

GUIDE

THE FEEL-GOOD GUIDE: FINDING JOY AND BUILDING CULTURE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

**Practical ideas and gentle inspiration to
help your team thrive — one joyful
moment at a time.**

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SMALL MOMENTS, BIG IMPACT

Every early learning center has its **own heartbeat** — the laughter of children, the quiet hum of teachers preparing materials, the stories shared between families at pickup time.

But amid licensing checklists, lesson plans, and the occasional toddler meltdown, it's easy to lose sight of what makes this work so special.

And yet, it's often **those small, fleeting moments** — a child's "aha!", a kind word from a colleague, a shared laugh during cleanup — that keep us going.

Recognizing and celebrating these moments isn't just "nice to have." **It's essential.** When we intentionally pause to notice what's good, we build resilience, connection, and hope. That's how center culture transforms — not through big changes, but through small, consistent acts of appreciation.

Research in positive psychology shows that **focusing on strengths and joy** enhances well-being, improves communication, and fosters a more supportive work environment. In early childhood education, where emotional labor runs deep, this practice can make all the difference.

WHAT'S IN HERE

Pages 3-16: Tips, tricks, and activities

Pages 17-21: Section for In-Home Childcare Providers

Pages 22-34: Activity printables

SPOT IT, CELEBRATE IT, STRENGTHEN IT

Appreciative Inquiry might sound fancy, but it's beautifully simple: it's about looking for what's right instead of what's wrong. **When we pay attention to the good, we create more of it.**

This way of thinking can completely transform your center's culture — from how staff start their mornings to how they connect with families and children.

Appreciative Inquiry isn't about ignoring challenges or pretending everything is perfect; it's about **shining a light on what's working, so it can grow.** It is a mindset that invites us to notice what is going well, ask questions that build on strengths, and envision the best possible future for our centers and communities.

There are **five key principles**, and each one can be woven naturally into the rhythm of your child care day.



1. ANTICIPATORY PRINCIPLE

When we anticipate good things, we move toward them.

What we imagine shapes how we show up. If we start the day expecting stress, we'll likely find it. But if we begin anticipating calm, connection, and joy, we create space for those feelings to grow.

This principle is about setting your intention before the day begins. Visualization isn't magic; it's mindfulness in motion. When you picture the energy you want to bring, you're already guiding the day in that direction.

Try this: Before the day begins, take one quiet minute. Picture what you want to feel — balanced, patient, lighthearted. Imagine yourself leading with kindness, staying calm through challenges, or sharing laughter with the children.



2. SIMULTANEITY PRINCIPLE

Change begins the moment we ask a question. Every question we ask — to staff, families, or children — shapes how people think and feel. If we ask, "What's not working?" we focus on problems. But if we ask, "What went well?" or "What made you smile this week?" we invite gratitude, reflection, and growth.

Positive questions are the change. They shift focus toward what's strong and remind people of their impact and value.

Try this: Begin each staff meeting with one appreciative question, such as:

- "What's a moment that made you proud this week?"
- "What's something beautiful you saw between a child and teacher?"
- "What's one small win you'd like to celebrate?"



3. CONSTRUCTIONIST PRINCIPLE

Our words create our worlds. How we talk about our work — and each other — shapes how we experience it. When we describe our days with curiosity and hope instead of frustration, we strengthen our culture and our connections.

This isn't about ignoring challenges; it's about framing them in ways that invite growth. Changing our language can change our outlook — and our outcomes.

Try this:

- Instead of "Mondays are always rough," try "Mondays are our reset days — a chance to ease in together."
- Instead of "We're short-staffed again," try "We're working together to make this day flow smoothly."



4. POETIC PRINCIPLE

What we focus on grows. Whatever we nurture through attention and care will flourish. When we focus on kindness, teamwork, and laughter, those qualities begin to shape our story.

Each day in early childhood is filled with small acts of care and connection. When we notice and name them, they multiply.

Try this: Share "good news" in newsletters, team chats, or staff meetings. Celebrate small wins and moments of joy. Or keep a "Joy Journal" where teachers jot down what made them smile.

5. POSITIVE PRINCIPLE

When we feel good, we do good. Positivity fuels performance. A warm, supportive climate doesn't just lift moods — it builds creativity, collaboration, and connection.

It's not about forced cheerfulness; it's about genuine recognition and care. Small moments of gratitude can ripple outward in lasting ways.

