

smalltalk

Early Years Wales members' magazine

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- What Does Joy Mean to Young Children?
- Neurodivergent Joy, Glimmers and Neuroaffirming Play
- Flow: A Pathway to Deep Joy
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Welcome to your July 2026 edition of *smalltalk*



Joy is often spoken about as though it is a pleasant extra; something that sits alongside learning rather than at its heart. Yet the voices gathered in this issue of *smalltalk* tell a very different story. They remind us that joy is not a reward for learning, nor a distraction from it. Joy is the foundation on which meaningful learning, wellbeing, belonging and human connection are built.

Across Wales and beyond, practitioners, researchers, childminders, playworkers and educators are increasingly recognising the profound role joy plays in children's lives. Whether it is found in a baby's laughter during a game of peek-a-boo, a toddler's fascination with a ladybird, a child completely absorbed in imaginative play, or the quiet concentration of a learner experiencing flow, joy signals something important. It tells us that children feel safe, connected, valued and ready to engage with the world around them.

This issue opens with **Kelcie Stacey's** exploration of the **enabling adult** and the crucial role practitioners play in creating joyful foundations for learning. **Dr Carys Jennings** then invites us to listen closely to **children's own perspectives on happiness**, highlighting how joy is experienced through play, relationships, belonging and being heard (page 7). Together, these articles challenge us to think differently about what children need most and how adults can create the conditions for those experiences to flourish.

Relationships emerge as a powerful thread throughout this edition. **Jayne Carter** encourages us to become "**Joy Detectives**" (page 10), noticing and responding to the moments that matter most to children. **Sue Atkins** reflects on the **importance of conversation and connection** in a world that often feels increasingly busy and distracted (page 32). **Nicole James** (page 28) explores how joyful play can become a **pathway to healing** and resilience for children who have experienced adversity, while **Dr Poppy Gibson and colleagues** remind us that being heard, in whatever form communication takes, is central to **confidence, comfort and belonging** (page 40).

Play, unsurprisingly, sits at the centre of many discussions. From **Amber Ogunsanya-William's** celebration of **play as a doorway** into possibility (page 22), to **Marianne Mannello's** powerful reminder that **children need time, space and freedom** to play (page 26), contributors repeatedly reinforce a simple truth: **play is not separate from learning**. It is often the vehicle through which children make sense of themselves, others and the world around them.

Several contributors encourage us to slow down and notice joy in its many forms. **Jacqui Lewis** explores deep engagement and flow, **challenging assumptions** about what joyful learning looks like (page 18). **Pavla Boulton** (page 50) reflects on the **wonder found in nature** and the importance of creating opportunities for children to experience awe and connection. **Terri Steele's gardening journey** shows how joy can grow through patience, nurture and shared experiences (page 54), while **North Cornelly Playgroup** demonstrates how carefully curated environments can **spark curiosity, creativity and delight** (page 46).

Running through every article is an important message. Joy is not frivolous. It is serious work. It strengthens relationships, supports emotional wellbeing, nurtures resilience and inspires lifelong curiosity. Most importantly, it reminds us why the early years matter so profoundly.

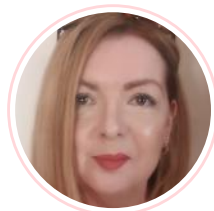
As you explore this issue, we hope you find inspiration in the many ways joy reveals itself in children's everyday lives. In a world that often moves too fast, perhaps our greatest responsibility is not to create joy, but to recognise it, protect it and ensure every child has the opportunity to experience it every day.

As always, *smalltalk* is enriched by the knowledge, experiences and reflections of its readers. If you would like to share your practice, suggest a topic for a future issue, or continue the conversation around any of the themes featured in this edition, please email us at charlotted@earlyyears.wales / smalltalk@earlyyears.wales

Thank you for reading
Charlotte – Editor



Meet the contributors



Listening to Children's Joy
Dr Carys Jennings

Carys' interest encompasses all things Early Years. Having been an Early Years educator and lead for many years, Carys made the move into Teacher education delivering on undergraduate and PGCE programmes and continues to do so on the Open University's PGCE Wales programme. Her research interests involve children's voices and choices, learning environments and their impact on children's development.



Play, Possibility and Imagination
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Amber is an internationally recognised Inclusive Play Consultant and NSPCC Champion of Childhood. Rooted in adventure playgrounds, she advances inclusive, child-led play across education, community, and cultural settings. From shaping national policy to leading creative initiatives, she champions children's rights, belonging, and the transformative power of play.



Flow, Focus and Deep Engagement
Jacqui Lewis

Jacqui is an advocate for children, early childhood educators and inclusive early education. Drawing on experience across practice, leadership, teaching, regulatory and research roles, she champions a respectful, rights-based pedagogical approach. She is a research associate, consultant for The Thinking Spot and the British Association for Early Education, a Makaton tutor, and a visiting fellow for the National Professional Qualification in Early Years Leadership.



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Curriculum Focus

Joy! The role of the enabling adult in creating foundations for learning.

Written by: Kelcie Stacey, Early Years Education Officer

Joy is a powerful force in children's learning. More than happiness or excitement, it is a sense of belonging, connection and curiosity that inspires children to engage deeply with the world around them. When children experience joy, they become motivated to explore, investigate and develop positive attitudes towards learning that can last a lifetime.

The Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings places the child at the heart of learning and recognises the importance of developing ambitious, capable learners who are ready to learn throughout their lives. For our youngest learners, this begins with meaningful experiences that nurture wellbeing, curiosity and a sense of wonder. Central to this is the role of the enabling adult. Through their interactions adults create the conditions in which joy can flourish.

The enabling adult is the most important resource within an early years environment. They are a role model, facilitator and advocate for children's learning. By modelling joy and enthusiasm, adults help children develop confidence, resilience and a love of learning.



The enabling adult as a role model

Children learn through observation. Long before they can read instructions or follow complex explanations, they watch the adults around them. They notice attitudes, behaviours, language and emotional responses. This means that the enabling adult's role as a role model is fundamental.

When adults demonstrate genuine enthusiasm, curiosity and wonder, children learn that these are valuable ways of engaging with the world. A practitioner who becomes excited by a child's discovery or shows fascination when investigating a minibeast is modelling a joyful approach to learning.

Role modelling joy does not require elaborate activities. Often, it is found in everyday moments:

- Showing excitement when reading a story
- Celebrating small achievements
- Demonstrating curiosity by asking questions
- Laughing and sharing positive experiences
- Expressing wonder about the natural world
- Showing perseverance when something is difficult

These behaviours communicate powerful messages to children. They learn that learning is enjoyable, mistakes are part of the process and exploration is valued.



Creating a culture of joy

A joyful curriculum begins with relationships. Children need to feel secure before they can fully engage in learning. The enabling adult establishes this foundation through warm, responsive and respectful interactions. When adults listen to children, acknowledge their ideas and value their contributions, children develop a strong sense of belonging. They feel seen and heard. This emotional security creates the opportunities for joy to emerge.

Creating a culture of joy also means celebrating children's individuality. Every child brings unique interests, fascinations and experiences and by recognising and building upon these interests, practitioners create meaningful opportunities for engagement and enjoyment.

For example, a child fascinated by dinosaurs may inspire investigations into fossils, habitats and storytelling. The child's interest becomes a vehicle for rich learning experiences that feel authentic and joyful.

Children are naturally curious. They constantly seek to understand how things work, why events occur and what might happen next. The curriculum provides endless opportunities for adults to nurture this curiosity.

The enabling adult encourages wonder by resisting the urge to provide immediate answers. Instead, they might respond with:

- "What do you think?"
- "I wonder why that happened?"
- "How could we find out?"
- "What might happen if...?"

These open-ended questions invite children to become investigators and thinkers. The process of discovery becomes just as important as the outcome.

When adults learn alongside children, they model a genuine love of learning. Children see that learning is not about knowing all the answers but about exploring possibilities.

Joyful learning

Play is a fundamental context for joyful learning. Through play, children make sense of their experiences, test ideas, develop relationships and express themselves creatively.

The enabling adult recognises the value of play and protects time for uninterrupted exploration. Rather than directing every activity, they observe carefully, respond thoughtfully and extend learning when appropriate.

Joy often emerges through autonomy. When children are trusted to make choices, follow their interests and take ownership of their learning, engagement deepens.

Adults can support this by providing rich environments, open-ended resources and opportunities for imaginative thinking. Loose parts, natural materials and flexible spaces encourage creativity and problem-solving.



Finding joy in nature

The outdoor environment offers unique opportunities for joyful learning. Nature naturally stimulates curiosity, creativity and exploration.

Children experience joy through:

- Discovering insects and wildlife
- Building dens
- Splashing in puddles
- Observing seasonal changes
- Climbing, balancing and risk taking
- Exploring natural materials

The enabling adult models appreciation and respect for the natural world. Their enthusiasm can transform ordinary moments into memorable learning experiences. A practitioner who stops to admire a spider's web or gets excited about finding a ladybird encourages children to notice what's in their surroundings. These shared experiences contribute to children's sense of wellbeing while fostering a connection to the natural world.

Reflective practice and joyful pedagogy

Creating joyful learning experiences requires ongoing reflection. The enabling adult continually considers:

- What brings joy to the children?
- How do children demonstrate engagement and enthusiasm?
- Which experiences generate curiosity and wonder?
- How can the environment better support joyful learning?
- What am I modelling through my own actions and attitudes?

Reflective practitioners recognise that joy looks different for every child. Some children express joy through movement and laughter, while others demonstrate deep concentration, quiet periods or sustained engagement.

By observing carefully and reflecting thoughtfully, adults can adapt their practice to meet children's needs and interests.

The value of authentic experiences

Children experience the greatest joy when learning feels meaningful and relevant. The curriculum encourages authentic experiences that connect with children's lives, interests and communities.

The enabling adult helps create these opportunities by:

- Following children's fascinations
- Engaging with local culture and heritage
- Making connections with the local community
- Exploring real-life problems and questions
- Making meaningful connections across learning experiences

Authentic experiences help children understand that learning has purpose. They see themselves as active participants in their communities and develop a stronger sense of identity and belonging.

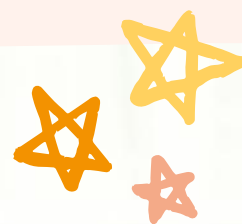
Conclusion

Joy should be part of all children's learning experiences and at the heart of daily practice. When children experience joy, they develop confidence, curiosity, resilience and a lifelong love of learning. These qualities provide strong foundations for future success and wellbeing.

The enabling adult plays a pivotal role in creating these experiences. Through positive relationships, responsive interactions and enthusiastic role modelling, practitioners demonstrate that learning is something to be embraced and enjoyed.

By approaching each day with curiosity, adults inspire children to do the same. They create environments where children feel valued, capable and excited to learn.

The curriculum offers countless opportunities to foster joy through listening, encouraging, celebrating and modelling a love of learning. When joy becomes embedded in children's experiences, it provides strong foundations for learning, wellbeing and future success.



What does joy mean to young children - and why does it matter to us all?

Written by: Dr. Carys Jennings (UGAAU/ SFHEA)
PGCE Primary Curriculum Tutor, The Open University

Joy in early childhood can be found in children's play, relationships, and a sense of belonging, where children feel seen, heard, and valued (Jennings, 2025; Clark, 2011). Through creative expression such as drawing, painting, photography and discussions, children can communicate the moments that bring them joy, revealing deeply personal meanings of happiness (Sutton, 2018). Listening to children freely discuss these joyful experiences supports emotional wellbeing, agency and engagement.

When practitioners create time and space for dialogue and creativity, they strengthen trust and nurture environments where joy becomes central to learning and development.

Creating opportunities for children to communicate

The findings demonstrated that when adults intentionally create opportunities for children to express themselves in a variety of ways, children usually, willingly and enthusiastically share their joyful experiences. The drawings and photographs revealed moments of play, friendship and belonging, but it was the adult-facilitated dialogue that unlocked the deeper meaning behind these representations (Burman, 2009). Children spoke about feeling valued by their peers, being supported by trusted adults, and having access to spaces that allowed them to relax, explore or connect. These insights were only possible because adults, through engaging with the research project, created the time and conditions for such conversations to take place.

Listening to children

My EdD study 'Y Plentyn Hapus' (The Happy Child), set out to understand happiness through the eyes of young children by exploring what brings them joy within their school environments. By asking children to draw or paint a picture of themselves and the things that made them happy in school in the first instance as part of everyday activity; engaging in walks around the environment capturing things that impacted on their happiness through photographic snapshots, lastly, and crucially, engaging in meaningful discussions created space for children to identify and communicate their lived experiences and what matters most to them. With happiness (or joy) placed front and centre, the study challenged assumptions and repositioned children as knowledgeable participants who can articulate the conditions that support their wellbeing and learning (Flewitt, 2020).

*Happiness is...
when you feel lovely and warm*



Why time matters

One of the most significant findings from the research was the importance of time: time that is created and protected by adults. In many early years settings, opportunities for extended, meaningful dialogue are limited by routines, transitions and in some cases, curricular pressures. However, this study highlights that emotional literacy, wellbeing and an understanding of personal feelings cannot be rushed (Burnett, 2018). Adults who prioritise unhurried interactions enable children to articulate their experiences more fully, revealing the relational and emotional dimensions of their learning environments.

Spaces that support happiness

Children's reflections also prompted practitioners to consider how the physical environment can either enable or limit joyful experiences. For example, children identified both social and solitary forms of happiness, highlighting the need for environments that offer a balance of shared and quiet spaces. In response, practitioners began to reflect on classroom layout, access to resources, and the availability of calm, comforting areas (Jennings, 2025). These changes were not imposed but informed directly by children's perspectives, demonstrating how adult responsiveness can transform provision.

The importance of time alone

The research also highlights the importance of boredom as a space for stillness, imagination and self-discovery, where not every moment is filled or directed by adults. Findings clearly showed that children value time alone. Distinct 'me' and 'we' responses emerged when pupils shared what made them happy, demonstrating a need for both social interaction and solitary engagement. Many children spoke about enjoying activities independently, without a partner or friend, suggesting these moments are both meaningful and necessary (Jennings, 2025). As adults, there is a responsibility to safeguard such opportunities by intentionally creating time and space for solitary play and reflection, recognising that quiet moments can nurture creativity, emotional wellbeing and a strong sense of self.

When children's voices lead change

Furthermore, the study aligned with the importance of adults valuing children's contributions. When children see that their ideas lead to meaningful changes, their sense of agency and belonging is strengthened. Practitioners who acted on children's insights - whether by adapting routines, enhancing play opportunities, or creating more flexible spaces - signalled that children's voices were not only heard but had impact. This reinforces a culture where joy is sustained, as children feel respected, included and empowered.

“Happiness is...
being cosy”



Every child experiences joy differently

The findings also highlight the need for adults to recognise the diverse ways in which joy is experienced. Not all children express happiness in the same way; some find joy in energetic interaction, while others prefer quieter, more reflective activities. Adults who remain attuned to these differences are better able to provide inclusive experiences that support all learners (Musgrave, 2017). This requires careful observation, thoughtful questioning, and a willingness to adapt practice in response to what children communicate, both verbally and non-verbally.





Joy as part of everyday practice

Importantly, the research proposes that creating opportunities for joy is not an additional task; it is integral to effective pedagogy, as outlined in United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2024) report. When adults embed creative expression and meaningful dialogue into everyday practice, they support children's emotional development alongside their learning. These approaches can foster self-awareness, strengthen relationships and build trust, forming the foundation for positive learning experiences. Happiness, in this sense, is not incidental but intentionally cultivated through adult practice and affordances (Jennings, 2025).

