

Teach with Joy!

by Deborah Stewart, M.Ed.



Teach Preschool

Dear Teacher,

This is a look at the power of teaching with joy; how you can harness that power; and why you should.

As I look back over my 30+ years of work in early childhood education, I can tell you that my most joyful moments come from the days, weeks, months, and years I have spent teaching in the preschool and Pre-K classrooms. Oh, it didn't always feel joyful at times but experience has shown me that in the midst of the hard, there is joy.



Joy is a precious thing. We, as teachers, need it to help us wake up every day and give our very best to the children we serve. I believe that once you understand, truly understand, what it means to teach with joy then you will have the power to make your teaching experience everything you hoped it could be no matter your circumstance.

I wrote this in hopes to lead you, inspire you, and above all else – to help you always teach with joy.

Deborah J. Stewart, M.Ed.



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I've Got that Joy!

When I was a child, I used to skip along singing this old Sunday School song - don't worry, I am not going to start preaching to you - but the song is relevant to our focus on joy and the words go like this...

I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart.
Where?
Down in my heart
Where?
Down in my heart
I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart.
Down in my heart to stay.

Although I love the rest of the song, I will stop there. You can google it if you are curious. Now let's take a look at the words of this section of the song for a just few minutes.

Joy Boosters and Joy Busters

There are different types of joy. They are all good and significant in our journey as teachers but they are different. The first type of joy is a 'Boost of Joy'. A boost of joy, or a joy booster, makes you feel like skipping along and singing "I've got that joy, joy, joy..."

When one of my students gives me a hug, I get a boost of joy. When I see one of my students suddenly understand an idea or concept, I get a boost of joy. When a parent or colleague pays me a compliment, I get a boost of joy. When my students cooperate nicely and help clean up the block center, I get a boost of joy. When my hair still looks good at the end of the day – that is a total joy booster.

But a boost of Joy isn't long lasting. It is a temporary surge of happiness that either fades with time or only lasts until a joy buster comes along and boom – the joy is gone.

My students pour their own juice for snack. We begin teaching the process of managing the pitcher, the cup, and the pouring right from the first day of school. After a few weeks of practice, my students have pretty much mastered the skill. When I watch my students successfully pour the juice and pass the pitcher – it's a joy booster. However, when I least expect it and a full cup of juice suddenly gets bumped off the edge of a table and spills all over the floor – joy is now busted.

Joy boosters are significant in our teaching practices and joy busters are unavoidable in our teaching practices.

- **Joy boosters can give us energy** – joy busters can take our energy away.
- **Joy boosters can make us smile** – joy busters can make us frown.
- **Joy boosters can make our job more enjoyable** – joy busters can make our job more stressful.
- **Joy boosters can motivate us** – joy busters can discourage.
- **Joy boosters can bring us joy** – joy busters can steal our joy.

We need joy boosters in our teaching practices. They make teaching fun. They help us love what we do. They make us want to get up each day and dive right back into teaching. However, joy boosters don't help us keep the joy and if we get dependent on joy boosters to make us happy ALL the time, then we will constantly find our moods swinging up and down.

Believe or not, we need joy busters in our teaching practices too. Joy busters motivate us to learn new skills and strategies; they foster our abilities to be more patient and forgiving; and they teach us how to be overcomers in the midst of the hard.

As a young teacher, I realized that I had very limited possibilities when it came to disciplining students. My boss was relentless in what we couldn't do; "No threats, no time-outs, no stickers, no candy, no yelling, and the list went on." It seemed that all the power to manage student behavior was being stripped away but instead of giving up, I focused my energy on being more creative with my teaching. I learned as many songs for transitions as I could. I practiced using my voice at different pitches to capture student attention. I made darn sure my classroom was as engaging as possible so the children would stay constructively busy.

Surely teaching can't happen in a place where we can't threaten, bribe, yell, or give time outs but you know what? I found out that it can. My bosses joy busters led me to become a more passionate, strategic, creative, skilled teacher. Her joy busters led me to think outside of the box, take risks, try something new.

