

Quick Spark: Books to Start Discussion

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

These books were selected to support the goals of #CreateConnectCare by helping young people explore emotional well-being, empathy, and connection. Recommended as classroom resources, but equally valuable for individual exploration, these titles invite readers to understand their feelings, appreciate differences, and care for themselves and others.

GRADE LEVEL

While #CreateConnectCare is designed for students aged 11–18, this list also includes books for younger children, allowing educators and families to foster these skills and conversations across all reading levels.

Elementary School

1. Different: A Story about Loving Your Neighbor **By Chris Singleton & Wiliam Luong | Ages 3-8**

When Obinna moves to a new country, he learns and teaches others that embracing differences can help bring a community together. The author's personal experiences inspired this gentle story with themes of empathy, inclusion, and celebrating uniqueness.

2. A Blue Kind of Day **By Rachel Tomlinson and Tori-Jay Mordey | Ages 4-8**

When a young child named Coen experiences depression, his family practices patience and understanding as they learn to listen and support him. This book is perfect for children learning to identify emotions, showing that sadness is natural and safe to discuss.

3. Wilma Jean the Worry Machine

By Julia Cook | Ages 4–11

This fun and humorous book addresses the problem of anxiety in a way that relates to children of all ages. It offers creative strategies for parents and teachers as well as tools for kids to lessen the severity of anxiety.

4. Michael Rosen's Sad Book

By Michael Rosen | Ages 5–9

Sad things happen to everyone, and sometimes people feel sad for no reason at all. A reflection on the author's deep sadness he feels after the passing of his son, expressed through simple words and evocative illustrations. Best suited for readers who need a gentle, honest exploration of grief and emotional complexity.

5. My Brain is a Home

By Orlanda Bettison | Ages 5–12

This picture book nurtures mental well-being by educating children about their brains, mindfulness, and the inner workings of their emotional world.

6. Hundred Years of Happiness

By Thanhà Lai | Ages 4–8

A picture book showcasing the love between grandparents and grandchildren, the challenges of memory loss, and the joy that sweet reminders of a faraway home can bring.

7. The Dot

By Peter H. Reynolds | Ages 4–9

Vashti's angry mark on paper unexpectedly sparks her journey of self-discovery and unleashing her creative spirit. A creative growth storybook boosting confidence, artistic expression, and emotional intelligence through imagination.

Middle School

11. Button Pusher

By Tyler Page | Ages 10–14

A memoir-driven, realistic graphic novel about Tyler, a child who is diagnosed with ADHD and has to discover for himself how to best manage it. This graphic memoir suits teens who appreciate honest depictions of neurodiversity and complex family relationships.

2. The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and the Horse

By Charlie Mackesy | Ages 7+

In this thoughtfully illustrated story, four unlikely companions share adventures and conversations about vulnerability, kindness, hope, friendship, and love.

3. Restart

By Gordon Korman | Ages 8-12

After a fall wipes his memory, bully Chase Ambrose must relearn who he is. The story explores identity, kindness, empathy, forgiveness, and doing better when you realize you've been wrong.

4. The Sea in Winter

By Christine Day | Ages 8-13

When an unfortunate accident leads to a severe knee injury, Maisie slips into a dark moodiness that she doesn't feel like her family can understand. In this novel, Native American History is weaved into a realistic story of grief, resistance, and healing.

5. Where the Watermelons Grow

By Cindy Baldwin | Ages 10-14

Zoe, a young girl from a small town, grapples with her mother's worsening mental illness and tries to keep her family together. This novel explores the impact of mental health on family dynamics and the strength required to heal and move forward.

High School

1. The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma

By Bessel van der Kolk, M.D. | Ages 18+

An evidence-based exploration of trauma's effects on brain and body, offering multiple treatment paths including neurofeedback, meditation, sports, and yoga for healing. Recommended for adult readers and educators seeking an in-depth, science-informed understanding of trauma and recovery.

2. The Dark Matter of Mona Starr

By Laura Lee Gulledge | Ages 12+

Mona gets to know her depression and manages it creatively, turning her fears into strengths. This graphic novel weaves themes of mental health with artistic expression and self-discovery.

3. Darius the Great is Not Okay

By Edi Campbell | Ages 12+

Darius Kellner, a teen struggling with depression and feeling disconnected from both his Persian heritage and his life in America, travels to Iran and experiences a profound sense of belonging for the first time. Through his deep friendship with Sohrab, Darius—called Darioush—discovers connection, identity, and what it means to truly be himself.

4. I Have Lost My Way

By Gayle Forman | Ages 13+

Three teens cross paths in New York City on the worst day of each of their lives, and through a single accident-turned-encounter, their individual stories of loss, identity, and loneliness intertwine.

5. This Book is a Safe Space

By Amy Tran | Ages 13–17

Cultivating a safe space in your mind and achieving balance between your thoughts and emotions begins with supporting your mental health. This book offers cute doodles, self-love affirmations, and encouraging reminders to help you develop positive self-talk.