Try this: Offer specific, heartfelt praise, such as:

- "I saw how patient you were with that child today — it really made a difference."
- "You handled that tough parent conversation with such grace. You stayed calm and kind."



Appreciative Inquiry isn't a one-time activity — it's a way of seeing. It helps us pause, notice what's good, and let it grow.

When we ask uplifting questions, use positive language, and celebrate small wins, joy begins to ripple through our center. Children feel it. Families sense it. And staff show up for the joy within the work.

1

MORNING JOY RITUALS

Mornings set the tone for everything that follows. When staff arrive feeling grounded, hopeful, and connected, children pick up on that energy too. Start each morning by setting a tone of gratitude and connection.

During your morning coffee or team meeting, ask:

- "What are you looking forward to today?"
- "What made you smile yesterday?"
- "What's a moment that made you proud this week?"
- "What's something beautiful you saw happen between a child and teacher?"
- "What's one small win you'd like to celebrate?"
- "What's one thing you hope for our children today?"

Teachers share quick, honest moments — a child tying their own shoe for the first time, a parent saying thank you, a co-teacher's laugh. These small rituals remind everyone that they're part of something bigger — a community that values joy.



Pro tip: Begin each day or week with a one-minute "intention pause." Invite everyone to choose one word that captures what they want to feel — calm, connected, joyful, curious. Write the words on a whiteboard or sticky notes near the time clock.

2

GRATITUDE CORNERS

Inspired by gratitude journaling, but made simple for busy educators.

- Create a "Gratitude Board" or "Feel-Good Jar" in the staff room.
- Encourage teachers to jot short notes about moments that warmed their hearts — "Liam shared his favorite toy today!" or "We had the best belly laughs during circle time."
- Read a few aloud on Fridays or during team meetings.

Practicing gratitude regularly shifts focus away from stress and toward appreciation — and helps everyone feel seen and valued.



Pro tip: Try "Micro-Moments of Thanks" - When you see something good, say it in the moment. A quick "I noticed how patient you were just now — that was beautiful" can change the course of someone's day.

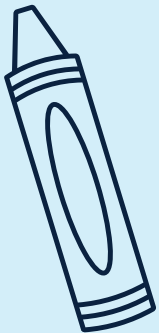
3

EXPRESS EMOTIONS CREATIVELY

Art can be a gentle, joyful way to process emotions.

- **Host** a "Feel-Good Friday" for staff to draw, paint, or craft moments that made their week special. Invite children to add artwork showing what makes them happy at school.
- **Create** a "Wall of Joy" filled with snapshots of classroom laughter, outdoor play, and staff milestones — visual reminders that keep everyone connected to their "why."
- **Start** a shared art piece — a large canvas, poster board, or roll of butcher paper that travels between classrooms or lives in the staff room. Each team adds their mark: a word, color, doodle, or quote reflecting what went well that week. Over time, it becomes a living portrait of your center's collective joy.

Creativity builds connection — sometimes paint and color express what words can't.



Pro tip: Keep a basket of smooth stones or small tokens in the staff room. Invite teachers to decorate one with a word or doodle that represents a joyful moment from the week. Over time, the basket becomes a colorful reminder of the good that grows when we notice it.

Nature grounds us, offering calm and perspective.

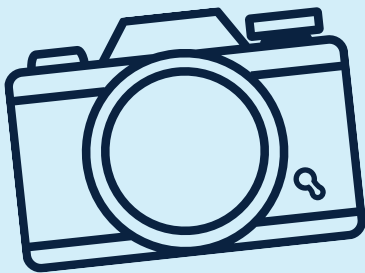
- Schedule short “Mindful Moments” outdoors — even five minutes to breathe, stretch, or simply watch the sky.
- Organize staff or classroom nature walks with fun scavenger hunts: find something soft, something bright, something that makes you smile.
- Once a week, invite your team to step outside together — even just for five minutes — and take a slow “Joy Walk.” No agenda, no to-do list. Just breathing, noticing, and appreciating.
- Encourage families to join in — a shared love of nature can strengthen relationships beyond the classroom.



Pro tip: Ask each staff member to find one small item from nature — a pebble, leaf, pinecone, or petal — that represents something that made them smile this week. Keep it nearby as a gentle reminder that joy doesn't have to be big to be powerful.

Visioning together sparks hope and motivation.