It is important for you to note that not only is our sense of joy affected by joy boosters and joy busters, but our students' sense of joy is affected too. In fact, you can be a huge joy booster or buster to your students without even realizing it. If you give a student a sticker, he may certainly be joyful but that joy won't last. It will naturally fade away. If your student loses the sticker – well that is a definite joy buster.

But this is about your joy, the teacher's joy, so let's take one final look at joy busters and joy boosters.

I was traveling to one of my very first teaching conferences with a group of veteran teachers. Before heading to the conference, I read an article that a publisher would be there accepting articles from teachers for their early education magazine. I sat down and wrote an article about teaching and tucked it away in my suitcase to submit. On the trip, I mentioned to the others that I had brought the article for submission when one of the veteran, more educated, more

experienced teachers spoke up in shock, “Why would someone like me want to read something written by someone like you?” JOY BUSTER!! I didn’t submit the article. I probably still have it somewhere in a box around the house.

You will notice that most of the joy busters and joy boosters in your life come from external sources or other people. If we focus too much on our joy coming from external sources or people then we are at greater risk of losing our joy every time something or someone comes along and dings us with an unexpected joy buster. When we lose our joy we also lose our confidence, energy, and motivation.

It is for this reason, we have to work hard at figuring out how to find and keep inner joy regardless of what others are saying or doing.

Inner Joy

If you go back to the song, you will notice that it says “I’ve got the joy down in my heart.” The “down in my heart” part is that inner joy. It is the kind of joy that comes from deep down inside. When it comes to teaching in the classroom, we need that inner joy.

Why is inner joy so important?

- **The first reason is so that we can respond in a healthy way to difficult or stressful moments.**
- **The second reason is to help us keep a teaching perspective in the midst of difficult or stressful moments.**
- **The third reason is to help us personally stay healthy in mind, body, and spirit.**
- **The final reason is to be able to teach with confidence, creativity, and energy.**



When you have inner joy, then you learn to cope in a healthy way with joy busters and you don’t need joy boosters to have a good day. Joy boosters and busters will still be present in your life and you will feel the impact of them but instead of your mood swinging back and forth like a pendulum, you will find and keep a healthier emotional balance because your joy comes from down deep in your heart.

We will discuss specific classroom examples of how inner joy makes a difference in your teaching experience but before I do, the next question to be answered is, “How do you nurture your own sense of inner joy?”

Choose Joy

Inner joy isn't a given. Inner joy isn't a state of being. Inner joy is a constant work in progress. One of the most important ways you can nurture your own sense of inner joy is to choose joy.

As a teacher, it is easy to get caught up in the classroom (or school) drama. It is real and it can be stressful. But in the midst of it all, we have to be aware of whether or not we are choosing joy. Joy is like a seed inside the dark soil of the heart and each and every time you choose joy, it's like giving the seed a little sunshine and water to grow.



That brings us to the last line of the song, “down in my heart to stay.” Inner joy may be down in your heart but in order for it to stay it needs nurtured so it can grow and blossom into something beautiful. Choosing joy helps to nurture your sense of inner joy.

Simply put, every time you run into an issue or stressful moment in your classroom, you have to choose joy whether you feel joyful or not. It is in the choosing that joy not only stays but also begins to grow and bloom.

Choosing joy is primarily a matter of mind over matter but there are things you can do to help with

choosing joy in the classroom...

Look at what has you frustrated as an opportunity to develop a new strategy, skill, or routine.

- **Whenever a situation seems impossible, start looking for the possibilities.**
- **Understand what the problem is and spend your best time and energy on coming up with solutions. If one solution doesn't work then try another, then another, then another.**



When something happens in your classroom, be responsive over reactive and know the difference. Reacting to a moment comes from how it makes you feel. Responding to a moment focuses on what you should do.

Hugs and Happiness

A healthy sense of humor is important in nurturing your inner joy. Learn to laugh with your students and find the humor in things that don't go as planned. Give out hugs – hugs are healing to you and your students.

Joy Stealers

Nurturing a sense of inner joy has its challenges and in this section I want to address some of those challenges when it comes to teaching with joy. Some of those challenges we have control over while others we do not. Let's take a look at the challenges we usually have some control over.