Reflecting on our role as adults

My experience as both a practitioner and researcher has shown that adult roles are not static but reflective. Engaging with children's perspectives encouraged practitioners to reconsider their assumptions and refine their approaches (Brookfield, 2017). This reflective process is essential in ensuring that provision remains responsive and aligned with children's needs. By continually asking, "What opportunities are we creating for children to express themselves?" and "How are we responding to what they tell us?", adults can sustain environments where joy is both recognised and nurtured.

Creating the conditions for joy

Ultimately, the research demonstrates that while children are fully capable of expressing their experiences, it is adults who hold the responsibility for enabling those expressions to surface (Jennings, 2025). Through intentional planning, attentive listening and responsive action, practitioners can create spaces where children's joy is visible, valued and sustained.

When we as adults provide time, tools and meaningful opportunities for children to share their lived experiences, they unlock new understanding that enrich both research and practice. By recognising young children as competent informants and actively supporting their participation, practitioners move towards more ethical, child-centred approaches. My EdD study shows that creating opportunities is not simply about inclusion; it is about transformation. When adults listen and respond with purpose, they help to create learning environments where joy is not only experienced, but actively shaped, supported and sustained.

“Happiness is...
like a big hug

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Joy Detectives:

an exploration of joy as the emotional foundation of learning, with a focus on the role of the adult as co-player and co-regulator.

Written by: Jayne Carter, Early Years Programme Development Lead, Partnership for Children

Within early childhood education, learning is often framed through outcomes, progress and measurable development. The Early Years PSED Skills for Life programme for 3-5 year olds, developed by Partnership for Children, is embedded within the principles of Personal, Social and Emotional Development in the Early Years Foundation Stage. At the same time, it reflects the principles of the Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings in Wales, particularly its emphasis on well-being, belonging and emotionally responsive relationships.



This article explores joy as the emotional foundation of learning, with a focus on the role of the adult as co-player, co-regulator and 'Joy Detective'. It argues this article argues that joy is not incidental, but foundational to learning, connection and well-being. By reframing practitioners as "Joy Detectives," it highlights the importance of attuned, playful relationships in creating environments where children feel safe, engaged and motivated to learn.

Joy as a developmental force

Within the Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings in Wales, children's development is understood holistically through developmental pathways including well-being and belonging. These emphasise relationships, emotional understanding and a developing sense of self.

Joy is deeply embedded within these processes. It signals connection, engagement and well-being—and when children experience joy, they are more likely to explore, take risks and persist.

The Early Years PSED Skills for Life programme for 3–5-year-olds recognises that emotional development cannot be taught solely through instruction; it must be lived. Joyful interactions—shared laughter, discovery, imaginative play—create the emotional conditions in which learning becomes possible. Joy is not an addition to learning; it is its foundation. In this curriculum, well-being includes developing confidence, resilience, empathy and the ability to recognise and regulate emotions - key foundations for joyful engagement in learning.

Joy in exploration, movement and communication

Joy is most visible in the everyday: exploration, sensory play, movement and communication.

Sensory experiences - water, sand, textures -

offer opportunities for pleasure, curiosity and focus. Imaginative play allows children to explore roles, experiment with emotions and build shared meaning. The programme extends this through story-led environments, where children revisit narratives using props, puppets and small world play, embodying emotions through action and imagination.

Joy is also embodied. **Movement-based experiences such as music and movement sessions**, obstacle courses and yoga enable children to express emotion physically: jumping, spinning, pausing, stretching. These are not performance activities but expressive ones, where laughter, collaboration and shared energy are central.

Communication - verbal and non-verbal -

is another key site of joy. A smile, a gesture, a shared rhythm in play all contribute to connection. The programme supports this through activities where children name, match and express emotions, building a shared emotional language.

Such experiences reflect the curriculum's emphasis on holistic development, where well-being, communication, physical development and exploration are interconnected through meaningful, play-based learning.

The 'Joy Detective': noticing what matters

The idea of practitioners as "Joy Detectives" reflects a shift in focus: from outcomes to experience, from instruction to attunement. Rather than only addressing behaviour or planned goals, practitioners tune into emotional cues and moments of delight.

A child absorbed in water play, fascinated by spinning wheels, or laughing with a friend is communicating something important. These moments reveal interests, needs and emotional states. When adults notice and respond to these signals, they validate children's feelings and strengthen belonging.

This approach invites a more relational stance: the adult as co-learner, curious and responsive, sharing in moments of discovery rather than directing them.



The adult as co-player and co-regulator

Children develop emotional understanding through relationships. The role of the adult as co-player and co-regulator is therefore central.

Co-play involves joining children with genuine interest—not leading but participating in ways that extend the experience. Co-regulation involves offering calm presence, naming feelings and modelling strategies. Over time, children internalise these approaches.

This is evident in programme activities. For example, in **"Box of Feelings,"** playful interaction is combined with emotional language, linking actions to lived experiences.

In music and movement sessions, adults notice and name children's responses: how movement reflects feeling, how expression connects to emotion.

These everyday interactions show that joy is relational: it lives between people, not just within individuals.

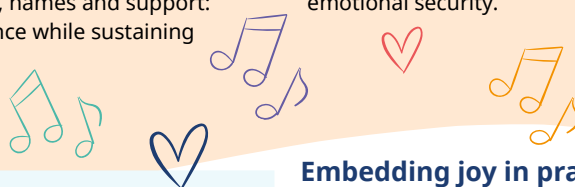
A moment in practice

During a small group session, a practitioner sits alongside a group of children exploring music and movement. A piece of lively music begins to play. One child starts jumping, arms wide, laughing. Another watches, hesitant at first, then begins to clap and spin.

The practitioner joins them: not instructing, but mirroring: clapping, smiling, saying softly, *"This music feels exciting."* She notices one child crouch down, covering their ears. Gently, she moves closer: *"That one sounds loud: shall we make it quieter together?"*

The activity shifts. Some children continue jumping; others sway slowly as the music changes. The practitioner names what she sees: *"Your body is moving softly now: you look calm."*

In this short moment, joy, regulation and learning are intertwined. The adult follows, notices, names and support: holding space for each child's experience while sustaining shared connection.



The value of stillness and space

While joy is often associated with activity, it also emerges in stillness. Boredom, when supported, allows space for imagination and self-direction.

The Early Years PSED Skills for Life programme supports continuity between adult-led and child-initiated experiences, with resources remaining available for ongoing exploration. Children revisit activities, adapt them and create their own forms of engagement.

In these moments, joy becomes quieter but no less significant: found in sustained attention, solitary play, or shared presence. Practitioners, as Joy Detectives, recognise the value of stepping back while remaining emotionally available.

Joy, resilience and adversity

Joy also has a protective role, particularly for children who have experienced adversity. For these children, consistent experiences of connection and positive emotion are essential.

The programme reflects this through practices such as creating calming spaces. A **"calming corner,"** co-constructed with children, offers a place for retreat, regulation and comfort. These environments communicate safety: feelings can be experienced, shared and soothed within relationships.

Moments of joy: even small ones, help regulate stress, build trust and provide predictability. Over time, they contribute to resilience and emotional security.



Embedding joy in practice

Embedding joy is not about adding more, but about noticing differently. Key principles include:

- **Observe and respond:** build from moments of engagement
- **Model emotional language:** support children to name feelings
- **Prioritise relationships:** create warm, responsive environments
- **Support co-regulation:** offer consistent, attuned strategies
- **Value play and exploration:** recognise these as primary contexts for learning
- **Support well-being and belonging:** create emotionally safe environments where children feel valued, connected and able to express their feelings confidently

Joy is not a reward or outcome: it is an entitlement.

Conclusion

Joy is often overlooked in discussions of early childhood education, yet it is central to development and well-being. It is not a distraction from learning, but its emotional foundation.

The Early Years PSED Skills for Life programme for 3–5 year olds, alongside the principles of the Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings in Wales illustrate that joy does not need to be manufactured; it needs to be recognised and protected. Through shared stories, playful interaction, emotional language and attuned relationships, practitioners can ensure that joy is present in children's everyday experiences.

By embracing their role as Joy Detectives, early years professionals create environments where children feel seen, valued and inspired. In doing so, they support not only learning, but the development of emotionally healthy individuals—and, ultimately, a more compassionate and connected society.

For more information:

- <https://www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk/what-we-do/programmes-for-schools/funded-projects/>
- <https://www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk/what-we-do/wellbeing-activities/>

About Jayne:

Jayne Carter is Early Years Programme Development Lead at Partnership for Children. She helps practitioners develop children's emotional language, resilience and self-regulation, supporting emotionally positive early years environments.



Growing Joy with easyfundraising

Joy is at the heart of every early years setting. Whether it's a child discovering something new, sharing laughter with friends, or proudly showing off a piece of artwork, these moments help children feel happy, confident and ready to learn.

The joyful moments children experience every day are often supported by the resources around them. A new story book that sparks imagination, sensory equipment that encourages exploration, or outdoor play resources that inspire adventure can all help create experiences that build confidence, curiosity and happiness. However, with budgets under increasing pressure, finding additional funding can be a challenge.

That's where easyfundraising can help.

An Easy Way to Fund More Joy

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Register your setting today:
www.easyfundraising.org.uk/early-years-wales

Understanding Neurodivergent Joy, Glimmers and the Power of Neuroaffirming Play

Written by: Tracey Bancroft, Grants and Funding Lead, AP Cymru -The Neurodiversity Charity

In early childhood, we often focus on milestones, development targets and supporting children through challenges. While these are important, there is another essential ingredient for healthy development that sometimes receives less attention: joy.

Joy is not simply a pleasant emotion. It is a powerful developmental experience that helps children feel safe, connected, confident and ready to learn. For neurodivergent children—including autistic children, children with ADHD, sensory processing differences and other neurodevelopmental profiles—joy can play an even more significant role in supporting wellbeing, identity and emotional regulation.

As practitioners and caregivers, understanding the importance of neurodivergent joy and recognising the value of neuroaffirming play can help us create environments where all children can truly thrive.

The Importance of Joy in Childhood

Joy is often described as a feeling of happiness, delight or deep contentment. However, from a developmental perspective, joy is much more than a fleeting emotion.

When children experience joy, their brains are primed for learning. They are more likely to engage with others, explore their environment, develop new skills and build positive relationships. Joy supports resilience, creativity, emotional regulation and a sense of belonging.

Children learn best when they feel safe and connected. Joy helps create this sense of safety. It allows children to take risks in their learning, experiment with new ideas and recover more easily from setbacks.

For neurodivergent children, who may frequently encounter environments that expect them to conform to neurotypical norms, opportunities to experience authentic joy can be particularly important. Joy validates who they are and celebrates their differences rather than focusing solely on areas of difficulty or support needs.



What is Neurodivergent Joy?

The neurodiversity movement encourages us to recognise neurological differences as natural variations of the human experience rather than deficits to be fixed.

Neurodivergent joy refers to the happiness, fulfilment and sense of wellbeing that emerge when neurodivergent individuals are accepted, understood and able to engage with the world in ways that feel meaningful to them.

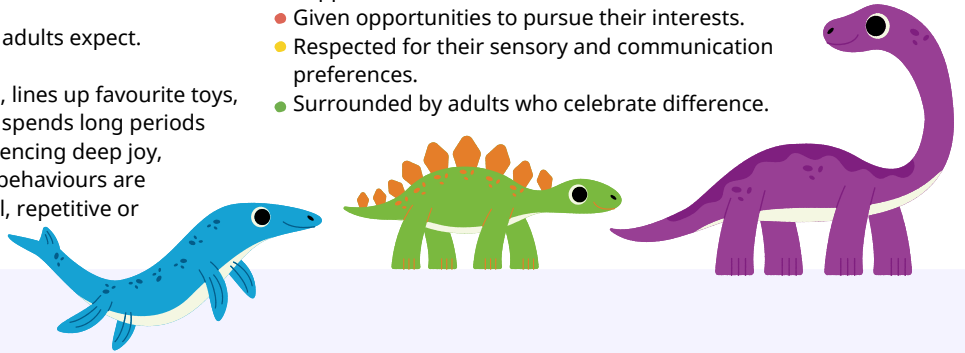
This joy may look different from what adults expect.

A child who repeatedly spins in circles, lines up favourite toys, talks passionately about dinosaurs or spends long periods absorbed in water play may be experiencing deep joy, regulation and connection. Yet these behaviours are sometimes misunderstood as unusual, repetitive or something to redirect.

When we shift our perspective and become curious about what brings a child joy, we begin to see strengths, interests and authentic ways of engaging with the world.

Neurodivergent joy flourishes when children are:

- Accepted for who they are.
- Allowed to express themselves authentically.
- Supported rather than corrected.
- Given opportunities to pursue their interests.
- Respected for their sensory and communication preferences.
- Surrounded by adults who celebrate difference.



Understanding Glimmers

The term "**glimmers**" was introduced by therapist Deb Dana¹ and refers to small moments that signal safety, connection, comfort and wellbeing.

While many professionals are familiar with discussing stress responses and triggers, glimmers encourage us to focus on the positive experiences that help regulate the nervous system.

For children, glimmers might include:

- Feeling the warmth of sunlight.
- Hearing a favourite song.
- Watching bubbles float through the air.
- Playing with a trusted adult.
- Spending time with a favourite toy or special interest.
- Experiencing a calming sensory activity.
- Sharing a moment of laughter with peers

For neurodivergent children, glimmers are often connected to sensory experiences, special interests and predictable routines. These moments may appear small to adults but can have a profound impact on a child's emotional wellbeing.

Recognising and cultivating glimmers helps children build emotional safety and resilience. It also provides practitioners with valuable insight into what helps a child feel regulated, connected and secure.



Play: The Language of Childhood

If joy is essential for children's wellbeing, then play is one of the most effective ways to access it.

Play is often described as the work of childhood. Through play, children learn about themselves, others and the world around them. They develop communication skills, problem-solving abilities, emotional literacy and social understanding.

Importantly, play offers children a sense of autonomy and control. It allows them to follow their own interests and motivations, which is particularly beneficial for neurodivergent children who may spend much of their day navigating environments designed around adult expectations.

Neurodivergent children often communicate, process experiences and regulate emotions through play. What may appear repetitive or highly focused to an observer may actually be supporting learning, emotional regulation and sensory processing.

Rather than asking, "How can we change this play?" we might ask, "What is this child gaining from this play experience?"

Reference:

¹ rhythmoofregulation.com/



The Benefits of Neuroaffirming Play for Neurodivergent Children

Neuroaffirming play recognises that children naturally communicate, learn, regulate and make sense of the world in ways that are unique to them. Rather than attempting to shape play towards neurotypical expectations, neuroaffirming approaches honour children's individual interests, sensory needs, communication styles and ways of engaging.

For neurodivergent children, play is often far more than recreation. It can be a source of regulation, self-expression, connection, confidence and joy.

When children engage in meaningful, neuroaffirming play, they are developing far more than cognitive skills. They are building a positive sense of self, discovering what helps them feel regulated and experiencing the joy that comes from being authentically themselves.

Emotional Regulation

Play provides opportunities for children to process feelings, reduce stress and regulate their nervous systems. Sensory play, movement-based activities and imaginative play can all support emotional wellbeing.

Confidence and Self-Esteem

When children are free to play according to their interests and strengths, they experience success and competence. This helps build positive self-identity and confidence.

Social Connection

Not all neurodivergent children seek social interaction in the same way, but play can create opportunities for connection on their terms. Shared interests, parallel play and cooperative activities can foster relationships without placing unnecessary demands on communication.

Sensory Regulation

Play offers valuable opportunities for children to seek sensory experiences that support regulation. Activities involving water, sand, movement, music, texture and nature can provide comfort, enjoyment and balance.

Identity Development

Perhaps most importantly, play allows neurodivergent children to be themselves. Through play, children explore their interests, express their unique perspectives and develop a strong sense of identity.

