

BANISHING BURNOUT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

TERESA A. BYINGTON, PHD



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INTRODUCTION

Rise and Shine

Leaders determine how they will rise; they also empower others to shine.

A few years ago, Kim Raab, a child-care director at La Petite Academy, a private child-care facility in Las Vegas, Nevada, attended the Leadership of Community of Practice. I facilitate this group of professionals who regularly meet to discuss ideas and improve their practices. Kim shared the following:

I have been in the early childhood field for the past twenty-eight years and an academy director for twenty-four of those years. A couple of years ago, I found myself in a place of wondering if there was something different that I should be doing. I was feeling as if I was doing the exact same thing each and every day, and to be honest with you, I was bored. I was looking for a change.

It was during that time that I was told about the Leadership of Community of Practice. It sounded fantastic, but I was hesitant about joining the group as it was totally out of my comfort zone. I am not one who is comfortable going into unfamiliar situations and putting myself out there, but I knew that I needed something. I needed to do something for me. Furthermore, I needed to see if staying in early childhood education as a leader was really where I needed to be, or if it was my time to move on.

Walking through those doors on the first day was one of the best decisions I have ever made. It is hard to put into words exactly what this course has done for me, but the best way I can describe it is that it has literally changed my life. I know that may seem a little over the top, but this class has reassured me that I am exactly where I need to be. It gave me the final push to complete my college degree. It has made me a better leader to my team and has given me a new love for the early childhood education field.

Introduction 1

In the two years that I have attended the Leadership of Community of Practice, I have received two prestigious awards within our company. I was honored with the People Leadership Award in 2020 and the Diamond Director in 2021. These are two of the highest awards that are given out to academy directors within our company. I am extremely humbled by these awards and have to thank the Leadership of Community of Practice for giving me the motivation, inspiration, confidence, and support to find myself again. I became a joyful leader.

Kim regained her motivation and confidence when she had opportunities to discuss challenges with other early child-hood leaders and brainstorm solutions with them. She realized that other directors were facing similar issues and that she wasn't alone in her struggles. Kim left the Leadership of Community of Practice sessions feeling encouraged and less isolated. Over time, she recaptured her purpose and became a joyful leader.

You may be able to relate to how Kim felt. Have you ever asked yourself if you are in the right place, doing the right thing? You may have wondered if you were making a difference and being an effective leader. As a leader, you will undoubtedly face many challenges. You may be feeling symptoms of burnout, but you also have opportunities to be a positive influence on the individuals you lead.

In this book, we will be exploring aspects of joyful leadership. My hope is that you will discover the joyful leader within yourself, and then help others do the same. Going on a joyful leadership journey can positively change your life and transform your leadership.

JOYFUL LEADERSHIP

What is joyful leadership? It is uplifting, guiding, and inspiring others with a joyful spirit. Even if you do not have an official leadership position, you can still lead with joy. Early childhood teachers who guide children in their play and joyfully engage with them are leaders of their classroom. Early childhood coaches who support and inspire teachers to enhance their teaching practices are leaders in improving quality. Children who befriend other children and are kind to them are leaders in their classroom. If you are an individual who uplifts, guides, and inspires others with joy, then you are a joyful leader!

Being a joyful leader is not a one-time event; it is an ongoing journey of intentionally bringing joy to your work, whether you're planning a meeting or leading children in daily learning experiences. I have seen many early childhood teachers who are joyful leaders. They bring joy to their classroom and delight in spending time with children. Their classrooms are filled with laughter and smiles. These teachers joyfully encourage and influence others through their actions. They brighten the lives of children, families, coworkers, and colleagues by building meaningful relationships. Joyful teachers intentionally offer children opportunities for growth and development as they explore their world. These teachers meet each day with joy in their hearts as they empower others to shine. They rise and shine.

RISE AND SHINE

What does it mean to rise and shine? To rise is an upward movement. Think about a hot-air balloon: the air causes the balloon to rise because hot air is lighter than the surrounding colder air. When the sun rises in the morning, it lights up the sky and is a joyful sight. Joyful leaders elevate negative thoughts and actions with positive, joyful ones. They rise to the occasion as they live their purpose and empower others to do the same.