- Create a "Center Vision Board" where staff post what they want to see more of — laughter, teamwork, curiosity.
- Add photos, quotes, and affirmations from teachers, children, and families, and display it where everyone can see and feel inspired.
- Invite your team to imagine moments they hope to experience this year — calmer transitions, children playing cooperatively, families laughing at pickup.
- Write or draw these "future memories" on colorful cards and post them alongside your vision board. You may be surprised how many come true.



Pro tip: At the end of each staff meeting, have everyone share one hopeful statement that begins with "I can see a future where..." — like "I can see a future where mornings feel smooth and happy." Speaking it out loud helps turn hope into direction.

6

FEEL-GOOD BINGO

Make a bingo board with squares like:

- "Heard a child give a compliment"
- "Helped a coworker without being asked"
- "Received a thank-you from a parent"
- "Tried a new activity that worked!"

Celebrate each bingo with a small reward — maybe coffee, stickers, or a simple "You did it!" dance.

Create a collective bingo board for the whole staff to complete together. Each time someone marks a square, add their initials. When the board fills up, celebrate as a team with a small treat — like extra break time, a breakfast bar, or a silly group photo moment.



Pro tip: Switch it up by creating seasonal or themed boards — Kindness Bingo, Spring Joy Bingo, Self-Care Bingo, or Connection Bingo. It keeps things fresh and gives staff something new (and meaningful) to look forward to each month.

7

THE BIG TRY BOARD

Create a space for staff to share something new they tried that week — whether it succeeded or flopped. Celebrate courage, not perfection.

"I tried a new transition song today — it was chaos, but we all laughed!"

Rename the old "trial and error" mindset to "Ta-Da!" moments. Create a bulletin board or digital chat thread where staff can post quick wins or funny flops. Each post starts with "Ta-Da! I tried..." to keep the tone light and celebratory.

These moments remind everyone that growth and experimentation are worth celebrating.



Pro tip: Keep a small, silly trophy (like a golden spoon or rubber chicken) to pass each week to someone who took a brave risk. It turns mistakes into laughter and learning — a reminder that innovation often begins with an oops.

8

APPRECIATION PAIR-UPS

Once a month, randomly pair staff and have them share one thing they appreciate about each other's work.

At your next meeting, ask everyone to write a short compliment on a sticky note and hand them out at random — a surprise bit of sunshine for the day.

Print small postcards with prompts like "I noticed..." or "You made a difference when..." and encourage staff to leave them in mailboxes.

These simple practices strengthen relationships and help everyone feel seen.



Pro tip: Start a "Sunshine Chain." Each week, one staff member receives a note of appreciation, then writes one for someone else the next week. The notes travel quietly, but their warmth spreads throughout the team.

— IMPORTANT REMINDERS —

Center culture isn't built in a day.

It grows quietly through the rhythm of noticing, naming, and nurturing what's good — even on hard or hurried days. Culture isn't a single event; it's the daily choice to look for the light.

When directors model appreciation and joy, it spreads.

Your encouragement creates confidence and belonging. When staff feel supported, they pass that care to children and families. One leader's mindful effort becomes the shared heartbeat of the center.

Healing and joy don't require monumental changes.

They live in the gentle, ordinary moments — a shared smile, a silly song, a quiet breath before the day begins. It's not about doing more; it's about seeing more. When we name those small joys, we strengthen the roots that hold our communities together.

You're not just improving morale, you're teaching.

Each time you pause to celebrate a "feel-good" moment, you model gratitude and meaning for others. Joy is a skill — cultivated through kindness, reflection, and seeing the best in one another. In doing so, you grow not just a thriving center, but a hopeful community.

GROWING A CULTURE OF JOY

Every educator knows this truth: **what we do matters** — quietly and profoundly, every day.

In early childhood, joy rarely arrives in grand ways. It slips in softly — a child's first **"I did it!"**, a teacher's deep breath before the day begins, laughter when things don't go as planned. These moments remind us why we began — and why we stay.

As educators, you shape how joy shows up in your community. When you model **appreciation and care**, others follow. This work isn't just about managing classrooms — it's about nurturing the emotional heartbeat of belonging.

When we focus on feel-good moments, we build hope. And when hope is tended daily, it becomes the steady rhythm of a thriving center.



This is how transformation happens — not through grand gestures, but through a thousand moments of gratitude, recognition, and light.

TIPS FOR:
IN-HOME
CHILDCARE
PROVIDERS



FOR: IN-HOME PROVIDERS

If you're an in-home child care provider, you already know that your program is something truly special.

