aware that changes could be due to a safeguarding concern, additional educational needs or a mental health problem requiring specialist support. Follow your setting's policies and procedures in relation to this.

Our professional and personal networks help us manage our feelings and think through our problems. Seeking advice and supervision can help us make decisions about how best to support a child and their family.



Accompanying resources from Anna Freud's Early Years in Mind series

Further resources from Anna Freud's Early Years in Mind series:

[Promoting young children's self-regulation skills through play.](#)

[A wellbeing guide for early years practitioners.](#)

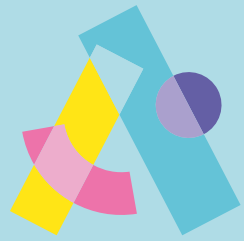
[Personal, social and emotional, development in the early years: a handbook for practitioners.](#)

[Helping young children to think about race in the early years.](#)

[A guide to neurodiversity in the early years.](#)

[Deafness and Me: a mental health and wellbeing toolkit for practitioners supporting deaf children in the early years.](#)

About Anna Freud



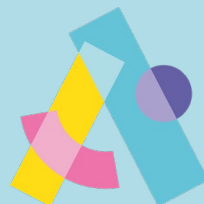
Anna Freud is a mental health charity and we've been supporting children and young people for over 70 years. We listen to and learn from their diverse voices, and integrate this with learnings from our science and practice to develop and deliver mental health care. This holistic approach has world-changing potential - our training, schools support, networks, partnerships and resources equip those who impact children and young people's lives with the knowledge and skills to support their mental health.

We believe mental wellbeing is the foundation from which children and young people achieve their potential. By continually expanding our understanding and translating it into practice – grounded in science and guided by children and young people - we can ensure they get the right support at the right time.

About Early Years in Mind

Early Years in Mind is a free online network for early years practitioners. The network provides easy to read and easy to use guidance on supporting the mental health of babies, young children and their families. The network was developed by our mental health experts and shares practical and clinical expertise, and advice on using attachment-informed practice.

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