

Tips for Cultivating Joy

- Spending time with someone who makes you feel good gives you energy rather than depleting you. As adults, we may have friends who live far away, so remember you can connect via phone or video chat.

- Use social media mindfully. While social media is a fantastic way to stay in touch with friends and family, it can also make you feel down. Reduce your use of social media platforms that leave you feeling disheartened.

- Play with your child, even if it's for 10 minutes each day, during the evaluation process. Allow your child to direct and pace the play so they're having fun alongside you. Visit the National Institute for Play's website to determine what kind of play is for you. (See Resources.) Then commit to playing daily. Even when demands are high and time is short, getting down to your child's level and engaging in play will bring more joy into your daily life.

- Bring on the joy by creating playlists for relaxation, a pick-me-up, to boost your spirits, or to enjoy with your child. Cue the needed playlist in the background, sing along, or dance to whatever music makes you joyful.

- Create something beautiful with your hands. Working with your hands can provide relaxation, rest, and relief for the mind while allowing the brain to work on problems subconsciously. It is inherently pleasurable and contributes to maintaining a healthy mood. YouTube has tutorials that can help you learn how to knit, crochet, and needlepoint. You might find joy in gardening, cookie decorating, or other things that require lots of handwork. Dabble with a few of these to find a new hobby to help you find joy during downtime.

- In the poem "A Lazy Thought" by Eve Merriam, she says it takes a lot of slow to grow. There are endless comparisons between plant growth and the rest of life. Therefore, get gardening or growing with your child. Visit a local nursery to get some seeds, herbs, vegetables, succulents, or whatever you and your child can commit to nurturing together. Discuss the time it takes to nurture and grow whatever you choose. Help your child see how growth happens over time, not all at once.

- Get your mind off an upcoming meeting and make some memories. Select a day when you and your child mutually agree on a location for a day trip. Visit a local farm to pick berries. Go for a hike or a swim at a local, state, or national park. Take in a festival with kid-related activities in a nearby town or city. If the season or weather demands, find something to do indoors that will bring you joy, create memories, and take your mind off the tough stuff for a while.

- Get involved with your child’s school so the faculty, staff, and kids know who you are. Depending on your available time, some possibilities include running a special event for the parent-teacher organization, being a room parent, chaperoning class trips, and assisting with clerical work. Not only will this help you cultivate stronger relationships with the adults at your child’s school, but you’ll also be helping others by volunteering your time, which tends to bring people joy.
- Watch filmmaker Louie Schwartzberg’s TED Talk “Nature. Beauty. Gratitude.” It will inspire you to pay greater attention to the natural world, the beauty of people, and the modern-day wonders surrounding you. Schwartzberg’s inspiring talk will not only help you cultivate a gratitude practice, since one of the best tools we have to activate the best version of ourselves is gratitude. Also, this short TED Talk will help you think about ways to find joy every day you are gifted. (See Resources.)
- Get to know the resources at your local library. The library’s collection extends beyond the books you see in the stacks. You can access audiobooks, ebooks, magazines, and more through apps like Libby and Hoopla with a library card. Discovering new authors, genres, or series—whether for yourself or your child—can spark curiosity and bring moments of joy into your everyday life.
- Teaching your child to self-advocate can take a while. Try keeping a Good Things Happen to My Child list to record when you notice your child engaging in self-advocacy. These lists have been popularized online and are usually kept daily. Carve out a regular time each week to work on your list. Five minutes per week can help you build a list that will prove that your child is progressing toward a life of personal agency.

SELF-CARE TIPS

- Commit to practicing self-compassion so you speak to yourself in a supportive and kind way. You can nurture your soul by talking to yourself in the same way you would to someone you love unconditionally.
- Slowing your breathing down is one way to manage stressful situations. Rather than waiting for stressful moments, practice slow breathing techniques now! Extended exhalations are associated with slowing the heart rate, which lessens the stress response. (You can read about this at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-athletes-way/201905/longer-exhalations-are-easy-way-hack-your-vagus-nerve>.) While I’m partial to using longer outbreaths and Box Breathing to decrease my stress level, it’s essential to find breathing exercises that work for you. (See Self-Care Resources.) Practice one or two breathing exercises for a few minutes daily so they’re well-practiced and ready to be activated when you are stressed.

- Filling out rating scales and profiles for the evaluators can be tedious and time-consuming. Dedicate a fixed period each day for filling out forms. Stop when your timer goes off. While it's essential to return these items promptly, trying to complete everything in one to two days can lead to resentment of the process, so pace yourself.

- Journaling helps you process your thoughts, problem-solve, reflect on what's happening with your child, and can help with stress reduction. You don't need anything fancy to get started! A simple spiral notebook and a writing utensil or a new document on your device/computer is all you need to start writing. While you don't have to write at a specific time, it helps to schedule a regular time to do some writing. Start by blocking off 10 minutes to write. You'll find links to journaling resources at the back of the book.

- If you're anxious, begin a worry list. Your list can be written in a special notepad, saved as a document on your device, or written on a sticky note. Write down any worries you have as they pop into your mind. (This isn't formal! Single words or partial sentences are fine.) Schedule a time to review the list—the following day or on the weekend—and work through the items listed. Until then, let your worries go and know you'll deal with them when you have the mental stamina.

- Say yes the next time a friend or family member offers to help you with an errand or to provide respite care. In *The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and the World*, Sharon Brous asserts, “It’s an act of self-love, to let someone else take your hand and lift you up, especially if you are used to doing the heavy lifting yourself.” This may be the season of your life when you need to receive help. At some point, you’ll be able to offer a helping hand to someone else.

- It is important to connect with others who have been where you are. Make connections through social media, a community-based support group, or your child's school district when they host informal meetings about special education. Life without a network can be lonely, so find your people.

- A popular calming strategy is coloring. Scott M. Bea, PsyD, of the Cleveland Clinic, shares three reasons adult coloring can be calming: the attention flows away from ourselves, it relaxes the brain, and the low stakes make it pleasurable. Therefore, grab your colored pencils, crayons, or markers and an adult coloring book, and take some time to relax if you're feeling overwhelmed by whatever is happening with your child at school.

- Learn about the benefits of self-compassionate touch. Research from Aljoscha Dreisoerner and Eli Susman has shown that soothing self-touch can lower cortisol levels and heart rate, thereby reducing stress. The effects of self-compassionate touch are dependent on cultivating a consistent daily practice. Learn more about making self-soothing touch a habit by listening to one or both of the following episodes of The Science of Happiness podcast. (See Resources.)

- Try to carve out time for a reading life rather than reading only on vacation or putting it off until your child is older. Find time to read what you love daily...even if it's only 10 minutes before bedtime. Remember, all reading counts, so read what brings you happiness!
- As you teach your child to self-advocate, advocating for your wants and needs is important. One way to do this is by having boundaries and using consistent language to protect your time and space. Beth Ann Mayer interviewed mental health professionals and developed 35 boundary phrases to help you communicate with your children, family, friends, and co-workers. (See Resources.)