



Bringing up Joyful Children

This text was prepared by Bill St. Cyr

*You will show me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy;
At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

~Psalm 16:11



“The joy is not merely that we have received a favour or a little kindness which speaks of goodwill and love, but that a beautiful thing has come out of some other person’s beautiful heart for us; and joy in that other’s beauty of character gives more delight than any gain or pleasure which can come to us from favours.” Charlotte Mason (Discuss)

Joy, The Emotion by Which We Live

We are made for joy. It is the first emotion a child seeks. For a newborn, the concrete symbol of joy is the delight in his/her mother’s face. A newborn responds to mother’s delight with his/her own delight. Such delight stimulates and builds the joy centers of the brain. The face of a delighted mother symbolizes to an infant “it is good to be me (the infant) with you (mother).” As a newborn becomes an infant, their field of joy expands to father, grandparent, and other family members. Joy is now delight that father and grandparent are glad to be with me. (Discuss)

- *In what way can you relate to the above description of joy?*
- *Identify a time and a place when your face shined upon someone else. What effect did it have on him/her?*

Joy vs. Happiness

Joy is a life sustaining meal. Happiness is the pudding. We are made for joy. We get treated to moments of happiness. Happiness is our response to circumstances we find delightful and exciting. Joy functions quite differently. It is the fruit of safely belonging to and with someone who knows and loves us, who delights in us, who sees us and smiles upon us. Happiness flees in the face of sadness and disappointment. Joy can blaze more brightly in the face of adversity. (Discuss)

- *Identify moments in your life in which happiness was present. How long did this happiness last for?*
- *Identify periods in your life in which joy was experienced. What was the nature of this joy?*

Low Joy vs. High Joy

While fear, anger, shame, sadness, despair, and disgust, all can serve a protective function, by none of these do we live. When one of these protector emotions dominates a life, it has a toxic effect. In contrast, we are made for joy, and life goes far better when we are running on



joy. When in a joyful brain-body state, everything works better. A human brain is about 30 percent more efficient than when it is negative, neutral, or stressed. Running on joy, people have more energy, make better decisions, and are more constructive in working with others. Everything about us works best when our relationships are rooted in high-joy connections with God and others. High-joy brains regulate dopamine and other neurotransmitters well, manage pleasure, pain, and emotions effectively, and can stay connected to others when self or others are distressed. A large "joy bucket" immunizes one from emotional overwhelm and meltdown. We only get overwhelmed when life's challenges get bigger than our "joy bucket." (*Discuss*)

- *Highlight moments that were fuelled by high-joy brains.*
- *How did these differ to periods fuelled by low-joy brains?*

Joy and Maturity

Joy and maturity are closely related. Low joy homes and low joy schools raise anxious, angry children, who grow into low maturity adults. While maturity has many dimensions, two essential ones are the capacity to stay one's best self in the face of emotional upset (one's own and that of others) and the capacity to return relatively quickly from emotional upset to joy. Without these skills, relationships become quite difficult, relational joy is elusive, and life tends to become a constant pursuit of temporary, illusory pleasures. To effectively facilitate joyful maturity (spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical), parents must become masters of the art of inspiring joy. (*Discuss*)

- *What helps you return from emotional upset to joy?*

Five Essentials for Inspiring Joy

1. Creating Belonging

Based on the neurological foundations of the relational brain, the first question the relational human brain seeks to answer is "To whom do I belong?" Thus, joy in the home begins with the absolute conviction that we belong together. There are no outcasts. Everyone is included. A single outcast marginalizes belonging for everyone.

We create belonging by:

- Consistently using face, voice, body language, and words to convey "I'm glad to be with you." We belong to those who are truly glad to be with us. Note that one cannot fake this. We know what others think of us.



- Consistently using face, voice, body language, and words to convey "I appreciate you." We belong to those who genuinely appreciate us.
- Regularly engaging in one-to-one conversation that gives focused individual attention and communicates genuine interest. We belong to those who give us focused attention and are interested in us. Again, this cannot be faked.
- Joyfully pursuing the outcasts and including them in. Everyone participates all the time. Everyone plays. Everyone serves. Everyone's ideas matter.

2. **Maintaining Safety**

The second question the relational human brain seeks to answer is "Is this place good, bad, or scary?" Thus, the second foundation of joy in a home is the maintaining of a place that is safe and good.

We keep everyone relationally safe by:

- Dealing with weakness gently and benevolently; never harshly or with emotional violence.
- Owning our weakness, and when appropriate asking for forgiveness and seeking reconciliation.
- Doing all things in good order, not out of a spirit of fear or control, but for the goodness and beauty of it. Life is lived by routine, and the routines make good sense.

3. **Keeping it Good to be Me**

The third question the relational brain puts before itself is, "Is it good to be me here with you?" As far as the brain is concerned, it is good to be me here if (a) my brain is delighting in lots of good stuff and (b) my brain is managing well with the bad stuff (potentially distressing feelings).

We make it good for our children to be with us by:

- Giving time and attention to the practice of appreciation and gratitude. When the brain appreciates a person or thing, it delights in it and builds joy.
- Recognizing and personally delighting in the good work done by all students. We share with students our delight in their work.
- Protecting students from the "vulgarity of display" and the narcissistic self-preoccupation that such displays foster. To display oneself before an audience is a joy substitute, a pale but seductive counterfeit for truly being seen and known.
- Being respectful of student emotions, taking them seriously. Student emotions are to be attuned with, listened to, acknowledged, and attended to.



- Never abandoning students who are experiencing distressing emotions. Rather we move towards an emotionally distressed child. By attuning with and co-regulating student emotions, we help students build capacity to recover from distressing emotions.

4. Many New Good, True and Beautiful Relations

The fourth question the relational brain seeks to answer is "How do I relate to persons and things?" Level four brain processing does not seek to answer this question with words but with experience, both personal experience and the experience of those to whom one belongs. At Ambleside, we are a people particularly adept at offering good, true, beautiful, and joyful relations.

In Charlotte Mason's words:

- "We offer children knowledge for its own sake and our pupils discover that 'studies serve for delight.'"
- "Education is the Science of Relations; that is, a child has natural relations with a vast number of things and thoughts: so, we train him upon physical exercises, nature lore, handicrafts, science and art, and upon many living books, for we know that our business is not to teach him all about anything, but to help him to make valid as many as may be of— Those first-born affinities That fit our new existence to existing things."
- In addition, providing students plenty of opportunity and support in accomplishing worthy tasks. It is a delight to complete worthy work well. Completing such work builds a richness and confidence in self.
- Supporting students in joyful relations with all classmates, with schoolmates of all grades, and with teachers.

5. Talking About It

Finally, the relational brain seeks to process using conscious thought and words. Thus, the final question the relational brain asks is "How do I explain this?"

We build joy with our conscious thoughts and intentional words by:

- Directing our thoughts towards that which is good, true, and beautiful and thus cultivating the habit of sweet thoughts. Those possessing the habit of sweet thoughts lead much more joyful lives.
- Becoming increasingly skilled at sharing our own thoughts and facilitating others doing the same.
- Avoiding the temptation to control the talk rather than engaging in the free flow of conversation.



Personal Reflection

What are the most important ideas for you to take with you from this session?

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