Neuroaffirming Play Therapy and Neurodivergent Wellbeing

Neuroaffirming play therapy builds upon the natural healing power of play while embracing neurodiversity as a normal and valuable part of human variation. Rather than focusing on changing behaviours that may be viewed as different, neuroaffirming play therapy seeks to understand the meaning behind those behaviours and support the child's wellbeing, identity and emotional development.

Play provides children with a safe, developmentally appropriate way to communicate experiences, thoughts and feelings that may be difficult to express verbally. Through neuroaffirming play therapy, practitioners create accepting environments where children can explore emotions, build self-understanding and develop a positive sense of self.

For neurodivergent children, neuroaffirming play therapy can provide:

- A safe and accepting space for self-expression.
- Opportunities to develop emotional awareness and understanding.
- Support for nervous system regulation.
- Increased self-confidence and self-advocacy.
- Validation of individual communication and play styles.
- Opportunities to explore strengths, interests and identity.

Importantly, neuroaffirming play therapy does not seek to reduce or extinguish neurodivergent traits. Instead, it supports children to understand themselves, process experiences and navigate their world while feeling valued and accepted for who they are.

Creating Joy-Filled Early Years Environments

As practitioners, we play a significant role in creating conditions where joy can flourish.

This may involve:

- Following children's interests and fascinations.
- Valuing child-led and neuroaffirming play.
- Creating sensory-friendly spaces.
- Celebrating neurodiversity.
- Looking for glimmers throughout the day.
- Supporting authentic self-expression.
- Focusing on strengths as well as support needs.
- Recognising that joy itself is a developmental outcome.



When we notice what lights children up, we gain insight into what helps them feel safe, engaged and connected.



Final Thoughts

Every child deserves opportunities to experience joy. For neurodivergent children, joy is not an optional extra—it is fundamental to wellbeing, learning, belonging and healthy development.

By recognising neurodivergent joy, noticing glimmers and embracing the power of neuroaffirming play and neuroaffirming play therapy, we can create environments where children are not simply supported to cope but are empowered to flourish.

When adults focus on what brings children joy rather than what makes them different, we send a powerful message:

You do not need to change who you are to belong. Your interests, your ways of communicating, your sensory experiences and your unique way of seeing the world are valued here.

That message may be one of the most important gifts we can offer any child.

Useful links:

apcymru.org.uk/

apcymru.org.uk/training



Turning Awareness in Action

Early Years Wales is delighted to celebrate the success of the first Early Years Neuroinclusion Champion programme, delivered by AP Cymru – The Neurodiversity Charity. Over three weeks, 16 practitioners from Early Years Wales member settings across Wales completed the highly engaging and practical training, earning recognition as AP Cymru Neuroinclusion Champions. Participants praised the course for its insightful content, immediate practical application and inspiring delivery, with 100% saying they would recommend it to others. The enthusiasm, commitment and passion shown by this first cohort demonstrated a shared determination to create truly neuroinclusive environments where neurodivergent children and their families can thrive. Congratulations to all of our new Champions as they continue their journey through the Neuroinclusion Champion Community of Practice. If you would like to join the next cohort, we encourage you to add your name to the waiting list and be part of this growing movement for neuroinclusive practice in Early Years settings.

For more information and to be added to the list training@earlyyears.wales

To keep up to date with forthcoming training earlyyears.wales/training-planner





Attuning to Flow: Pathways to Deep Joy

Written by: Jacqui Lewis

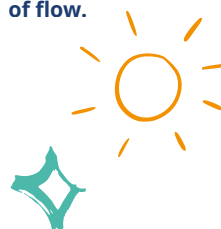
The Thinking Spot, Early Education Consultancy



When we talk about joy in early childhood, we often think of wide eyes, wily grins and shrieks of laughter and excitement. We may hold in mind an image of friends making joyful discoveries or moving with speed, their exchanges impulsive and free. Maybe there is a playful adult stirring up excitement or maybe it is the absence of an adult that makes space for this freedom to unfold into joy.

But what if the deepest forms of joy are found elsewhere, in the quiet intensity of a child's own competence. An absorption within solitary play where curiosity, creativity and discovery co-exist alongside each child's unique way of grappling with complexity.

This article explores the concept of flow and invites a shift in thinking in our role as practitioners. A shift from carrying joy into the room through the popular notion to be endlessly enthusiastic, entertaining and continuously available to all children, to creating the conditions in which children may discover joy for themselves. This is not to detract away from the importance of being attentive, playful and relational in our interactions, just a shift towards a more respectful agentic image of the child, where children are seen as capable individuals with the potential for joyful independent discovery. This perspective is further deepened by recognising the diverse ways children experience attention, immersion and engagement, including neurodivergent ways of being which help to broaden our understanding of flow.



What is flow?

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975;1990) originator of flow theory, tells us that a state of flow occurs, when we are completely absorbed in an activity, where time appears to pass differently, self-consciousness fades, attention is fully focused and most significantly, challenge and competence are at balance.

Not to be confused with...

Over time, the word flow in early childhood has reduced from its origins of a deeply psychological state of immersion and become more synonymous within the latter half of the term free flow. A term which narrowly relates, in the main, to the free movement between indoor and outdoor spaces. As practitioners we need to protect these powerful childhood moments and reclaim the concept of flow as a deep sustained joyful engagement.



Flow within Curriculum and Pedagogy

Although the terminology of flow may not appear explicitly within the Curriculum for Wales, the theoretical underpinning is seen through the abundant references to deep learning, meaningful engagement, sustained engagement and immersion in learning experiences (Welsh Government, 2021; Welsh Government, 2022). More broadly these principles are embedded within the four purposes of the curriculum, particularly within the emphasis on the ambitious and capable learner and enterprising, creative contributor (Welsh Government, 2021a).

As practitioners, we may feel we are constantly negotiating and chasing that almost elusive level of challenge, where a child transcends from boredom, but does not cross the threshold into overwhelm, anxiety and surrender. In practice, this means creating the conditions where children's pathway to flow is optimised. To strengthen our **child-led environments**, so children are **afforded agency** and **adults guide rather than control**, and where **motivation comes from the child's own curiosity rather than from external rewards**.

Csikszentmihalyi shares that when we receive internal and immediate feedback on our own progress, from our own efforts, a state of flow is more likely. When children have the agency to focus their energy intentionally, they have the power to shape their own wellbeing.



Recognising diverse pathways to flow

The unique perspectives of neurodivergent children may offer powerful guidance in deepening our understanding of flow, illuminating the profound significance of deep engagement. There is a growing theoretical and qualitative evidence base that suggests that some autistic children for example, may have particular strengths that make deep engagement, or flow, more accessible.

One influential theory in autism, associated with Dinah Murray and colleagues, is monotropism: the idea that autistic attention may be deeply focused on a relatively **small number of interests or activities at any one time** (Murray, Lesser & Lawson, 2005). This helps explain why some autistic children may enter states of intense concentration, intrinsic motivation and immersion that closely resemble flow. Recent research also links autistic people's experiences of deep task immersion with hyperfocus and monotropism, while emerging work on autistic flow suggests that **meaningful interests and self-chosen activity** can support wellbeing, identity and flourishing (Pellicano et al., 2024; Heasman et al., 2024).

What might be dismissed simply though the naming of a fixation or restricted interest, can often hold immense potential, when we notice it as a child's most reliable pathway into flow and deep joy.

This insight invites us to reconsider some of our assumptions about what engagement 'should' look like. Deep involvement is not always social, verbal or immediately visible to adults. These moments can help us notice what supports a child's deep engagement, what captures their attention, sustains their interest and brings them joy. We need to be careful not to impose adult assumptions on play and attach deficit labels such as repetitive, fixed or even 'stuck'. What may look like repeated action from the outside, may be a child's route into concentration, competence and joy. Instead of assuming we need to redirect, we need to pause and consider what the repetition is making possible for the child.





Protect periods of uninterrupted play

Autistic experiences of flow can invite us to think differently about the conditions that support deep engagement. If we are serious about creating opportunities for flow and ultimately joy, we must protect uninterrupted periods of play and exploration, even when routines or timetables tempt us to move children on. We **must take children's interests seriously**, and not just simply as starting points for learning. We must truly **afford time and space** for **repetition and revisiting**, recognising that returning to the same area, movement, story, object, or idea, can deepen understanding and enjoyment, rather than suggest a lack of progress. We must also **resist interrupting sustained concentration with unnecessary praise, questioning or transitions**, and broaden our understanding of what meaningful engagement can look like. We need to recognise that deep involvement may be quiet, solitary or intensely focused rather than social or immediately visible to adults. While these conditions may be especially important for some children, they may help create richer opportunities for flow, joy and flourishing for all children.

Detaching from flow

The experiences of neurodivergent children can also offer important insights into how abrupt interruptions to flow are experienced. You may recognise this readily in moments of emotional distress or dysregulation following abrupt transitions, but I invite you to notice these responses differently. Rather than viewing them as deficits in flexibility or regulation, they can be understood as making visible the challenge of being asked to leave a state of intense concentration, enjoyment and meaning before a child is ready to do. This is particularly evident during periods of flow when neurochemicals and endorphins support motivation, attention and pleasure. For some neurodivergent children the interruption of this state may be experienced more intensely or expressed more visibly, offering valuable insight into an experience that is shared by many children. As young children's prefrontal cortex is still developing, sensitive adult presence is often needed to help transition from states of deep involvement without unnecessarily disrupting their sense of well-being and agency.

Respect

A child wholly absorbed in an activity is demonstrating competence, curiosity and purpose. Recognising and protecting these moments can be understood as an act of respect. Even with good intentions, we as practitioners can interrupt, direct or structure children's experiences in ways that prevent and disrespect deep engagement. When we privilege verbal interaction, eye contact, and collaborative play, we risk overlooking the child's own signs of agency, competence and joy. To value the joy that may emerge from an epistemic rupture, a moment in play when a child's way of knowing shifts, or when they suddenly see a pattern, solve a problem, make a connection or understand something differently, we are witnessing some of the richest experiences of childhood.

Implications for practice

Ultimately deep joy is not defined by how it appears from the outside. It may be energetic, playful and expressive, but it may also be quiet, serious, focused or intensely absorbed. What matters is the quality of the engagement, its continuity, depth and capacity to sustain the child's interest. The implication for practice is clear, if we value flow as a pathway to joy, then our task is not simply to look for visible joy, but to value the conditions that create it.



See also:
Creating a Climate for Voice, *smalltalk*,
(December 2025) pg 05 - 07

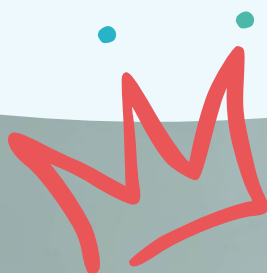
What can we do today?

- **Consider** who makes the decisions in your setting? We need to be intentional in affording children agency and respecting their competence, and purpose. Agency does not reside where influence is not felt.
- **Discuss** the importance of disrupting play versus upholding traditional transition times (e.g. tidy up time). Are we really OK that joy may be the sacrificial collateral damage?
- **Dive** headfirst into a child's broader interests. We often can name a child's interest, but not what it is about that interest that is so absorbing for the child.
- **Value** the absorption itself and scatter across the fabric of their play.
- **Be unapologetic** If a child is still relishing in the meaning, rhythm and joy of the same book, go forth and read it for the 11th time, with joy!
- **Resist** turning deep concentration into a test or quiz with questions of colour and number, play is not to be proven by the child as a learning opportunity.
- **Notice** the child who is quiet, focused or repeating the same action, consider what depth of attention or joy might be present.
- **Respect** the detachment of a flow state outside the language of 'supporting transitions', can a sound, a held or raised hand really suffice?
- **Reflect** on the equitability of opportunity for flow. Which children are supported to remain deeply engaged, and which are more frequently interrupted, redirected or moved on?
- **Notice your own flow state....**



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Joy opens the door and children **PLAY** their way into possibility

Written by: Amber Ogunsanya-William
Inclusive Play Worker and Consultant

Joy has never been a quiet emotion. It doesn't tiptoe in politely or wait for permission. Joy arrives like a Caribbean auntie at a family gathering loud, laughing, arms wide, already telling a story before she's even stepped through the door. Joy bubbles up from your belly, fizzes in your chest, and spreads across your face until your lips crack open into a smile you didn't even realise was forming. Sometimes it escapes as a laugh, sometimes as a squeal, sometimes as a tiny gasp of wonder. Joy is not just an emotion. Joy is an entryway. A portal. A shimmering doorway into possibility!

When children experience joy, the world doesn't just brighten it expands. Colours sharpen. Ideas can absolutely stretch. Imagination stops being a background dancer and becomes the headline act. Joy is the key that unlocks possibility, and play is the pathway children follow to explore it....

I learned this early. I grew up in an adventure playground not the neat, plastic kind, but the wild, wooden, rope-swing, tyre-swing, climb until your hands are muddy kind. The kind of place where children built dens out of pallets, invented entire worlds before lunchtime and negotiated complex social hierarchies while hanging upside down from a rope. It was chaotic creative and completely magical. And it was home... it still is.

It also helped that my dad has been a senior playworker for over thirty years. Thirty years of building spaces where children feel free, brave, silly, curious, loud, thoughtful and everything in between. Thirty years of watching children transform everyday objects into extraordinary creations. Thirty years of championing joy as a serious, essential part of childhood. Growing up with playworker papa meant that play wasn't just something we did it was a way of life. A philosophy. A family tradition! He's still working as one to this day...



Illustration credits: Playworker Amber



Joy is a Doorway!

Joy acts like a threshold. When children feel safe, seen and uplifted their brains shift into a state of openness. Curiosity wakes up. Confidence stretches its legs. Suddenly, they step through an invisible doorway into a landscape where anything can happen!

This isn't just poetic it's backed by research. Helen Dodd's¹ work on **play and mental health** shows that joyful play helps children build confidence, reduce anxiety and develop emotional resilience. Joy is not a "nice extra." It's a biological and emotional catalyst.

Joyful environments whether a playground, a living room, a science centre or a Caribbean granny's backyard they tell children:

"Explore. This world is yours."

Joy doesn't just brighten the moment. It widens the horizon.



The Magic of Possibility

Possibility is where children begin to understand that they can shape their world. It's the spark that whispers:

What if... Could I... Let's try...

This is where the Narnia wardrobe and Faraway Tree vibes come alive not because children escape reality, but because they expand it.

Possibility teaches children that they have **agency**, that their ideas matter, that they can try again when something doesn't work and that hope is not just a feeling but a skill. It teaches them that the world is not fixed. It is flexible. It is shapeable. It is theirs!

In families, possibility often shows up through storytelling. A grandparent might tell a tale that stretches reality just enough to make it magical and suddenly a child begins to see the world not as it is, but as it could be. In adventure playgrounds, possibility shows up when children transform everyday objects into extraordinary creations. In intergenerational spaces, possibility shows up when adults join in the play, showing children that imagination doesn't expire with age.

Possibility is not fantasy. It's true preparation for life.

Play is the Pathway into Possibility

Play is children's natural language it truly is a universal language. Their research method. Their emotional rehearsal space and is mine to this very day. When joy opens the door, play becomes the pathway children follow to explore what they can do, who they can be and how they can shape their world.

In an adventure playground, play looks like children turning old tyres into pirate ships and wooden pallets into secret dens. It looks like groups of kids negotiating roles in a game they invented five seconds ago. It looks like a child climbing a rope swing for the first time, wobbling, laughing, trying again and discovering resilience in real time.

Across the play sector from playgrounds to museums, schools, parks, libraries, community centres and family hubs, I see the same magic unfolding. When adults create environments where joy is welcomed rather than squeezed out, children flourish. They take risks. They experiment. They imagine futures. They practice possibility!