Your home isn't just a workplace — it's where **learning, laughter, and love** happen side by side. Each giggle, each story, each "I did it!" is a piece of light that ripples far beyond your living room walls.

But when you're the teacher, the cook, the bookkeeper, the playground monitor, and the center director all in one, it can be easy to forget to pause and celebrate those feel-good moments. The good news? This work — recognizing and celebrating joy — fits beautifully in a home-based setting. In fact, it may come even more naturally there.

Here are some simple, powerful ways to weave **appreciation and positivity** into your daily rhythm, even when you're a one-person team.

FINDING JOY IN THE EVERYDAY

Even in the cozy corners of an in-home program, joy has endless room to grow. These simple ideas are made just for you — ways to bring light, laughter, and connection into your days, right where you are.

1. Begin with a Morning Moment for You

- Before the first family arrives, take a quiet pause. Maybe it's while your coffee brews, or as you set up the art table.

Ask yourself:

- What do I want this day to feel like?
 - What joy can I notice today — in the children, in myself, or in this space?
- A short, mindful ritual — lighting a candle, stretching, saying an affirmation — can shift your mindset from "What needs to get done?" to "What will make today feel good?"

2. Create Your Own Gratitude Space

- You don't need a bulletin board or staff room to practice gratitude.
- Keep a small notebook or gratitude jar on your kitchen counter.
- At nap time or after pick-up, jot down one or two good things from the day: "The babies giggled at bubbles," "Our nature walk was peaceful," "I handled a hard moment with patience."
- When tough days come — and they do — re-read those pages. They'll remind you that your work is filled with quiet victories.

3. Celebrate Small Wins with Families

- You might not have a big team, but you do have a community — the children and families you care for.
- End each week by sending families a short note or photo of a joyful moment from their child's week. ("Eli built his tallest block tower ever!") Encourage parents to share good news too — a new word, family adventure, or sweet bedtime story.
- Add a "Family Gratitude Board" near your entryway where everyone can post notes of appreciation. Together, you'll build a circle of shared joy that extends beyond your center's walls.

4. Make Joy Visible

- Dedicate a small wall or bulletin board to display children's art and "joy moments."
- Post photos or quotes from the week — "We danced in the rain!" or "Everyone helped clean up snack today!"
- Let the children help choose what goes up. When they see their joy celebrated, they learn to celebrate others, too.

5. Step Outside for a Reset

- Nature offers instant perspective, even if it's just the backyard or a walk down the block.
- Try a five-minute "nature pause" between transitions: listen for birds, find a soft leaf, or feel the sun.
- Invite children to share what they notice that makes them happy.
- These mindful outdoor moments refresh both you and the children — a simple joy that doesn't cost a thing.

6. Find Connection Beyond Your Walls

- Working solo can sometimes feel isolating. Remember, you're not alone — thousands of family child care providers are creating magic every day.
- Join local provider networks or online communities for encouragement and idea-sharing.
- Partner with another nearby home provider for playdates, planning days, or even joint celebrations.
- Reach out to a trusted colleague to share weekly "feel-good moments" — just two minutes of mutual encouragement can lift your whole week.

7. Celebrate Yourself

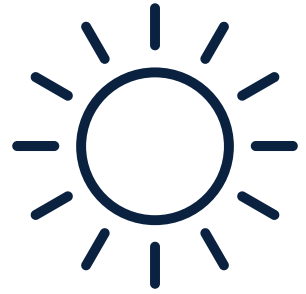
- You wear many hats — and you do it with heart.
- Take time to honor your own milestones:
 - Did you help a child master a new skill? Celebrate it.
 - Did you make it through a challenging week? Celebrate that too.
- Treat yourself to something small — a walk, a favorite snack, a moment of mindfulness, or a few minutes of quiet music — as a way to say, "I'm proud of me."
- Because you deserve celebration every bit as much as the children and families you nurture.

Activity Printables



MORNING JOY REFLECTION

Take a quiet moment to pause and reflect. Each day holds small moments worth remembering — the smiles, wins, and heartwarming scenes that remind you why you do what you do.