To shine is to give out a bright light or to have a quality of brightness. The sun shines on the Earth and provides life-giving light, which is an essential element of growth. When individuals shine, they have distinguished themselves or excelled at something. Leaders give individuals opportunities to shine by highlighting their brightness and accomplishments. They honor the gifts and talents of the individuals they lead; they let their light shine.

The expression "rise and shine" is often used to wish someone happiness as they wake up. It encourages the individual to get up, be joyful, and have a great day. Likewise, leaders can encourage their team to go forth, be happy, and have a productive day. Children are happier in classrooms with teachers who are joyful. Workers are more contented in workplaces that focus on strengths. Leaders are more effective when they elevate their team members. Positivity can make a difference in your relationships and your productivity. When we feel joyful, life seems better, and we are less prone to burnout. Joyful leaders are able to accomplish more because they have higher levels of energy and motivation.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

In this book we explore many ways that a joyful leader can rise and help others shine. To begin our journey, we will look at why joy is an essential element of effective leadership. We will then explore five aspects of joyful leadership:

- * Reimagine Your Purpose
- Radiate a Joyful Outlook
- * Engage in Joyful Actions
- * Create Caring Connections
- * Use Reflection to Build Strengths

Throughout this book, you will find ideas on how you can *rise now* by implementing strategies to help you become a more joyful leader (look for the \P icon). You'll also find ways to *shine on* the individuals that you lead and inspire them to be more joyful (look for the \cong icon).

Introduction 3

Interspersed throughout each chapter are real-life examples of leaders and teachers leading with joy. (The names of the teachers and children are pseudonyms to protect their privacy.) Each chapter concludes with discussion questions, a reflection activity, and an action plan so you and your team members can reflect on the chapter's content and put the ideas into action. If you are using this book as part of training or professional development, consider creating a Joyful Leader Book Club (see appendix A) in which your team reads, reflects, and then acts on what they learn in each chapter.



As I became a more joyful leader, it wasn't long before I was leading a more joyful team. My work became more meaningful. I developed stronger relationships with my team members, and we engaged in more joyful actions. Our creativity increased and we were able to face challenges with more fortitude and unity. We focused on what we could change, and we let go of what we could not change. We supported each other during hard times and celebrated joyful moments. It's worth noting that focusing on joy and finding the joyful leader within does not mean having toxic positivity. *Toxic positivity* is the belief that people should maintain a positive mindset regardless of the situation (Cherry, 2023). Everyone experiences hard times and painful experiences. When you feel negative emotions, you need to experience and deal with them, not suppress them or pretend they do not exist. Negative emotions are a part of life, and they need to be acknowledged and validated.

Joyful and effective leaders recognize that it is okay to not be okay. When experiencing difficult times and emotions, lean on others for support. Share your true feelings and recognize they are real and valid. Accept and process your emotions in healthy ways. Within this book, I will share times when I experienced difficult situations that were not joyful. I will also share how being a joyful leader helped me bounce back and move forward. As Ingrid Fetell Lee, author of *Joyful: The Surprising Power of Ordinary Things to Create Extraordinary Happiness*, shared on Instagram (2022), "In the middle of a crisis, remember that joy always comes back. You don't have to smile through the tough stuff or remind yourself it could've been so much worse. You're allowed to feel disappointed, frustrated, or pissed off. But, if you can, try to remember that joy always comes back. When you keep yourself open to the possibility of joy in the future, you make it more likely you'll notice it when it returns."

Remember, after experiencing tough times, joy will come back, and you can again find the joyful leader within. As you do, your team members will discover the joyful leader within themselves and become joyful influences on others. Together, you will weather both the good times and the not-so-good times. Joyful leadership is a journey, not a destination. You are invited to join me as I share how I became a more joyful leader, leading a joyful team.

CHAPTER 1

My Joy?

"You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending."

-C.S. Lewis, British author and scholar (attributed)

You rise as a leader as you infuse joy into your leadership. Have you ever had a moment or event that changed your life and started you on a different path? I had one when I was introduced to the work of Ingrid Fetell Lee. In 2018, one of my team members invited me to watch Lee's TED Talk called "Where Joy Hides and How to Find It." During her talk, Lee describes a personal experience that started her on a quest to find more about joy. Her professor was viewing her design work and told her that it brought him a feeling of joy, which surprised her as she had been focused on making her designs practical, ergonomic, and sustainable.