Cost-Effective Ways Children Play Their Way into Possibility



Playground Magic

1 Adventure playgrounds have always felt like portals into possibility to me not just because they're full of loose parts and open spaces, but because they invite children to step into worlds they've invented themselves. A simple path becomes an expedition route the moment a child decides it's one. Chalk arrows suddenly transform into clues left behind by mysterious travellers and benches stop being benches and start becoming mountain ledges that must be conquered before sunset. Slides turn into waterfalls, rope swings become jungle vines, and before you know it, a group of children has declared themselves explorers navigating a secret island that only reveals its magic to those who dare to imagine it. This kind of play doesn't require equipment or instructions just curiosity, confidence and a willingness to follow the story wherever it goes.

2 Loose-parts treasure hunts are another favourite of mine, especially because they remind me so much of my own childhood... Children gather sticks, leaves, stones, bottle tops anything they can get their hands on and treat them like precious artefacts. These moments are rich with engineering thinking and indeed provide imaginative problem-solving, and they show how powerful loose-parts play can be when children are trusted to lead.

3 Shadow play is one of those simple joys that feels almost magical. On a sunny day, children stretch their shadows as far as they can, dance with them, chase them, and experiment with how their bodies change shape. There's something wonderfully freeing about watching a child realise they can make their shadow look tall, tiny, wiggly, or wild just by moving differently. It's joyful, completely free, and teaches body awareness and creativity in a way that feels effortless.

4 Nature quests turn any outdoor space into a Faraway Tree adventure. Children search for "three magical things," or "a leaf that looks like dragon skin," or a stick that could be a fairy wand," and suddenly the ordinary becomes extraordinary. This kind of play blends imagination with sensory exploration and helps children see nature not as something to walk past, but as something to wonder about.



Home Magic

1 Homes are full of possibility when we allow them to be. Cardboard boxes become castles, spaceships, shops, and secret reading nook! With only crayons, tape and imagination, a living room can transform into Narnia before you've even finished your cup of tea. I've seen children spend entire afternoons designing cardboard control panels for their spaceship, pressing imaginary buttons and narrating their journey to a distant planet with the kind of commitment that would impress NASA.

2 Kitchen science is another joyful pathway, especially because it turns everyday items into experiments. Vinegar and baking soda become a volcano that erupts with dramatic flair. Ice and salt become a melting race that children monitor like tiny scientists. Food colouring and water become a potion lab where children mix, stir, observe and narrate their discoveries with absolute seriousness. It's cheap, joyful, and teaches curiosity and experimentation in a way that feels playful rather than pressured.

3 Cushion worlds are endlessly versatile. Chairs, cushions, and blankets can become obstacle courses, reading caves, pirate ships, or jungle hideouts. Growing up in an adventure playground, we used sticks and blankets to become Tarzan in the jungle, swinging from imaginary vines and telling stories that made the whole space come alive. That same spirit can be recreated at home with nothing more than soft furnishings and a willingness to let the living room get a little messy.

4 Story sparks are simple but powerful. Asking a child "What's behind the magic door?" or "What did your toy see last night?" opens up entire worlds. Children begin to narrate, invent, and explore ideas that help them understand themselves and the world around them. It's storytelling, emotional development, and creativity all wrapped into one.



Top Tips for Bringing More Joy into Children's Lives



Here are some clear, practical, joy-boosting ideas you can use anywhere at home in a playground, in a classroom, or in a community space... even in your home!

Follow their lead:

Let children guide the play. Joy grows when they feel ownership.

Say yes more often:

If it's safe, say yes. Yes to messy play. Yes to silly ideas. Yes to building a fort in the living room.

Create invitation spaces:

Set out loose parts, cushions, cardboard, or natural materials and let children decide what they become.

Join in the play:

Intergenerational joy is powerful. Sit on the floor. Build the tower. Stir the potion. Swing on the rope (if your knees allow).

Celebrate the process:

Joy comes from exploring, not perfect outcomes. Celebrate effort, imagination and experimentation.

Slow down:

Joy needs time. Create pockets of unhurried play where children can wander, wonder and invent.

Bring nature in:

Leaves, sticks, stones, petals! Nature is the cheapest, richest play resource.

Add humour:

Silly voices, funny walks, playful exaggeration... humour is joy's best friend.

Protect play fiercely:

Advocate for play in schools, communities and policy spaces. Joy is not optional. It's essential.



A Final Thought

Growing up in an adventure playground with a dad who has spent over thirty years championing play taught me that joy is not optional. It's essential. It's intergenerational. It's cultural. It's developmental. It's transformative. And now, working across the play sector, I see how powerful it is when families, communities, educators and organisations come together to protect and nurture it.

Joy is not a small thing. It's everything!

You may also be interested in:

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See also:

- You Can't Be What You Can't See: Championing Children's Voices Through Representative Play, *smalltalk*, (December 2025) pg 16 - 19
- Culture, Cuddles and Early Literacy; How Babies Learn Through Play, *smalltalk*, (April 2026) pg 19 - 21
- Let Play Lead the Day tapestry.info/collaborations/playworkeramber/

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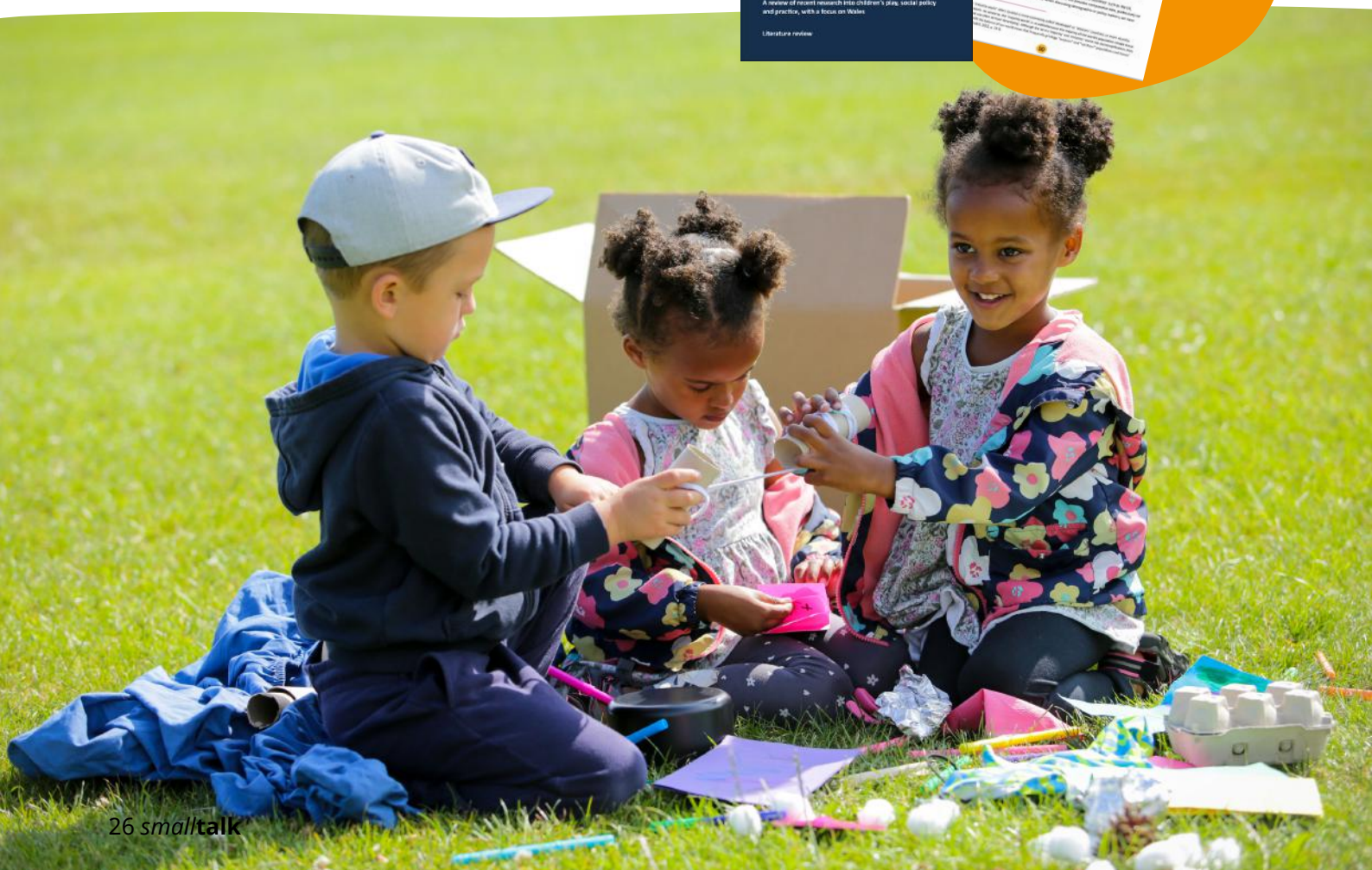
Play and joy: why children need time, space and freedom to play

Written by: **Marianne Mannello**

Assistant Director: Policy, Support and Advocacy, Play Wales

Play and joy are almost inseparable. Playing is one of the simplest and most powerful ways children experience joy. It is how they laugh with friends, test ideas, make sense of the world and feel that they belong. Endorphins are the body's natural mood-boosters and stress-relievers. When children are directing their own play, endorphins are released and this immediately improves wellbeing.

This is reinforced by Playing and being well, Play Wales' literature review which brings together recent research on children's play, social policy and practice in Wales. The review explores the connections between playing and children's wellbeing, children's play patterns, and how adults can support the conditions for children's play.



The Playing and being well review highlights that:

- play matters to children and the pleasure of playing makes a significant contribution to mental health and motivates further playing
- the skills, dispositions and autonomy that are needed for and honed through playing can make playing more satisfactory and contribute to wellbeing beyond play
- through playing children can build attachments to peers, other adults, animals, objects and places, contributing to children's sense of security and belonging and of being able to affect their own lives and the lives of others
- nonsense is valuable and the 'what if?' potential of play supports creativity and innovation, which can contribute to evolution.



For children, play is not a break from important things – it is 'the' important thing. It supports their health, happiness, friendships and sense of freedom. Joy in play is found in everyday moments: running in a park, jumping in puddles, making up a game, looking for dragons and fairies or rough and tumbling with friends or siblings. To adults, these moments of play may look small, but to children they are massively important. These small moments of play, of being well, offer choice and possibility in children's lives – they are often moments away from being told what to do and how to do it.

Playing also brings opportunities for imagination, challenge, uncertainty and creativity. When children are working tough things out – like how high to climb or how far to jump – they are building confidence and resilience. These opportunities help them to work out how their bodies and emotions work. The joy of play comes from this freedom to try out new things, explore, make and fix mistakes with no fixed outcome.

Adults have an important role in protecting children's opportunities to play. This means listening to and carefully observing children, paying careful attention to their preferences, noticing what gets in the way, and being willing to challenge these barriers to play.

Protecting play equates to protecting joy. It means that children need more than structured timetables and inflexible routines. They need everyday opportunities to take small risks, to be free, to connect with people and places and to make their own fun.

At its core, play is about children 'being children' in its most traditional sense. It is silliness, laughter, movement, friendship, imagination, being brave. When we value play and help make time, space and freedom for it, we create the conditions of a happy and healthy childhood.

Play Wales resources – further reading:

- **Play in the first 1000 days:** an information sheet exploring the importance of play in the first 1000 days – play is the foundation for development during this time.
- **Playing outdoors in early years settings:** a toolkit highlighting the importance of playing for young children and of creating a rich play environment.

All our resources are freely available on the **Play Wales website:** www.play.wales/resources-library.



Play in the first 1000 days
co-written by Play Wales and
Early Years Wales

Download here:
play.wales/resources-library/play-in-the-first-1000-days/





Why joyful play is so powerful for children with ACEs and how you can bring it to life in your setting.

Written by: Nicole James, Senior Training and Development Officer at New Pathways

Walk into any early years setting and you'll see play everywhere: laughter bubbling, imaginations running wild and children making sense of the world around them. But for children who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), play isn't just play — it's healing.

Children with ACEs often have bodies and brains that are on high alert, ready for danger and prioritising safety over learning, development or joy.

Joy is More Than a Feeling — It's a Biological Reset

Research tells us that joy is not just a “nice extra”. It is a biological necessity, especially for children who have experienced adversity or trauma.

Joyful experiences trigger the release of “feel-good” chemicals such as dopamine, oxytocin and endorphins. These help counteract stress hormones and support the vagus nerve, which plays an important role in calm, focus and emotional regulation.

Experiencing joy repeatedly over time can ‘rewire’ the nervous system, helping children shift from constant high alert into a state where they can learn, play, and build relationships.

From “Stuck Play” to “Dynamic Play”

Children with ACEs don't always experience play in the same way. Sometimes their play can be repetitive, intense or lacking in joy. This is often called “stuck play” and may reflect a child re-living stress rather than working through it.

When we provide the right environment of safety, connection and empowerment, “dynamic play” can begin. This kind of play is characterised by laughter, imagination and curiosity.

Through joyful play, early years practitioners can help children move from survival mode into a place of safety, connection and growth.



How Joy Builds Resilience

Joyful play doesn't just help in the moment. It can also have lifelong benefits. Research shows that the more **Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs)** children have, the less likely they are to experience poor mental health as adults.

High levels of positive experiences can buffer the effects of ACEs, even when adversity has been significant. Over time, this can reduce some of the negative impacts later in life.

This is because intentional, joyful play helps children:

- Build emotional regulation
- Develop relationships and trust
- Experience mastery and confidence
- Form a positive sense of self

What Makes Play Truly 'Joyful'?

For children with ACEs, joy doesn't always happen by accident. **It often needs to be carefully supported and co-created with adults.**

The key is something called affective scaffolding: practitioners intentionally bring warmth, encouragement and emotional support into everyday interactions.

Joyful play happens when children feel:

- Safe (both physically and emotionally)
- Seen and understood
- Connected to others
- Free to explore without fear

Without this sense of safety, a child's brain, which may be alert to danger, simply won't "allow" play to happen.

Bringing Joyful Play to Life: Practical Strategies

So what does this look like in a busy nursery or playgroup?

Here are some practical, meaningful ways to build joyful play into a child's day and help them move from survival mode into a place of safety, connection and growth.

Connection

A popular way of doing this is by being intentional in how we greet children and welcome them into a space:

When a child arrives, enters a room or joins a group:

- Greet each child by name and at their eye level to increase feelings of emotional and physical safety
- Incorporate touch, but on the child's terms, allowing for cultural sensitivity and child empowerment: "Would you like a high-five, a hug or a wave?"
- Use a warm tone and facial expression



This video offers an example of how it works:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVAKBnXIGxA>



Empowerment

To feel safe, children need to feel in control and have choices.

Try this:

- Let children choose the activity
- Join their play rather than directing it
- Notice and build on what interests them

Example:

If a child is lining up dinosaurs, you might say, “Wow, they look ready for something... are they going on an adventure?” Now the play can grow, evolve and become joyful.

Create Predictable, Safe Environments

A brain on high alert can experience surprises or sudden change as unsafe. That can quickly send a child into hyper- or hypo-regulation.

Children with ACEs need to know what comes next.

Predictability helps them feel safe enough to engage in play.

Try this:

- Use clear routines
- Visual timetables
- Consistent transitions

Example:

A child who struggles with change may become distressed at snack time. A simple visual routine or familiar transition song can reduce anxiety and allow them to stay engaged.

Shared Laughter

Shared play is incredibly powerful and helps build connection with a trusted adult. **Laughter** reduces stress chemicals such as cortisol and supports emotional wellbeing.

Try this:

- Silly songs or dances during transitions
- Funny voices in storytelling
- Playful games like “peek-a-boo” or “guess what happens next”

Example:

Turn tidy-up time into a game: “Let’s hop like frogs back to the shelf!” Suddenly, a potentially stressful transition becomes a moment of connection and fun.