 **What are you looking forward to today?**

 **What made you smile yesterday?**

 **What's a moment that made you proud this week?**

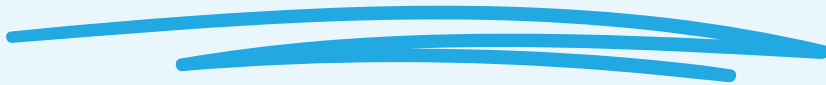
 **What's something beautiful you saw happen between a child and teacher?**

 **What's one small win you'd like to celebrate?**

 **What's one thing you hope for our children today?**

Keep these small moments close. They're gentle reminders that joy is always growing right here in your care.

Gratitude Board



Joy Wall



Vision Board



**OUR FUTURE
LOOKS LIKE...**



**OUR FUTURE
LOOKS LIKE...**



**OUR FUTURE
LOOKS LIKE...**



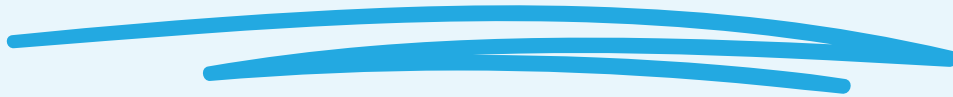
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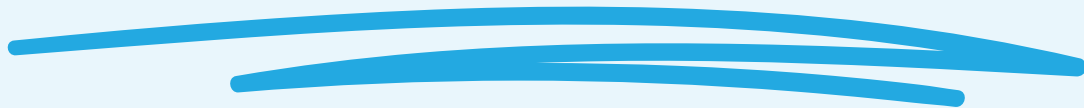
Feel-Good BINGO

Saw a child master a new skill	Shared a genuine laugh with a coworker	Had a calm, smooth transition	A parent shared a kind word or story	Took a mindful moment
Found joy in a small mess or "oops" moment	Gave a compliment that made someone smile	Wrote down one thing that went well today	Heard a co-teacher say something encouraging to a child	Ended the day feeling proud (even just a little!)
Told someone "You make this place better"	Caught yourself smiling at something ordinary	Noticed a child helping another without being asked	Celebrated a small win out loud (yours or someone else's!)	Saw teamwork in action during cleanup or transitions
Shared a "feel-good moment" with your team or director	Helped someone feel seen or included	Received a thank you note	Told a coworker what you admire about them	Took a moment to laugh at something delightfully silly a child said

The Big Try Board



Ta-Da Moments





**I APPRECIATE
HOW YOU...**



**I APPRECIATE
HOW YOU...**



**I APPRECIATE
HOW YOU...**



**I APPRECIATE
HOW YOU...**



**YOU MADE A
DIFFERENCE BY...**



**YOU MADE A
DIFFERENCE BY...**



**YOU MADE A
DIFFERENCE BY...**



**YOU MADE A
DIFFERENCE BY...**



I NOTICED...



I NOTICED...



I NOTICED...



I NOTICED...

SUNSHINE CHAIN



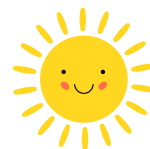
You made me smile today when...

You made a difference this week by...

The children light up when you...

Our center feels brighter because you...

SUNSHINE CHAIN



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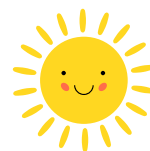
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COLLABORATION

BUILT BY EDUCATORS, FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

This resource was created in collaboration with dedicated educators and school leaders who brought their experience, ideas, and insight to every step of the process. We're grateful for their partnership in building tools that truly make a difference in schools.



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Early Childhood School Psychologist
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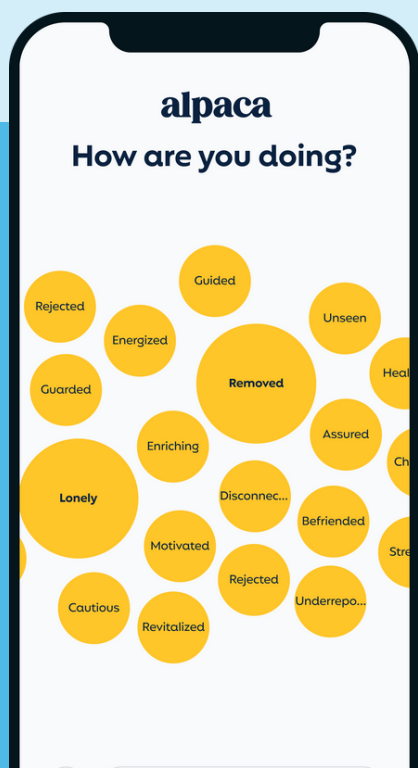
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