I like to call these kinds of challenges joy stealers. These are the kinds of challenges that affect our ability to have joy, to keep joy, and to teach with joy in the classroom and yet if we can see the impact they have on our ability to teach with joy, then perhaps we can do something about them.

Lack of Sleep

Not getting a good night of sleep is a huge joy stealer. It makes us less able to think creatively and clearly, to be patient, and to put the children's needs first. It makes us more reactive to unexpected problems rather than constructive. A good night of sleep is an important part of teaching with joy.

I am a night owl by nature and like to write into the wee hours of the night. On a school night, however, I can see a significant difference in my ability to teach with joy at school.

As I mentioned earlier, I always teach my students how to pour their own juice. On this particular day, I had stayed up late and dragged myself into school. I managed to get through the morning with joy but when one of my sweet littles poured the juice and just kept on pouring rather than stopping at the half-way point – I reacted. I didn't go off the deep end but my movement and body language clearly showed that I was frustrated with her and it hurt her feelings. I quickly tried to regroup and encourage her to try again but she wasn't having it. She didn't want to pour her juice or eat snack or do anything as long as I was standing there and I knew it was all my fault. I also knew that my reaction was a result of just being too tired.

We solved the problem by me stepping away for a few minutes and asking my assistant to save the day. My assistant got everyone smiling again and I made up with my little one. Boy I do not want to do that too often – or really ever. I felt guilty about that for a week even though my student was fine within the hour. It is simply better for me (and everyone else) to get a good night of sleep. I need to nurture and protect my ability to teach with joy.

Coming to School Unprepared

Showing up in the classroom unprepared for the day can be another joy stealer. It makes us feel under pressure and takes away our ability to teach with confidence and joy.

I am a huge procrastinator and it wasn't until I started to run my own school that I had to get a handle on my habit of procrastination. My lack of preparedness was affecting my students and the other teachers. It left everyone guessing, including me, as to what we would do and that is a recipe for disaster. It also left me feeling under pressure all the time which can lead to burn out in a hurry. Over the years, I have made a deliberate effort to come to class better prepared which has given joy to all of us.

Text Messages

Okay so you might be thinking, “Deborah has lost her mind!” But I am here to tell you that your mobile phone can have a huge impact on your ability to teach with Joy. Let me share this example with you.

One of my normally joyful teachers was going about her day when she stopped to check her mobile phone for a quick second. There was a message from a friend that upset her. It wasn't a huge, end of the world, problem but it was a huge joy stealer. She couldn't focus on anything but that message for the next hour.

Text messaging is unpredictable. Folks don't stop to think how their message might affect your mood in the moment. They may not even realize their message will affect your mood. It is up to you to be smart about what you read during the day and to protect your joy where necessary.

I understand that folks like to have their phones close by in case of emergencies but in the process, there needs to be in place some other means of communication or you need to have an awareness of how your phone is affecting your ability to teach with joy.

If your phone is asking for your attention, then you will find that what is happening in the classroom to be more difficult to focus on. You will find yourself edgy and less patient. I know that this may not be something you want to read but the impact of other others, even in a text message, can steal your joy so just use wisdom and rise above the occasion as needed so you can continue to teach with joy.

The Other Hundred Joy Stealers

I could probably write an entire book about joy stealers. I bet you can tell me a few hundred of your own. However, if we focus too much of our attention on joy stealers then that in itself will steal our joy. The reality is, life is filled with real world, grown-up, difficult situations and people that come our way but the point here is to recognize how those challenges are affecting our ability to teach with joy and then to rise above them as we enter the classroom door. With every good choice we make in our personal and professional lives, we are also protecting and nurturing our ability to teach with joy.

A Joyful Classroom

To have a joyful classroom, you have to focus on teaching. Sounds simple, right? I wish it were that simple but too often teachers replace teaching with judgement, attitude, frustration, rules, regulations, opinions, labeling, or other non-teaching focuses. They forget that every single thing that happens in the classroom is an opportunity to teach.

- **As you focus on keeping a teaching perspective,** you will find the joy in teaching.
- **As you focus on teaching,** you will help your student find the joy in learning.
- **Where there is a genuine focus on teaching and learning,** there you will find the makings of a joyful classroom.