Lee began her quest by asking people about what things brought them joy. Some of the common responses she heard included rainbows, bubbles, cherry blossoms, and fireworks. She wondered, "Why do fireworks cause us to ooh and ahh?" "What makes looking at rainbows a joyful experience for almost everyone?" As she looked at pictures of things that individuals found joyful, she started to see some patterns. People often experienced joyful sensations when they saw things that were round, colorful, and surprising. Hot-air balloons and things that give a sense of abundance or feelings of lightness and elevation were seen as joyful. As Lee aptly shared, one confetto, the singular form of the word confetti, is not nearly as joyful as hundreds of pieces of confetti! After ten years of study and thought, Lee wrote Joyful: The Surprising Power of Ordinary Things to Create Extraordinary Happiness, which describes her findings on joy.

JOY

Lee's TED Talk and book inspired me to think about joy and how it could be an important aspect of leadership. I wanted to become a more joyful leader and was curious about discovering more about the following:

- * What is joy?
- * What brings me joy?
- * What type of things do others find joyful?

WHAT IS JOY?

Joy can be described as moments when you spontaneously see or hear something that causes you to feel delighted. Lee describes it as "intense momentary experience of positive emotions." In contrast, happiness is how good you feel over time; it is feeling a sense of satisfaction and contentment with your life. Brené Brown, author of *The Gifts of Imperfection* suggests to her readers a familiar joyful symbol. "Twinkling lights are the perfect metaphor for joy," she writes. "Joy is not a constant. It comes to us in moments—often ordinary moments. Sometimes, we miss out on the bursts of joy because we're too busy chasing down extraordinary moments. Other times we're so afraid of the dark that we don't dare let ourselves enjoy the light. I believe a joyful life is made up of joyful moments gracefully strung together by trust, gratitude, inspiration, and faith."



"Joy is not a distant destination in which you arrive, but a path you choose to travel each day!"

—Tommy Newberry, author and speaker

To be joyful is to have feelings of delight or bliss. Joy often begins with the senses, or what Lee calls the aesthetics of joy. By being more aware of the aesthetics of joy and where to find them, you can discover many joyful things throughout your day. Take a moment to join me in the following visualization:

- Take a deep breath and clear your mind.
- * Imagine something that makes you feel joyful. It could be a person, place, or thing.
- * Become aware of how you are feeling. Continue to breathe deeply.
- * Think about where you are. What are you seeing? hearing? smelling? touching? tasting? Think about each sense that you are experiencing.
- * Allow the sensations of the experience to flow throughout your whole body.
- * Savor how you are feeling. Enjoy being at this moment.

- * Imprint the moment in your mind and your heart. Continue thinking about your joyful thoughts and feelings.
- (Wait at least one minute.) When you are ready, slowly open your eyes.
- * How did you feel? Write down your thoughts and feelings.

Becoming more mindful of joyful experiences and thinking about them often is one way to become more joyful. Joyful experiences help us feel good about ourselves and others.

WHAT BRINGS ME JOY?

My next question was "What brings me joy?" I thought about the joy I feel when I spend time with my family and friends. I also thought about the types of things that bring me joy within my surroundings. I became more intentional about noticing details that I found joyful, called *joyspotting* (see page 12 for more on this topic). One day on my drive to work, I saw a large yellow balloon floating high above a new neighborhood. As it floated in the breeze in the blue, blue sky with wispy white clouds in the background, I felt joyful. I noticed some purple and pink flowers that I had not seen before blooming in a neighbor's yard, and they brought a smile to my face. Noticing balloons and flowers was a simple action and yet when I arrived at work, I felt more joyful and wanted to share my joy with others. As I shared my observations, others responded by sharing something that brought them joy. There was a snowball effect as more people began sharing their joy with each other.

Over time, I discovered that being more mindful of joy improved my life, work, and well-being. When I feel better, I am more creative. When I make mental and emotional shifts toward being more joyful, I improve my productivity. I am less likely to feel burned out, and this positively affects the people I lead.