Co-Regulation and “Name It to Tame It”

Before a child can feel joy, they need your help to feel calm. Co-regulation, where you “share your calm”, is key.

Try this:

- Speak slowly and softly
- Offer comfort or proximity
- Label feelings: “I can see that was a bit overwhelming”

Example:

After a meltdown, instead of jumping to correction, you sit quietly nearby and breathe slowly. As the child calms, you gently reintroduce play, perhaps with a favourite toy or activity.

Final Thoughts: Joy as a Professional Practice

Supporting children with ACEs can feel challenging, but it is also incredibly powerful work. The evidence is clear: **joyful play is not an optional extra. It is a pathway to healing.**

When you create moments of laughter, connection and safety, you are not just helping a child enjoy their day. You are:

- Rewiring their stress system
- Strengthening their brain development
- Building lifelong resilience

So the next time you join a child in a silly game, share a laugh or follow their imagination, remember: you are not “just playing”. **You are helping them heal.**



READING LIST



Want to learn more? Here are additional reading suggestions for those looking to deepen their understanding of joyful play, resilience, and trauma-informed practice:

Foundational Research & Frameworks

- ☐ **Trauma-Informed Wales Framework:** the **ACE Hub Wales** guidance, which outlines the five practice principles for becoming a trauma-informed nation.
- ☐ **Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences (HOPE) Framework:** Explore the "Four Building Blocks of HOPE" (Relationships, Environment, Engagement, and Emotional Growth) via the **HOPE National Resource Center at Tufts Medical Center**. This framework provides the evidence base for why positive experiences are a biological necessity for development.
- ☐ **Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) Study:** Read the landmark 2019 study led by **Dr. Christina Bethell** (Johns Hopkins), which identified the **seven key positive experiences in childhood** that statistically buffer against adult mental health challenges.

Practical Toolkits for Practitioners

- ☐ **Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (TrACE) Toolkit:** A practical resource from **ACE Hub Wales** designed to help early years settings and other organisations assess and improve their trauma-informed culture.
- ☐ **Early Years Trauma Informed Guidance:** Developed by the **Bath & North East Somerset (BANES) Council**, this guide offers practical templates for **Responsive Co-regulation plans** and **Quick Read Profiles** to support individual children.
- ☐ **Edutopia's YouTube channel.** They create videos about what's working in preK-12 education. "Whether you're curious about about project-based learning, integrating tech tools, or social and emotional learning practices, we've got you covered."

Expert Literature on Relational Healing

- ☐ **The Whole-Brain Child and No-Drama Discipline:** These books by **Dr. Dan Siegel** and **Dr. Tina Payne Bryson** explain the science behind "Name It to Tame It" and the **Emotion Coaching** steps used to validate a child's internal world.
- ☐ **The Work of Louise Bomber:** Specifically "**Know Me To Teach Me**" and "**Inside I'm Hurting**," which provide differentiated discipline strategies for children who have experienced ACEs and toxic shame.
- ☐ **The Work of Dr. Bruce Perry:** His research on the neurobiology of trauma emphasizes that "there is no more effective neurobiological intervention than a safe relationship".
- ☐ **Sonia Mainstone-Cotton:** Refer to her guides on **Promoting Young Children's Emotional Health and Wellbeing** for practical solutions tailored specifically to the early years environment.

Do you have a favourite book, podcast, article or resource that has influenced your work with children and families? We'd love to hear your suggestions and share them with the wider *smalltalk* community. Please email Charlotte at charlotted@earlyyears.wales.





THE JOY OF CONVERSATION:

Why Talking Together Matters More Than Ever

Written by: Sue Atkins President: Montessori UK and Parenting Author, Broadcaster & Host of the "Navigating the Digital Jungle" podcast

I've been thinking a lot about joy lately.
Not the big, expensive, once-a-year sort of joy, but the everyday kind.

Childhood happens in the small moments

The joy of puddle jumping on the way to nursery...

The joy of spotting a ladybird on a leaf...

The joy of singing nonsense songs in the car...

The joy of a child telling you a story that wanders all over the place before finally arriving at the point...

The joy of simply being together.

In my work with parents, schools and nurseries, I often find myself returning to something surprisingly simple: conversation.

Not because conversation is another thing to add to an already busy day, but because conversation is where so much childhood happens. It is where children discover language, where they make sense of the world and where they learn who they are. Perhaps most importantly of all, it is where they feel seen.

When a toddler proudly points to a digger and an adult responds with genuine interest, something important happens. When a child excitedly tells us about the worm they found in the garden and we stop to listen, something important happens. When we laugh together, wonder together, sing together or simply chat together, children receive a powerful message:

“**You
matter**”



“These moments may seem small, but childhood is built from small moments.”

Joy is not separate from learning

For many years, conversations around child development have understandably focused on outcomes, milestones, assessments and school readiness.

These things matter.

But sometimes I wonder if we risk overlooking the conditions that allow children to flourish in the first place.

Joy is one of those conditions.

Children learn best when they feel safe, connected, curious and engaged. Joy is not separate from learning; joy fuels learning.

Think about a child completely absorbed in building a tower, mixing mud, chasing bubbles or creating an imaginary world from a cardboard box. They are not simply playing. They are experimenting, questioning, communicating, negotiating, problem-solving and learning.

Joy and learning are partners. One feeds the other.

As Maria Montessori reminded us, children learn best when they are actively engaged in meaningful experiences. **Joy often signals that a child is exactly where they need to be: interested, involved and eager to explore.**



Putting conversation back at the heart of childhood

This is one reason I have become increasingly passionate about putting conversation back at the heart of childhood.

We know children develop language through interaction, not instruction. Through turn-taking, storytelling, questioning, listening and being listened to. Through shared experiences and relationships.

Some of the richest conversations happen during the most ordinary moments:

- At snack time
- Walking to the shops
- Planting seeds
- Laying the table
- Tidying up
- Looking out of the window



*We sometimes underestimate the power of everyday interactions because they don't look remarkable. Yet these are often the moments that shape children's **confidence, vocabulary, curiosity and sense of belonging.***



A woman with reddish-brown hair, wearing a beige sweater and dark blue jeans with tall black rubber boots, sits on a large log over a stream. She is surrounded by four children. To her left, a young boy in a blue and white striped sweater and tan pants with bright yellow rubber boots is focused on a stick. Next to him, another boy in a blue denim jacket and grey pants with green rubber boots is also looking down at a stick. To the woman's right, a boy in a blue and white long-sleeved shirt and dark jeans with dark boots is looking at a stick. On the far right, a girl in a pink patterned sweater and blue jeans with brown boots is also looking down at a stick. They are all sitting on the same log, which is positioned over a shallow stream with dark water. The background is a dense forest with many thin tree trunks and some green foliage. The overall mood is quiet and focused, despite the title suggesting a loss of joy.

**When life gets busy,
joy can slip away**

“

Children rarely remember the perfectly planned activity.
What they often remember is how adults made them feel.

”



a smile...a shared joke...a song...a moment of wonder...a conversation

In recent years I've become increasingly aware of how much pressure adults are under.

Parents are juggling work, family life and endless demands on their attention. Early years professionals are navigating increasing expectations while doing some of the most important work in society.

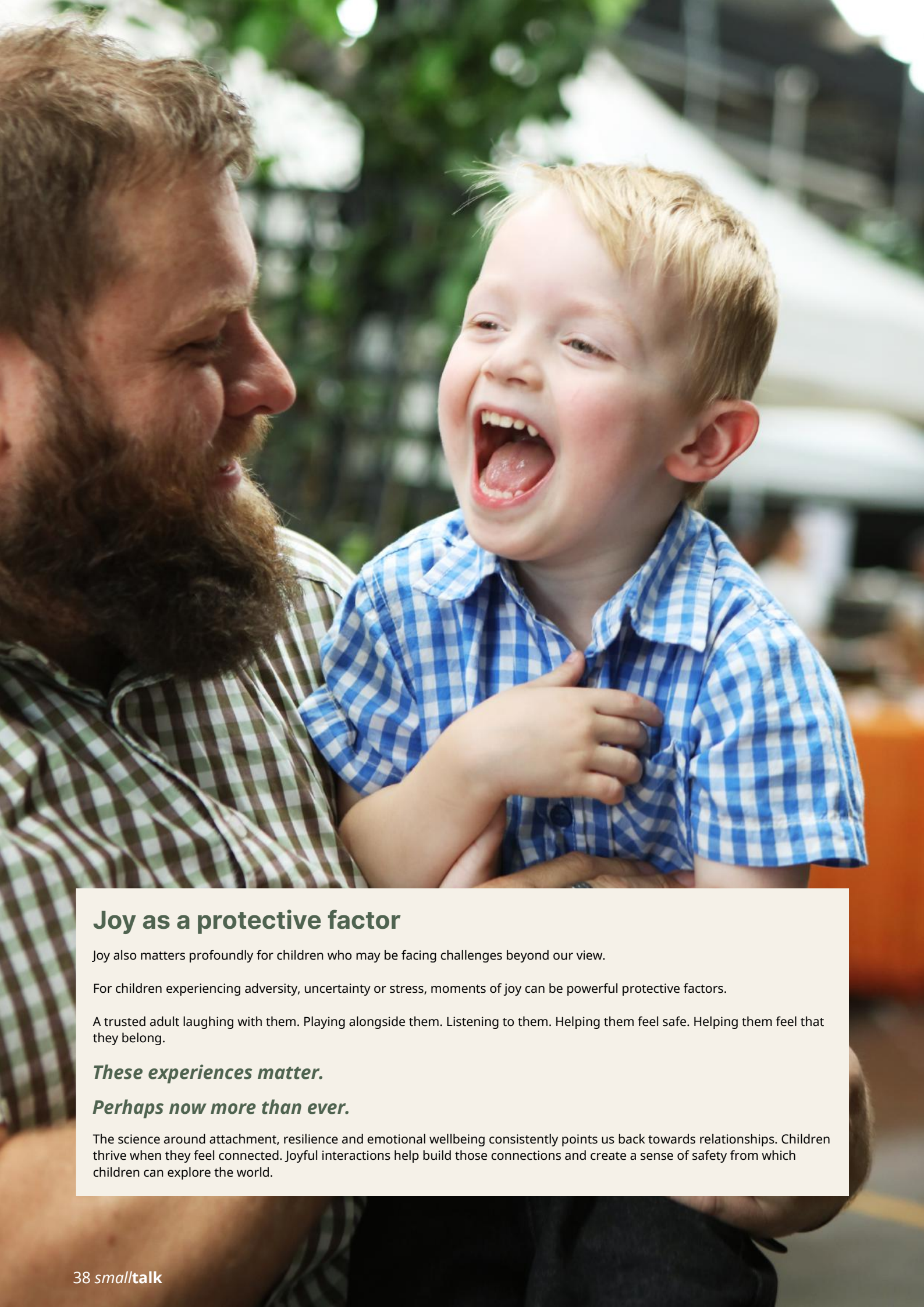
When life feels pressured, joy can quietly slip out of the room.

Not because we don't value it.

But because we're busy. Because we're tired. Because we're focused on getting through the day.

That's why I think joy deserves our attention.

Not as an extra activity. Not as a special event. But as a way of being.



Joy as a protective factor

Joy also matters profoundly for children who may be facing challenges beyond our view.

For children experiencing adversity, uncertainty or stress, moments of joy can be powerful protective factors.

A trusted adult laughing with them. Playing alongside them. Listening to them. Helping them feel safe. Helping them feel that they belong.

These experiences matter.

Perhaps now more than ever.

The science around attachment, resilience and emotional wellbeing consistently points us back towards relationships. Children thrive when they feel connected. Joyful interactions help build those connections and create a sense of safety from which children can explore the world.



An invitation to notice more

One of the things I love most about young children is their ability to find delight in things adults often rush past.

A puddle.

A feather.

A funny noise.

A stick.

A cloud shaped like a dinosaur.

Children remind us that joy is rarely found in bigger, faster or more.

It is often found in noticing....in slowing down....in being present.

Perhaps that is the invitation for all of us.

To notice more - To rush a little less - To talk a little more - To laugh more often - To be curious alongside children.

Because when children experience joy, they don't just learn.

They thrive.

And when we create spaces filled with conversation, connection and delight, we are not simply supporting children's development.

We are helping to create happier childhoods.

And that feels like something worth making time for.

A simple challenge

Today, pause for one extra minute during a conversation with a child.

Listen a little longer.

Wonder alongside them.

Follow their lead.

You may be surprised where the conversation takes you.

Because sometimes the smallest conversations create the biggest impact.

About Sue

Sue Atkins is a parenting author, former Deputy Headteacher, President of Montessori Society AMI (UK), broadcaster and creator of Together at the Table™, a movement dedicated to putting conversation back at the heart of childhood.

Useful links:



www.navigatingthedigitaljungle.com



www.thesueatkins.com

The joy of being heard in diverse ways: comfort, confidence and belonging in the Early Years

Written by: Dr Poppy Gibson, Jayne Carter and Martine Brockman
The Open University

The root of joy in relationships often stems from the sharing in happiness and participating in activities that encourage self-expression, communication and human connection. For children in early years settings, their relationship with their key worker or other practitioners is vital in helping joy to flourish; children need to feel safe, respected and valued, as these are the people with whom communication happens each day.

This article aims to deepen understanding of listening as a relational experience that helps children feel safe, included and ready to learn, but most importantly to find joy. The article shares four creative ideas for use in early years settings as well as for parents and carers to try at home, to help encourage communication for our youngest learners, including through the use of signing. Joy looks different for every child and when we enable children to interact through diverse means, we are able to access the joy of non-verbal, anxious, shy children too.



The value of communication in Early Years

For young children, **communication is not simply about words; it is about connection.** Feeling seen and heard by trusted adults creates a strong emotional foundation from which joy can grow. In early years settings, children arrive with a wide range of communication abilities, experiences and needs. Some may be confident verbal communicators, while **others may rely on gesture, behaviour, silence or play to express themselves.** Recognising and valuing these differences is key to ensuring every child experiences a sense of belonging.

A primary challenge for practitioners is tuning into these diverse communication styles within busy environments. When communication is missed or misunderstood, children may feel overlooked or frustrated. Over time, this can impact their confidence, leading some children to withdraw, become anxious or communicate through behaviour rather than language. Creating spaces where all forms of expression are acknowledged helps children feel emotionally secure and this sense of comfort is essential for joyful engagement.

When children feel comfortable, they are more likely to take risks in their communication. This is where confidence begins to develop. Responsive adults who listen attentively, give children time to respond and validate their attempts, whether verbal or non-verbal, send a powerful message: **"you matter."** These everyday interactions build a child's willingness to participate, share ideas and explore language without fear of getting it wrong.



Equally important is fostering a sense of belonging. Communication is relational; it happens within the context of meaningful relationships. When children feel understood and included, they begin to see themselves as valued members of a community. This is particularly important for children who may feel marginalised due to language barriers, additional needs or temperament. Inclusive communication approaches ensure that every child's voice, however it is expressed, is recognised and respected.

Different ways to encourage communication

Communication is so much more than the spoken word. The joy of feeling heard is deeply rooted in how we listen and are listened to. How do we create confident communicators? It's simple; make listening joyful, create meaning and enjoy wholesome participation. But how do we teach listening? Here are four activities to try.

Listening walk

A walk is a beautiful way to make listening joyful; by exploring what we hear and how it makes us feel, we can then learn how we listen best, which can transfer to positive communications, equal relationships and emotional stability. A walk outside can welcome sounds of birdsong which historically trigger responses of safety and calm. Exploring the different sounds, identifying different birds and recognising the feelings that their song conjures up, promotes listening without load. A plane overhead; the joy evident through excitement and wonder. A tractor in the field; whilst too loud for some, others will relish the magnitude of the sound and its purpose. The gentle wind rustling leaves in the tree can be mesmerising; this space can then allow for day-dreaming and problem solving. When every moment is filled with purposeful activity, it can limit the opportunity for simply being.