Does this mean that all the problems will go away? No – it doesn't. What it does mean is that in the midst of problems and challenges that come up during the classroom day, you can still have a joyful classroom – but it starts with you.

- **When Sam can't find his cubby,** it is an opportunity to teach Sammy about his classroom environment.
- **When little Johnny kicks over the block tower,** it's an opportunity to help Johnny learn how to build his own tower.
- **When the children argue over who will sit by who at the snack table,** it's an opportunity to help your students develop their sense of kindness and concern for each other.
- **When Sally cuts her journal up into tiny pieces,** it's time to get her a new journal first then it is time to help her find better cutting materials, but just think of how amazing those cutting skills are!
- **When you keep finding jackets on the floor,** it's time to teach the children how to hang up their own jackets.
- **When the children keep tossing the trash on the floor,** it's time to think like a teacher and either move the trashcan or have a lesson on how to throw away the trash.

You see, with every new challenge that comes up, the children are showing you what they still need to learn. The children are showing you where they need your support. The children are

demonstrating to you the skills that they still need to practice and master. The children are revealing that they are real people needing the time and support to learn about real life in a safe environment where joy is present, promoted, and protected.

If the focus is on removing or rushing through to fix the problem, then we miss out on the greater opportunity of helping young children achieve emotional, physical, social, and cognitive success.

By now, you might be thinking, “Deborah – you have not described a very joyful classroom!” But soon, Sam will find his cubby; Johnny will build his own tower; Sally will cut a masterpiece out of construction paper; and all the trash will land in the trash can – as long as we keep our focus on teaching.

With every accomplishment, with every new skill mastered, with every encouraging word you give your students – joy is nurtured.



Where teachers are invested in teaching and children are continuously encouraged and supported in the learning process, therein lies the foundation of a joyful classroom.

Look for Joy

To teach with joy encompasses all that I have shared so far but let me close with a few personal examples of what helps me continue on my journey to Teach with Joy.

Every time I make a game or other DIY activity for the children to explore, I can't wait to put it into action. For me, being creative fuels my sense of inner joy for teaching.

Every time one of my students does something I don't expect, I always try to remember to smile first. Genuinely smile. Tenderly smile. Compassionately smile. Smiling helps me to relax. Smiling helps me put the child front and center of my next move, response, or decision. Nine times out of Ten, smiling helps my student relax too so we can work through the problem together and find a solution that will help us both keep our joy.

I share my passion for reading and singing with my students every chance I get. As I share my passion, my hope is to ignite their passion and in the process, I find joy.

After 30 years of teaching, I have discovered that I still have so much to learn. I love that about teaching and I am thankful for the teacher I get to be today and the teacher I hope to be tomorrow.

Look for the things that bring you joy in teaching and build on them. If you love to read then read with the children and share that joy with them. If you love to sing, then sing with your children. If you love math then bring math to life around your classroom. If you love to create then share that passion with your students. Be a part of your classroom community not just a manager of it and work alongside of your students to find joy.



Teach with Joy

Let's wrap up this look at joy with the following take-aways...

1. Joy boosters and joy busters are a part of everyday life. They can help us laugh and teach us where we need to grow.
2. Inner joy must be cared for and nurtured.
3. To teach with joy involves making the choice to choose joy even when you don't feel like it.
4. We must know our limits and manage the things that steal our joy where possible.
5. A focus on teaching takes commitment but where teachers are invested in teaching and children are continuously encouraged and supported in the learning process, therein lies the foundation of a joyful classroom.
6. Every member of your classroom is a valued member of your classroom community, including you. Take time to share your passions (the things that bring you joy in teaching) with your students.

Thank you for every effort you make to continuously teach with joy. What a difference it makes in the life of a young child to experience the learning process in a joyful classroom.

About the Author

Deborah J. Stewart is the author of the Teach Preschool blog. Deborah uses her blog to share early learning in action from her own private preschool classroom with other early educators around the world.

Deborah holds a master degree in early childhood education and has been teaching and leading others in the field for over 30 years.

Deborah believes that young children learn best through play and exploration and applies her play-based teaching practices in her own classroom on a daily basis.



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