



Child Mental Health Toolkit: Tips for Using the Levelness Simplifying Model

Below are some tips for using the Levelness simplifying model, identified in FrameWorks' research on children's mental health. Practitioners and advocates should keep these in mind when they use Levelness in publications, talks and other communications.

Scientists say that a child's mental health affects how they socialize, how they learn, and how well they meet their potential. One way to think about child mental health is that it's like the levelness of a piece of furniture, say, a table. The levelness of a table is what makes it usable and able to function, just like the mental health of a child is what enables them to function and do many things. Some kids' brains develop on floors that are level. This is like saying that the kids have healthy supportive relationships, and access to things like good nutrition and health care. For other kids, their brains develop on more sloped or slanted floors. This means they're exposed to abuse or violence, have unreliable or unsupportive relationships, and don't have access to key programs and resources. Remember that tables can't make themselves level – they need attention from experts who understand levelness and stability and who can work on the table, the floor, or even both. We know that it's important to work on the floors and the tables early, because little wobbles early on tend to become big wobbles later. So, in general, a child's mental health is like the stability and levelness of a table.

The Levelness simplifying model should include the following elements:

- Levelness is a quality of a piece of furniture, such as a table.
- Levelness is important because it determines the functioning and usability of the table.

- In reality, there are many degrees of the levelness of a table, as there are also degrees of levelness of the floors they're placed on.
- There are many reasons that a table might be level or unlevel – it could depend on the condition of the table, the floor, or both.
- Positive mental health can be achieved by adjusting the floor, the table, or both.
- Tables don't level themselves. They must either be made that way or they require intervention by people who know about furniture and levelness.

Users should also keep in mind some of the following characteristics that FrameWorks observed both in the model itself and in people's behavior while talking about the model.

1. Although the model did not compare child mental health to a table, but rather to a quality that a piece of furniture such as a table possesses, some of our research participants redirected the metaphor from Levelness to "table." This is because a table is a prototypical piece of furniture, and because they saw levelness as a central feature of a table. When the metaphor was redirected from Levelness to Table, the table was equated both with the child and the child's brain, but was never decontextualized from the environment in which it functions. Our participants continued to talk about "adjustments" being made to the table or the floor, for example, and so the central metaphorical idea of levelness, and that levelness could be achieved in a number of ways, was not lost.
2. There was a tendency for the phrase "level playing field" to arise in discourse. We mention this as a caution; when it occurs it does not indicate that the model is ineffective or that the discussion has gone irrevocably awry. Saying "level playing field" for Levelness occurs for two main reasons: First, research participants knew the correct phrase but misspoke and selected the inaccurate but more frequently used phrase. Second, some participants mistakenly equated child mental health with some other outcome such as intelligence or educational achievement. Once a participant erroneously introduced "level playing field" into the conversation, the phrase tended to persist. Redirecting the conversation should include reminders that the topic is child mental

health, and that one consequence is educational success, though it is not the only consequence.

3. Some research informants raised the question, “Why are we assuming that mental health is a good thing?” This seemed to come from a prevailing cultural model that creative people are not bound by the same norms as others. In fact, they argued, our society needs to give creative people the latitude to be “unlevel” in order to do the things they’re best at. This might also be the result of communications that seek to reduce the stigma of mental illness by naming and listing famous creative figures from the past, such as Van Gogh and Beethoven, who experienced mental illness. However, other group members were quick to challenge this assumption.