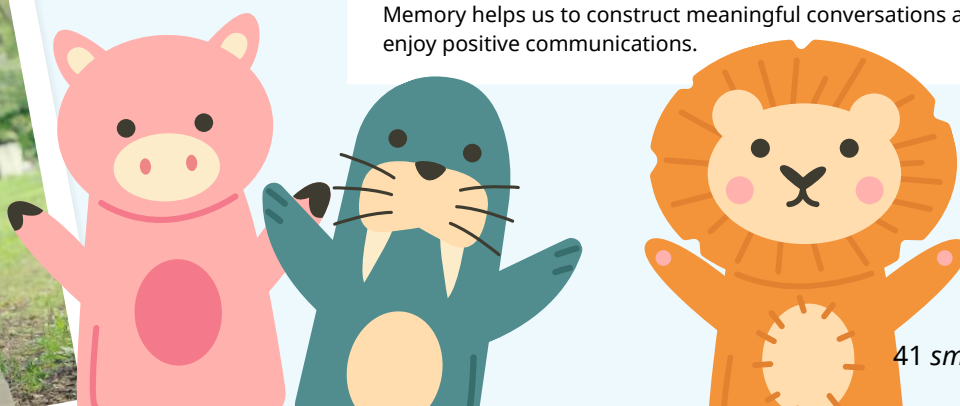


Memory

"Listen" is such a loaded instruction; it relies upon multiple sub-instructions which include processing, focus and memory. To keep listening joyful and something that the children enjoy practising, first attach meaning to words with props:

- 1 Take 3 colourful props; start with animals.
- 2 Verbally label each prop with a number, a name and a colour. This ensures understanding of meaning.
- 3 Pop the animals into a fun drawstring bag.
- 4 Depending on the age of the audience, pose a question: which animals did I have, which animal was the colour blue, what colour was the dog?

Memory helps us to construct meaningful conversations and enjoy positive communications.



Frog or fish

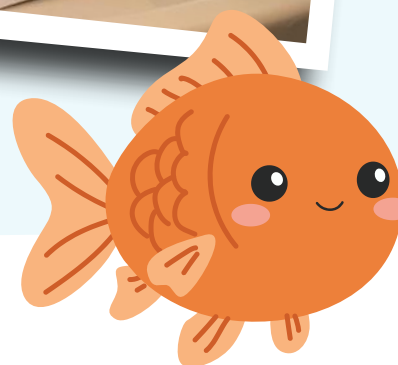
Listening without an agenda is a skill that needs to be taught so the experience needs to be joyful to make the practice fun:

- 1 Take a colourful soft toy frog and a fish.
- 2 Child one is the speaker and chooses "frog or fish."
- 3 Child two is selected as the person to listen and react to the request and take the frog or the fish to the speaker, according to their preference.
- 4 Child two then becomes speaker and so on.

This promotes attention, listening, sharing and cuddles!

“Most people don’t know how to listen because the major part of their attention is taken up by thinking

Eckhart Tolle



SIGN makes sense

Gestures/signs offer an inclusive conversation for every type of learner and support the processing needed to listen. Signs make language visual, interesting and memorable; all the things needed to make listening joyful and something to engage in.

- 1 Shape your hands together like binoculars and hold them to your eyes. This is the sign for the letter "B."
- 2 Look around the room saying "b,b,b, what can you see?"
- 3 Have pictures or objects that begin with B like 'bus, bear, balloon' and label them.
- 4 Everyone is listening and looking, adding the activity, building a conversation naturally. Label the object with a sign too; it's ok to be inventive. It will support understanding without expectation. Don't forget to track to the bear or balloon, else they will not relate your pointy finger to a real-life object.



Conclusion

As adults, being heard and seen helps affirm our identity and appreciate who we are. For our youngest learners, being able to communicate is crucial if they are to feel safe. Ultimately, the joy of communication lies in connection. When early years practitioners prioritise comfort, nurture confidence and cultivate belonging, they create environments where every child can experience the joy of truly being seen and heard.

See also:

Helping adopted children and children in care find their voice in the Early Years, *smalltalk*, (December 2025) pg 22 - 23

Photo credits: Martine Brockman



Joy is serious work

Written by: Professor Charlotte Davies, Fit 2 Learn CIC

I work with people of all ages. Some of my work is with vulnerable adults who have had terrible life experiences, I can bring most to calm by getting them to remember moments of joy from their childhoods.

Joy is not just a feeling, it is a huge investment into the long-term well-being of the person...

Infants really do remember joy in their bodies. When I screen adults for sound processing I can see if they felt happy and secure as children on their sound curves. The body holds the score.

Equally they can shake off trauma by engaging in joyous, silly activities.

Joy therefore is serious work and it is not difficult, so put away those mobile phones and let's engage in the serious work of being joyous.

Key elements of joy for an infant 0 to 7 years old might include the following:

Eye contact – play games such as peek-a-boo with infants from birth; as the children get older just looking into each other's eyes is important, simple communication.

Rhythm – singing songs, reciting rhymes, dancing, rocking rhythmically, hand-clapping. It is all an important part of bringing the bodies rhythms of the adult and the child into synchronisation. Humans get an endorphin high when they are in-tune together, it is joyous.

Touching – cuddling, patting, physically reassuring, doing high fives, playing physical games, allowing the child to climb over the adult and so on is all good physical reassurance that increases the child's sense of safety. Remember children in the early years are developing their sense of proprioception, i.e. understanding where they are in space, they need to touch to check where other people around them are.

Storytelling and acting out stories – children enjoy the rhythm and practicability of stories they know. They like to act them out over and over again. Encourage it, together you are building an understanding of stories having a beginning a middle and an end and a definite sequence, you are building vocabulary and sharing rhythm together, so being in-tune.

Adventures – plan exciting adventures. Exciting to an early years child is quite simple and predictable. For example, have a picnic basket and go to the local green for a picnic or out in the garden. The whole process of packing the basket, transporting it to the chosen destination, unpacking, eating the picnic, playing a few games perhaps, packing up, and going home is a huge undertaking for a small child. They will love to be in control or to have jobs to do. Then doing it all again a few days later. It is simple and joyous.

Whatever you do, keep it simple and within the child's regular routine. They will be exhausted by 4pm and ready to go home. Have basic back up plans if things go wrong, such as spare dry clothing and plenty of water. And catch them doing things with joy with a few photographs, so later you can make a scrapbook about your adventures and remember them together.

Those lovely secure days of being in-tune with adults will be with the child for life, take time to make that investment.

For more info and access for lots of free and fascinating resources visit: www.fit-2-learn.com

See also:
Sound processing is so much more than hearing, *smalltalk*, (May 2025) pg 12 - 13



Joy of Moving

Written by: Diane H. Craft, PHD. Professor Emerita of Adapted Physical Education, State University of New York, Cortland

The three - and four-year-old children I lead in physical activities usually greet me with great enthusiasm. I would be flattering myself if I thought their exuberance was solely because of my cheery personality! What I do know from experience is children are so excited to see me because they know they will soon have fun being physically active and will enjoy the experiences of moving and learning. So why are children enjoying the movement activities I teach? To answer this, we must think back to our own childhood experiences as we define joy in children's terms.

Turning everyday experiences into active play

Young children have strong developmental needs to move. Movement is essential to support children's well-being. The physical activities they love often mimic activities they see adults doing daily. Most children focus intently on what adults do, wanting to know why they do these things, and are they fun?

I use this interest to infuse movement into stories that make sense to children. As an example, in one activity I'll have children pretend to be a milk delivery service, as they move heavy, tightly sealed containers of water from a pretend "dairy" to different "shop" locations around the playground. Children often spontaneously collaborate during this activity as they explore the most efficient ways to move the water. Another activity the children love is scribbling a letter to a

friend, putting a pretend "stamp" on the envelope, and delivering it to the post office. When I provide paper plate "steering wheels," children zoom around the play area driving their "cars" from the newsagents to the "post office," obeying traffic rules that pop up along the way. When I give some children cords attached to plastic plates with pictures of flies on them, and other children pool noodle "fly swatters," they run until exhausted, dragging and chasing the plates, trying to swat the flies.

Children also love negotiating obstacle courses created with pillows, chairs, blankets, laundry baskets and other common household items and respond to an exciting story such as "the road has flooded, and we have to find a different way to get our letters to the post office."



Learning through playful movement

The physical activities I lead are designed to encourage children to move and to learn through playful movement. As adult educators, we can give children positive attention for their efforts and encourage them to try different ways when encountering challenges.

Activities that develop children's esteem bring joy to their hearts!

They will go home with entertaining stories to share with their families.

Exciting News!



In September Early Years Wales will be launching a series of monthly podcasts, and Diane will be our first guest. Make sure you tune in to listen to her talk about the Joy of Movement in more detail...details to be announced soon!

Active play doesn't need expensive equipment

There is no need to design physical activities around expensive equipment. Rolled up socks, laundry baskets, pool noodles, hula hoops, and other common household items and low-cost items can be repurposed for many hours of active play. Providing frequent opportunities to do physical activities gives children the practice needed to master new movement skills. When most children have mastered a skill, make the activity a little harder to create more interest in the newer challenge. And most importantly, play and laugh with the children! They love and respect adults who play and laugh with them.

The physical and emotional benefits of movement

As children are experiencing joy through movement, they are also getting the benefits of physical activity. When planning activities for young children, let them drag heavy objects, bear-walk on hands and feet, and push hard against immovable walls to give them the deep pressure in their joints and muscles they need. When children get this deep pressure, many become calmer and more focused on the task at hand.

For more information on Diane's work visit:
activeplaybooks.com/

Photo credits: Diane Craft

Building healthy habits from an early age

From birth to six or seven years old, children are in the most active part of their lifespan. Habits established in this period can determine whether they will choose to be physically active or sedentary for the remainder of their lives. The requirements of physical activities that support children's holistic development are not daunting.

Practitioners may wish to consider activities that are safe and enjoyable, while developmentally appropriate for the children's ages and abilities. With exposure to physical activity success, children experience healthy physical development and learn to function successfully as part of a group. They get practice with the give-and-take of sharing and socio-emotional rules of the road. And when adults participate with children in physical activities, the children enjoy it.



Through these joyful experiences playing together, positive adult-child relationships strengthen, and children see adults as positive role models for lifelong physical activity.

Supporting development through different types of movement

Try arranging for children to hop across an open area, jump in place to lively music, play chasing games to give them the heart pounding exercise their hearts and lungs need. After such vigorous activity, happy children are more likely to sleep better.

Help children do log rolls, spin on their seats, and bend over to look at the world upside down. Then they are getting the vestibular stimulation they require! A well-developed vestibular system helps children balance and move with coordination. Better balance and coordination, better sleep, and better focus are just a few of the many benefits of movement for young children.

As we offer many opportunities to be physically active, everyone - adults and children - can experience the benefits and joy that comes with moving!





Shining a Light on Joy

Written by: Libby Leyshon, Manager, North Cornelly Playgroup

The moment you enter North Cornelly Playgroup, our enabling environment is carefully curated to spark wonder, awe and joy. Under twinkly lights, with calming aromas filling the air, sensory materials and resources draw children into deep and meaningful play that ignites plentiful opportunities for joyful play and learning.

Inspired by training undertaken with Elizabeth Jarman, we audited the setting to ensure it was enabling, inviting and tailored to the needs and interests of the children.



Joy as a Foundation for Learning

The Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings states, "It is essential that we consider not only the physical spaces but also the emotional climate of our setting. These environments will provide for wide and varied experiences that allow children to express themselves physically, creatively and imaginatively, and allow them to safely follow their interests, independently or with others."

(Ref: hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/curriculum-for-funded-non-maintained-nursery-settings (pg 13)).

The environment at North Cornelly Playgroup nurtures an emotional climate that facilitates joy, awe and wonder through creativity, imagination and physical play in abundance. Whilst joy isn't explicitly mentioned in the curriculum, it is woven throughout each of the pathways. For example, joy can be found in children's sense of cynefin - seeing themselves, their families, community and experiences reflected in their environment and resources, helping them to feel a sense of belonging and connection. It is evident in exploration when children express themselves creatively, and in physical development as they experience the satisfaction and pride that comes with mastering a new skill.

From our leafy community forest school area to our cosy tiny destinations and through freely chosen, intrinsically motivated play, we are blessed to observe moments of joy every single day.



Discovering the Magic of Light

At North Cornelly Playgroup practitioners observe that joy naturally creates opportunities for meaningful, deep play and the development of skills integral to the four purposes of the curriculum, such as creativity, innovation and problem solving. Within our setting, light pedagogy has been an activity that has undoubtedly provoked these.

Some of our lucky practitioners attended a learning retreat in Perth facilitated by **Adventures with Alice** (Alice Sharp). One of the sessions was focused on the magic and wonder of light and shadow play. Completely inspired, we enhanced and enriched the light play opportunities within the setting, linking them to the children's fascinations and interests, resulting in a wealth of joyful play and exploration opportunities. (Ref: alicesharp.co.uk)

Using light and shadow pedagogy in the setting has been tremendously impactful, not only for joy, awe and wonder, but across all areas of learning. We have observed newly acquired vocabulary, problem-solving, sustained shared thinking and more mathematical learning than we could ever have imagined!!



Following Children's Fascinations

One example of this was a **"Room on the Broom"** inspired invitation to play, following the children's current interests and fascination at the time. We used rope lights, a projector and a mix of natural and light up resources to encourage curiosity & emergent thinking as they explored how to work new technology and watched them develop strategic competence as they explored and solved mathematical concepts and problems, such as making projections bigger and smaller, or combining coloured light.

When Shadows Become Learning Opportunities

Children were introduced to the science of shadows and particularly enjoyed developing their sense of self by moving their bodies and watching the cause and effect of their movement on the white sheet - pure joy was observed as they laughed, explored and experimented.

Maths was hugely evident within their play, as they recognised and enquired about colours and reflection. They played with quantities and number; counting balls, leaves, spiders and each other's shadows. They showed resilience through exploration, trying things again if needed as they learned how to use some of the resources, and they took turns with their peers. Exploring and manipulating the light and smaller resources contributed to motor skills and some children even noticed shape and pattern in the projection.

Why Joy Matters

Early Years author **Ben Kingston-Hughes** highlights the importance of cultivating joy within children's environments and reminds us that every adult working with children has the capacity to create and nurture joyful experiences.

(Ref: worldofeducation.tts-international.com/ben-kingston-hughes-bringing-joy-to-our-children/)

As enabling adults, there are many, many ways we can ensure that joy is encouraged within our settings, recognising what brings us joy as practitioners in our role, what brings the children joy and incorporating them into the environment, activities and ethos of the setting. We know that joy contributes to positive wellbeing and emotional health, and that some of the most meaningful moments in early childhood are often found in the simplest experiences - such as exploring light and shadow.

The Sound of Sight and Joy

Throughout our observations of light and shadow-based play, the children have expressed their joy and enjoyment verbally and non-verbally. On reflection of one activity, one child told us that "It was beautiful and made her happy". Obvious signs of joy are also always evident, beaming smiles, wide-open mouths and bright eyes as the children become fully immersed. Joyful activities like these undoubtedly sit at the highest levels of the **Leuven Scale for Emotional Well-being** for sure, as children are at ease, expressing themselves, focused and absorbed in their play.

(Ref: learningjournals.co.uk/what-is-the-leuven-scale-and-how-to-use-it/)

Light and shadow play links seamlessly to the pathways within the Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings and continues to have a profound impact on children's play and learning at North Cornelly Playgroup. More importantly, it creates opportunities for children to experience the joy, wonder and sense of belonging that underpin meaningful learning. In witnessing these moments unfold, we are reminded that joy is not simply an outcome of learning - it is often where learning begins.



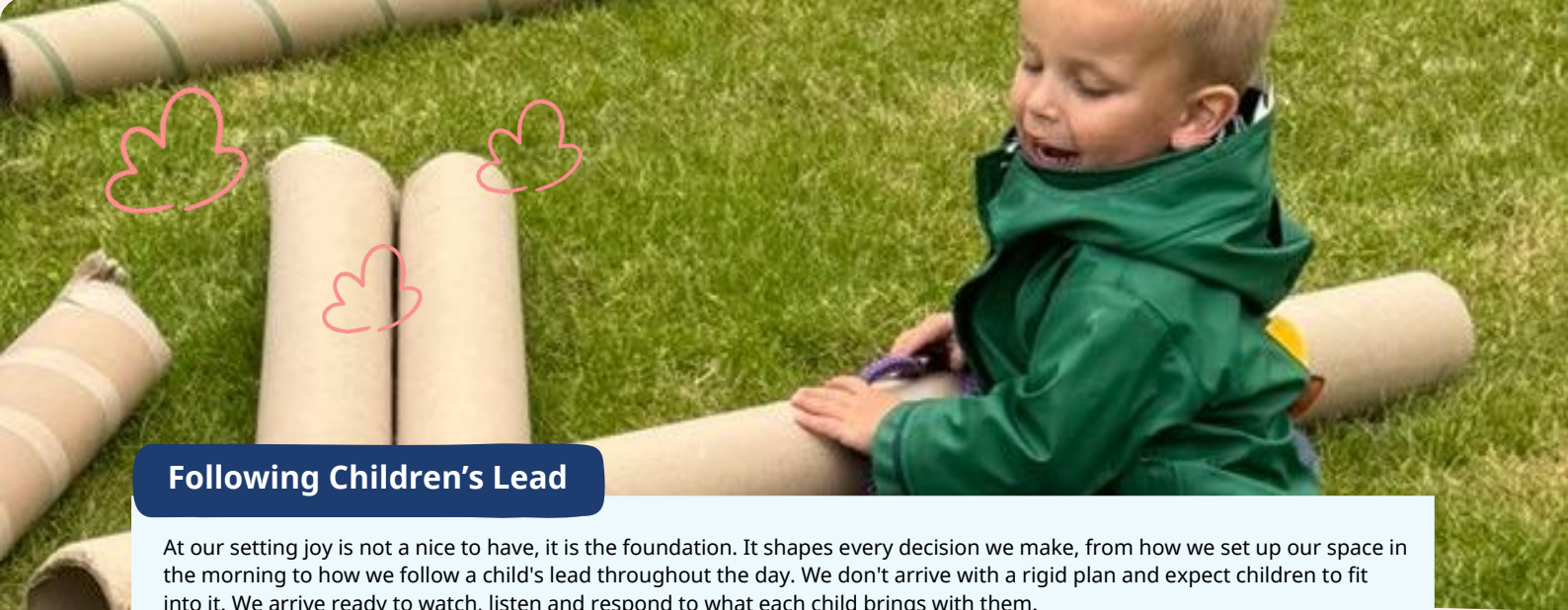


When Joy Leads Learning

Written by: Jacqui Gill, Apple Tree Tots - Home-based Early Years, Conwy

The most memorable moments in early years aren't always planned; they happen naturally and you can feel them the moment they arrive. It's the moment a little one finds a worm in the soil and holds it up like treasure. The shriek of laughter when bubbles catch the breeze, the quiet concentration of a child completely lost in play, oblivious to everything else around them. Those are the moments I live for and those are the moments that remind me exactly why I do this work.





Following Children's Lead

At our setting joy is not a nice to have, it is the foundation. It shapes every decision we make, from how we set up our space in the morning to how we follow a child's lead throughout the day. We don't arrive with a rigid plan and expect children to fit into it. We arrive ready to watch, listen and respond to what each child brings with them.

Children bring an extraordinary curiosity and enthusiasm to the world around them. They don't need expensive resources or elaborate activities. They need time, space, permission and an adult who is genuinely engaged and interested in them. When those things are in place, something magical happens. The curiosity switches on, the exploration begins and the learning follows, not because we've directed it, but because the child is fully alive in the moment.

I think about a child who spent an entire morning moving water from one container to another, completely absorbed, no instruction, no outcome, just pure, focused joy in the process. That child was learning about capacity, cause and effect, problem solving and persistence. But more than that, they were experiencing what it feels like to be in flow and of course to be joyful.

Creating the Conditions for Joy

The UNCRC reminds us in article 31 every child's right to play which is the very condition in which joy can flourish.

That isn't a soft aspiration, It's a responsibility. As early years practitioners, we are the architects of those experiences. The environment we create, the relationships we build, the way we respond when a child brings us that worm or that drawing or that question, all of it shapes whether joy becomes a regular part of their day or something that only happens by chance.

At Apple Tree Tots, we work hard to make joy intentional. That doesn't mean manufacturing it, it means removing the barriers to it, getting outside even when the weather is imperfect and saying yes to mess, to noise, to the unexpected and being present enough to notice the small moments and big enough hearted to celebrate them.

The Power of Relationships

That contagion doesn't stop with the children; it runs through the whole team - we are lucky to have amazing staff, who genuinely love what they do. That isn't something you can manufacture, it grows from a culture where joy is valued, where every person in the room, child and adult alike, feels that they matter.

When a practitioner arrives in the morning with warmth and enthusiasm, the children feel it before a single word is spoken, and when that same practitioner has been part of a child's life for months or years, the relationship deepens into something really special as trust and familiarity, a shared language of laughter and play shine through. That continuity is its own kind of joy, and it makes everything else possible.

Recognition and Reflection

We were recently honoured to receive regional recognition for the quality of our childminding provision, and that recognition means a great deal. Not because of the award itself, but because of what it represents. It reflects a shared belief that childhood should feel joyful, every single day. That every child, regardless of background or ability, deserves to experience the kind of deep, settled happiness that comes from being truly seen, valued and free to play.

In our setting, learning and joy go hand in hand. When children feel connected, they become curious, and curiosity creates the conditions for growth.

Perhaps the most important thing I have learned in this work is that joy is contagious. When we as adults, bring genuine warmth and delight into the space, children feel it. When we get excited about the worm, they get excited and when we slow down and sit with them in the mud, they know they matter. That knowledge, that felt sense of being valued, is the bedrock of everything else we want for them.

Woven into Everyday Life

Joy isn't a destination or something we achieve and move on from. It is woven into the fabric of everyday life: in the songs we sing, the stories we share, the questions we explore and the relationships we build. Ultimately, this work is about far more than supporting development. It's about helping children grow up knowing they belong, that they are valued, and that joy is possible every single day.



Pockets of Joy!:

Reflections on an early childhood teacher educators practice

Written by: Pavla Boulton

Lecturer in BA (Hons) Education & BA Education , Inclusion and SEN
University of Gloucestershire

This photograph was captured by one of my early childhood (EC) students some years ago, in the middle of Newport during an outdoor lecture. The peacock butterfly landed on a student's hand as she was digging in the raised bed near some flowers. It was a moment that descended into complete silence, the students became like statues staring intently at the butterfly and I observed the intense curiosity and wonder that spilled over in those moments - it was a pocket of joy!

Curiosity, wonder and relational pedagogy

What followed after the butterfly flew off was a dynamic chatter, lots of questions about butterflies, descriptions of the incident,...'did you see that?',..... 'wasn't it beautiful!'.....I witnessed 'connection', to nature, to their environment and to each other - a relational pedagogy (Wills 2024), driven by curiosity and wonder through the opportunity to go off track by slowing down the learning (Froebel, 1887; Clark, 2023). The students went on to share their heightened interest in butterflies with the children they were teaching on placement, conducting butterfly identification activities, butterfly painting and creating butterfly fact files, all enriching their own learning and teaching; this joy was contagious.

Why nature matters more than ever

Over the years as an early childhood teacher educator, it has become very clear to me that outdoor pedagogies are an avenue not only for reconnecting children to nature but in enabling them to make meaning of world, to develop their sense of place in the world. I had witnessed the same need for reconnection with my students during the butterfly incident. I believe this is much needed if our learners of all ages are to develop holistically, maintaining a healthy mind and body, standing up to the future demands that will be placed upon them in a global climate crisis; helping them to care for the planet and make important decisions that affects lifestyle, for themselves and the generations to come (Scott and Vare, 2020).



Froebel's philosophy (1887) has become particularly instrumental in my practice. His well-known works in establishing early childhood educational theory led to the concept of the 'Kindergarten' where play and nature have a significant place in the development of the child's innate characteristics and capabilities and are observed in the practices of early childhood today.

As time has passed, I have been inspired to provide opportunities for my students, young and old, to 'experience the joy, excitement and wonder of the world we live in' (Carson, 1965, p.55) and to explore what it means to 'live at one with nature' (Kumar, 2015, p.18).

This sense of unification is recognised by Tang and Zhao (2024) who in exploring Froebel's work, refer to 'spirituality' as enabling children to develop the capacity for more abstract concepts of wonder, connecting to something bigger than the self.

Reflecting on these elements of my own childhood as part of my recent studies, has emphasised how 'wonder' is manifest in my daily life, even now it inspires a sense of mystery and offers opportunity to contemplate my relationship with the world, leading to a sense of unity between self and other (de Souza, 2010).

This connection was and continues to go beyond any sort of religious framework, aligning with Froebel's pedagogy (Tang and Zhao, 2024). Hay and Nye (2006) refer to spirituality as something that exists separate from religion and is often the starting point for everyday meaning making. Thus, the concept of spirituality provides a foundation for critical reflection and imagination and is perhaps why Goodliff (2013) suggests that it is connected to play, which inspires creativity and critical thinking where children negotiate ideas about identity, culture and society and where they experience moments of wonder, awe, joy and inner peace (Mata-McMahon, Haslip and Schein, 2019).



Overcoming nature disconnection

Embedding these philosophies into my own practice as a teacher educator have given me confidence to challenge the discourse of what my EC students were faced with in their placement experiences, where outdoor learning was marginalised for many reasons. Understanding these concepts was made all the more challenging for the students because they were unable to recall experiences of their own due to limited childhood experiences in nature. They could not relate to how the outdoor environment could be the third teacher (Malaguzzi, 1994) and were themselves 'disconnected' from nature (Louv, 2008). Louv's book 'Last Child in the Woods' had a profound effect on my own realisation that a generation of people, my students, and the next generation, were growing up without experiences in nature. Louv (2008) refers to this as 'Nature-deficit disorder', suggesting that a lack of connection with nature, playing in the outdoors and the development opportunities that it affords children, may lead to challenges with social, physical and psychological deficits.



Making space for the unexpected

Therefore, developing sessions with students that provide them with experiences of the natural environment, in ways that allow them to linger and experience the unexpected in their learning has become a key part of my own practice. This is where a pedagogical development of the whole person 'head, heart and lifestyle' (Aoki, 1983) becomes critical in shaping the approaches that they use in their practice. This affects their own understanding of nature as much as it does the children that they will teach. Opportunities to experience the natural world through slow pedagogy (Clark, 2023), that promotes student teachers' knowledge and skills is an important part of their professional development (Palmberg et al., 2018).





Teaching outdoors, teaching differently

Thus, in the same way, outdoor pedagogy needs to be embedded by the teacher educator in the delivery of the higher education curriculum (Wolf, Kunz and Robin, 2022), in order to develop motivation for the student teacher to become confident in implementing it in their own practice and understanding that it has an equal place in supporting a holistic curriculum.

Nurturing hearts and minds

This is an ongoing element of my practice and is not without a political connection to what drives me to teach in the ways that I do. Hook's work (1994) on teaching to transgress and specifically 'engaged pedagogy' proposes that teachers should be engaged in the 'spiritual and intellectual growth of students' by transgressing the traditional boundaries of higher education. She challenges all teachers to teach in a way that respects and cares for the souls of our learners and this concept percolates my thinking and my teaching deeply. I have come to understand and explore this as a key element of 'unification' within my ongoing developing teaching practices. This is in both a Froebelian sense, where 'child - nature - God' (something bigger than self), underpin my love of nature, alongside the privilege of witnessing my students' joy, when curiosity and wonder are manifest in their learning experiences with nature.

Finding pockets of joy

Carson (1965, p.9) proposes that we all have an "ancient longing for unity with the living world", reminding us that we are not separate from nature but inherently part of it. She powerfully argues that if a child is to retain their innate sense of wonder, they need "the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with them the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in" (p. 55). This highlights the importance of the adult not only as an observer, but as a gentle facilitator- someone who models curiosity, reverence, and attentiveness to the natural outdoor world alongside the child. And it has been no different in my own teaching and learning with my undergraduate students; it has and continues to connect us, giving me and them, pockets of joy!

See also:

The Lost Words Project *smalltalk*, (Spring 2020) pg 18 - 20

Outdoor Risky Play and Schema Development in the Early Years Part One, *smalltalk*, (Autumn 2021), pg 26 - 30

Outdoor Risky Play and Schema Development in the Early Years Part Two, *smalltalk*, (Winter 2021), pg 24 - 27

Photo credits: Pavla Boulton

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Want to delve deeper? These recommended readings explore the power of nature, wonder, connection and outdoor pedagogy in supporting children's learning and development.

Nature, Wonder and Connection

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- ☐ Kumar, S. (2015) *Soil, Soul, Society: a new trinity for our time*. 2nd edn. East Sussex: Leaping Hare Press.
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- ☐ Scott, W. and Vare, P. (2020) *Learning, environment and sustainable development: A history of ideas*. London: Routledge.

Outdoor Learning and Pedagogy

- ☐ Clark, A. (2023) *Slow Knowledge and the Unhurried Child: Time for Slow Pedagogies in Early Childhood Education*. Oxon: Routledge
- ☐ Palmberg, I., Hermans, M., Jeronen, E., Kärkkäinen, S., Persson, C., and Yli- Panula, E. (2018) 'Nordic student teachers' views on the importance of species and species identification', *Journal of Science Teacher Education*, 29(5), pp.397-419. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1046560X.2018.1468167>
- ☐ Wolf, C., Kunz, P. and Robin, N. (2022) 'Emerging themes of research into outdoor teaching in initial and formal teacher training from early childhood to secondary education – a literature review', *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 53(4), pp.199-220. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00958964.2022.2090889>
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Froebelian Perspectives and Early Childhood Theory

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Spirituality, Meaning and Children's Experiences

- ☐ de Souza, M. (2010) 'Meaning and connectedness: Australian perspectives on education and spirituality – an introduction', in de Souza, M. & Rimes, J. (eds.) *Meaning and connectedness: Australian perspectives on education and spirituality*. Australia: Australian College of Educators. pp.1-6.
- ☐ Hay, D. and Nye, R. (2006) *The Spirit of the Child*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
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- ☐ Goodliff, G. (2013) 'Spirituality expressed in creative learning: young children's imagining play as space for mediating their spirituality', *Early Child Development and Care*, 183(3), pp.1054-1071. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2013.792253>
- ☐ Mata-McMahon, J., Haslip, M., and Schein, D. (2019) 'Early childhood educators' perception of nurturing spirituality in secular settings', *Early Child Development and Care*, 189(14), pp.2233- 2251. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1445734>

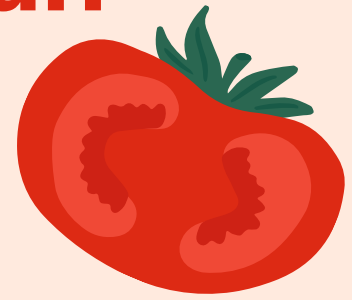
Reflective and Transformative Teaching

- ☐ Aoki, T. (1983) 'Curriculum implementation as instrumental action and as situational praxis.' In: Pinar, W. and Irwin, R. (eds.) *Curriculum in a new key: The collected works of Ted T.Aoki*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. pp.111-123. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410611390>.
- ☐ hooks, b. (1994) *Teaching to transgress*. London: Routledge.

Have you discovered a book, article, podcast or resource that has inspired your thinking about nature, curiosity, wonder or outdoor learning? We'd love to hear your recommendations and share them with the wider *smalltalk* community.

Please email Charlotte at charlotted@earlyyears.wales.

Cultivating Joy in an Age of Instant Gratification



Written by: Terri Steele, Let's Grow Childminding, Ceredigion

The challenge of instant gratification

We live in a fast-paced world that seems to move ever faster. Almost anything we need is available at the touch of a button, at any time of day or night. Children are growing up surrounded by short-form videos, endless entertainment and more content than many of us could ever have imagined.

There are many benefits to this connected world, but it also raises an interesting question: are we becoming increasingly accustomed to instant gratification?

While these moments can be enjoyable, they are often fleeting. Some of life's most valuable lessons come from waiting, persevering and working towards something over time. Patience, resilience, focus and empathy are rarely developed through immediate rewards.

In early years, joy is at the heart of what we do. The awe, wonder and delight we witness every day are part of what makes this profession so special. The challenge is creating opportunities for children to experience the deeper satisfaction that comes from investing time and care in something meaningful.

A garden grown together

At my setting, much of that happens in the garden.

I began gardening the year before opening my childminding setting and, as my own knowledge has grown, the children have joined me on the journey. There is nothing instant about gardening. What began with potatoes in grow bags and sunflowers in pots has, over six years, evolved into a thriving space complete with a very nearly industrial-sized polytunnel.

Our gardening year starts in January with grow lights, seed trays and a heat mat. The children help choose which tomatoes to grow, leafing through seed catalogues and debating varieties. This year we are growing eight different types, including my favourite, Barry's Crazy Cherry.

The children are involved in every stage of the process. The youngest fill seed trays while older children carefully make holes and place tiny tomato seeds into the compost. It is delicate work requiring concentration, care and patience.



Then comes the waiting....

Every gardener knows that seedlings are checked far more often than necessary. Yet the excitement when those first green shoots appear never fades. The cries of "Look!" and "They're growing!" ripple through the setting as children proudly show friends, siblings and parents their tiny seedlings.

Sharing what we've nurtured

Our tomatoes are a particular source of pride. After germination, they still need months of care before they are ready to plant out. For the past two years, during Childminding Week, the children have gifted tomato plants to other childminders across Ceredigion. Watching them pass on something they have nurtured for months is incredibly powerful. They see that their efforts can bring happiness to someone else and begin to recognise that they have something meaningful to contribute.



Joy through discoveries

Gardening has become woven into the rhythm of our days. Often the first thing children want to do each morning is check on the plants. Their discoveries are accompanied by a constant stream of observations, questions and excitement.

The rewards are endless. There is the excitement of watching changes unfold, the thrill of finding worms, the surprise of discovering peas inside pods, or learning that cucumber roots smell faintly of cucumbers. There is wonder in noticing that bees sometimes fall asleep inside flowers.

Gardening also gives children opportunities to develop genuine competence. One of my older children recently returned during the holidays and confidently potted on sweetcorn independently because we had practised the process together before. Watching children use skills without adult support is one of the greatest rewards of all.

There is also the satisfaction of contributing to others. This year we grew enough produce to create a small market stall for families at collection time. We shared vegetables with parents and even put together a mini vegetable box of iron-rich leafy greens for one expectant mother. The children could see the positive difference their efforts made to those around them.

Growing stories

Another unexpected highlight has been growing our own stories.

This began when we read *Pumpkin Jack* during a particularly successful pumpkin-growing season. Pumpkin Jack quickly became part of life at the setting. The children checked on the pumpkins daily and followed their progress with fascination.

When winter arrived, we buried one of the pumpkins just as the story describes. Months later, to our delight, a single seedling emerged. Pumpkin Jack is now thriving once again and is greeted each day with excited updates about just how much bigger he has become. The children already know what comes next because they have lived the story before. The anticipation is part of the experience.



Photo credits: Terri Steele

Belonging, contribution and cynefin

Here in Wales, where the concept of *cynefin* is so important, gardening also strengthens children's sense of connection and belonging. Through the garden, they connect with nature, the changing seasons and the traditions and knowledge passed down through generations.

The garden as a teacher.

The garden is a remarkable teacher. It shows children that mistakes are opportunities to learn, that growth takes time and that not everything worth having happens instantly.

In a world that increasingly encourages us to consume, gardening teaches us to nurture. For children growing up in an age of instant gratification, it offers a powerful reminder that some of life's deepest satisfactions are worth waiting for.



Help little ones discover the joy of walking with **Little Feet**

Living Streets is the UK charity for everyday walking, helping to create safer, healthier and more accessible streets for children and families. Their vision is a nation where walking is the natural choice for everyday journeys, while their mission is to improve walking environments and inspire people of all ages to walk more, supporting healthier lifestyles, stronger communities and children's wellbeing.

Children in Wales are learning healthy habits, connecting with friends and family and finding joy in the natural world with Little Feet.

Living Streets' Little Feet programme offers a range of walking activities for children aged 2-5, designed for use in early years settings with resources available in Welsh and English.

Through fun, themed challenges, children and their families discover the benefits of regular physical activity while supporting key areas of early learning and development.

Regular movement supports healthy growth and social development, but did you know that almost 90% of 2-5-year-olds don't meet the daily activity levels recommended by health experts? Walking or wheeling to preschool or nursery is a great way for young children to get active and spend quality time with their families.

Each Little Feet activity takes children and their families on a collective walking journey. Designed for groups of up to 30 children, the activities are themed to help children learn about the world around them, can be delivered at any time of year and are generally run over a period of 2-4 weeks. Children enjoy adding stickers to the interactive wall map every time they walk to nursery or school and earning rewards once the challenge is complete.

Visit livingstreets.org.uk/littlefeet to find out how your nursery or school can take part in Little Feet and help young children discover the joy of walking.

Early years settings can choose from three engaging themes:

- **Elmer**, everyone's favourite patchwork elephant – with fun activities based on friendship and inclusion
- **People Who Help Us**, introducing children to local community helpers
- **Minibeasts**, exploring the wildlife of the UK like butterflies, ladybirds and snails

Each pack includes a set of colourful resources and encourages children to connect with their friends and learn about native wildlife as they walk to or from school or nursery.

Thanks to **Welsh Government funding**, 25 early years settings in Wales took part in Little Feet during 2025-26 and 30 settings will discover the joy of walking in 2026-27.

Parc Primary School in Rhondda Cynon Taf recently delivered Little Feet and pupils in the preschool and reception classes enjoyed taking part in the **'People Who Help Us'** themed activity. Teachers also reported an increase in the number of children and their families who walk and wheel to school.

👉 *The children have shown incredible enthusiasm and commitment, especially with our walking and cycling sticker chart. They have loved tracking their progress and celebrating each achievement along the way.*

The children are absolutely over the moon with what they have accomplished. We are so proud of their positive attitudes, determination and growing independence.

Teacher, Parc Primary School



Finding Joy in Everyday Learning

Written by: Kate Wright, Childminder, Denbighshire



In my setting, joy is seen in many different ways; in children's excitement, curiosity, laughter and deep involvement in the moments that matter most to them. Joy looks different for every child; different activities, places and experiences spark different kinds of happiness and engagement. These joyful moments support learning, creativity, confidence and personal growth.



Wonder in the natural world

Joy can come from awe and discovery in the wider world. Recently, during a trip to Chester Zoo, one child was captivated by the frogs we saw. The range of colours, shapes and sizes fascinated them, and their sense of wonder was wonderful to witness. Not only was this a joyful experience, but it was also a valuable learning opportunity, encouraging curiosity, close observation and meaningful conversations about the natural world.

Creative curiosity at Dwylo Bach

At other times, joy is found through creative freedom and self-expression. One of my little ones experiences this particularly during our visits to Dwylo Bach sessions. In a larger, open space, his creativity and imagination are free to flourish, and his enthusiasm for mark-making and exploration truly shines through. These experiences support his confidence, independence and creative development.



Photo credits: Kate Wright

When joy finds its voice

Songs, rhymes and stories also bring great joy to the children in my setting, both past and present. While every cohort develops its own favourites, the pleasure children gain from music and storytelling remains constant. Songs teach so much - from new vocabulary and language patterns to rhythm, sequencing and confidence in performing and participating with others.

A particularly joyful moment for me was watching a child I had previously cared for win on the big stage at the Urdd Eisteddfod this year, at just six years old. It was wonderful to see that she still gains so much happiness from singing and performing, and that her early enjoyment of music continues to support her confidence and self-expression.

Joy in everyday routines

Daily routines can also provide meaningful opportunities for joyful learning. At the moment, mealtimes and food-related experiences bring a great deal of pleasure to my little ones. From discussing and planning snacks, picnics and meals to visiting the supermarket, food becomes an exciting real-life learning experience. Choosing fruit and vegetables for our meals is not only enjoyable but also supports independence, communication, decision-making and an emerging understanding of healthy choices.



Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.

Fred Rogers

For me, joy begins with knowing children well and understanding which resources, experiences and environments will engage and inspire them. When I create spaces and opportunities that reflect children's interests and needs, I create the conditions for joy, curiosity and learning to thrive. In those moments, children are not only enjoying themselves—they are learning, growing and flourishing.





BBC CBeebies PARENTING

Joy at the heart of learning: What children's laughter is really telling us, from BBC CBeebies Parenting

Dr Caspar Addyman, developmental psychologist and regular contributor to BBC CBeebies Parenting¹, explains what children's laughter can tell us about connection, curiosity and learning – and how practitioners can nurture more joyful moments every day.

One topic explored by CBeebies Parenting is the important role laughter plays in children's development.

Every day in early years settings, practitioners create moments that help children learn, communicate and thrive. BBC CBeebies Parenting is there to support with free, evidence-based resources for both families and professionals, including practical guidance, downloadable resources and free CBeebies Champions Training² to help strengthen parent partnerships.

More than just a giggle

Babies laugh long before they can talk. Those everyday giggles can tell us a lot about connection, curiosity and learning, says developmental psychologist and regular CBeebies Parenting contributor Dr Addyman.



Learning starts with connection

For early years practitioners, those moments of shared delight – a baby giggling during peekaboo or a group of children laughing during a silly song – are not distractions from learning. They are part of it.

He says, "Everybody thinks of laughter in terms of the joke and the punchline. But it's actually the relationship. The simplest example is peekaboo. The delight doesn't come from the surprise. It comes from the eye contact and the fact that someone is paying attention to them. You're laughing with someone, not at something."

It's a powerful reminder that before babies communicate with words, they communicate through emotion.

And those everyday interactions – smiling back, copying sounds, or singing together – are doing far more than creating happy moments. They help build the secure relationships that underpin everything else.

As Dr Addyman, who specialises in finding out why babies laugh, puts it: "Laughter is about social connection. With little people, social connection is the foundation of how they learn from us. You want the clearest signals that you're building that connection, and laughter is one of the best³."

A sign that children feel safe and ready to learn

That doesn't mean practitioners should try to make children laugh all day. Instead, laughter can act as a useful indicator that children feel safe, seen and emotionally ready to learn.

"Laughter isn't the goal in itself," he says. "It's the sign that things are going well."

When curiosity sounds like laughter

Laughter can also be a sign that children are discovering something new.

"The most common phrase in science isn't 'eureka'," says Dr Addyman. "It's, 'That's funny.' It's what you say when you notice something for the first time."

That's exactly how babies and toddlers experience the world.

"So much of what makes toddlers and babies laugh is something they've never seen before. Learning isn't about stuffing knowledge into children's heads. It's about getting them to notice what's already out there in the world and expanding that curiosity."

Whether it's watching bubbles drift through the air or hearing a funny new sound during story time, these moments are doing important developmental work. They encourage children to observe, investigate and make sense of the world around them.

Laughter doesn't just strengthen relationships between adults and children. It also helps children connect with each other.

References

¹ CBeebies Parenting: Resources for professionals and volunteers

bbc.co.uk/tiny-happy-people/topics/c51762ze3y2t

² CBeebies Champions Training 2026

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³ CBeebies Parenting; When do babies start laughing and what do they laugh at?

bbc.co.uk/tiny-happy-people/articles/zqh6dp3

Sharing the experience

In one study, Dr Addyman found preschool children laughed up to eight times more when watching a funny cartoon with another child than when watching it alone.

"The programme wasn't any funnier," he explains. "The laughter was children saying, 'I'm sharing this experience with you.'"

Making every moment count

So what can practitioners do every day? Dr Addyman believes the answer is surprisingly simple: be present. "Children don't know when it's teaching time or playtime. For them, the day is all one continual experience. They're learning at every moment. Everything is an opportunity."

How CBeebies Parenting can support your practice

BBC CBeebies Parenting can support practitioners in three easy ways:

- Find evidence-based activity ideas to use in your own setting, from communication and language to play, attachment and everyday routines.
- Signpost parents to trusted, jargon-free advice that reinforces the learning and development taking place in your setting.
- Build your own professional knowledge through free downloadable resources, practical guidance for working with families and the free CBeebies Parenting Champions Training.

You can also listen to the CBeebies Parenting podcast, Why do babies laugh?

bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0ngcjx1 which explores the science behind children's laughter in the early years.

Scan here to visit the website

bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/parenting





The Lasting Power of JOY

Written by: Kimberly Rees, Llanybydder Family Centre

When we talk about the early years, it is easy to focus on milestones, development, and preparing children for school. While these are important, there is something equally vital at the heart of childhood: joy.

Not the grand, expensive, or occasional kind of joy, but the simple moments that brighten everyday life. The laughter shared during a game with friends, the excitement of discovering a ladybird in the garden, the delight of singing songs that become sillier with every verse, or the pride of building “the tallest tower ever.” These moments may seem small, yet they often become the memories children carry with them long into adulthood.

At Llanybydder Family Centre, we see these moments every day. When children feel happy, safe, and connected, they are naturally curious. They ask questions, explore, solve problems, build friendships, and immerse themselves in learning without even realising it. Joy and learning are not separate; they are deeply connected.

One of the unique aspects of our Family Centre is that we are based within an Independent Living Facility for older adults. This creates wonderful opportunities for intergenerational experiences, and some of the most joyful moments I have witnessed have happened when children and residents come together.

One memory in particular has stayed with me. During a Remembrance Day activity, a young child and a resident in her nineties sat side by side making handprint wreaths. Their hands were covered in red paint, and as we laughed at the inevitable mess, the resident looked down at her hands, smiled, and said, **“Ooh... it takes me back to my childhood.”**

“For a moment, time seemed to stand still. One tiny hand was just beginning life’s journey, while the other reflected more than ninety years of experiences. Yet both were creating, laughing, and sharing the same joy.”

That moment reminded me that joy does not disappear with age. We may forget the details of childhood, but the feelings remain. A familiar smell, song, or even paint-covered hands can instantly transport us back to moments when we felt carefree and happy.

As practitioners, we have the privilege of creating those moments. It is not about expensive resources or elaborate activities. More often, it is about slowing down, following a child’s curiosity, and embracing simple pleasures.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises every child’s right to play, rest, and leisure. Joy is not a reward that comes after learning; it is often what makes meaningful learning possible.

Perhaps that is the true power of joy. It stays with us long after childhood ends, quietly shaping who we become and reminding us, even decades later, what it feels like to delight in the moment. If we help create those memories, that is surely something worth celebrating.

Photo credit: Llanybydder Family Centre