WHAT TYPES OF THINGS DO OTHERS FIND JOYFUL?

As I became more joyful, my team became more joyful, and their productivity increased. This led me to my third question, "What types of things do others find joyful?" As Lee discovered, some things, such as fireworks, are almost universally joyful, but individuals might find joy in specific things, such as a hand-drawn picture created by their son or daughter. My team found joy in having opportunities to be creative and interact collaboratively within a positive work environment. They enjoyed working together and learning more about each other professionally and personally.



"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

-Maya Angelou, author, poet, and civil rights activist

FINDING JOY AMIDST STRUGGLES

Although it may be easy to find joy when things are going our way, we all know that life doesn't work that way. We all have struggles—both personal and professional. On a personal level, you may find it hard to feel joy when you are anxious or stressed. Some people feel guilty expressing joy during difficult times, yet joy can help us recover from the physiological effects of stress and burnout. In fact, joy can provide respite during tough times and make us more resilient. Evelyn Ritzi, Content Marketing Manager at The Ohlman Group, shared that when we are faced with difficulties, instead of bouncing back, we should focus on bouncing forward. Bouncing forward means not just to get back up after falling down, but to get up and jump forward over or through what knocked us down in the first place. Ritzi suggested that one way to bounce forward is to find meaning in adversity by noticing and celebrating small moments of joy. Experiencing joy can help us recover from stress, anxiety, and negative feedback loops. As we find purpose and meaning, we will become more resilient and better able to bounce forward.

One helpful action that can help you bounce forward is to pause for a few moments and think about something that you are thankful for or something that has brought you joy in the past. Although stopping to pause and focus on joy for a few moments does not change your circumstances, it can change how you feel. Focusing on joy can help reset your brain to a more positive mindset and return to an upward spiral.

- Pause and focus on something for which you are thankful.
- Encourage your team to share something for which they are thankful.

On a professional level, whether you are the teacher leading a group of children or a director leading a team of teachers, some days will be difficult: a staff member calls in sick, a child has a meltdown, or a licensing agency shows up for a surprise inspection. However, if we look for it, we can find joy during struggles. You can find joy as you listen to children

laugh as they play or as you think of a joyful memory. Joy is a choice. Each day, we make choices about what we will say and do. When events occur, we have a choice in how we will respond. Our responses can make a big difference in the outcome of a situation.

Let me share a personal example. Before becoming a joyful leader, my response to situations was often different from what they are today. In the past, when I faced a challenge such as a cut in funding, I focused on all the possible negative outcomes. Likewise, I would sometimes avoid addressing the issue as I didn't want to upset the individuals who would be affected. I was also fearful that if I told staff about the potential budget cuts, they would leave the organization and find other positions. My

"The day I decided my life was joyful, there

was suddenly joy all around me."

-Anonymous

reaction of fear, worry, and avoidance often resulted in the very things that I was trying to avoid. It wasn't long before my team picked up on my negative emotions and rumors started to spread. My team began to exhibit fear and worry. The outcome was a negative work climate and team members looking for employment elsewhere. Recently, I faced a similar situation, but my response changed, and the outcome was very different because of my joyful mindset.

I oversee several grants that provide funding for training and coaching early childhood educators. A few years ago, I learned that one of my contracts might not be renewed because of state budget cuts. The funding cuts would directly affect the positions of two of my team members. Instead of being overcome with fear and worry and avoiding the situation, I responded differently. I met with my team and explained the situation with an optimistic outlook. I emphasized that I thought we had the creative energy to think of different ways we could approach this situation. I shared that I had given them the worst-case scenario and that funding might not be cut, but we needed to start exploring other options if it was cut. We brainstormed many different ideas, including approaching my supervisor about finding a different source of funding to carry us over until we knew the actual outcome. With a positive and joyful attitude, I met with my supervisor and outlined the situation. I emphasized the positive effect my team members were having on the early childhood community and asked him what he could do. To my surprise, he offered to cover the salaries of the staff members for three months, or until we knew the outcome of the funding. He shared that he had been impressed by my team and that he never had to worry about them getting their work done. He also mentioned that my team seemed happy and never came to him with issues. Wow! A few months later, we received even better news when we learned that we were not only funded for another year but at a higher level of funding!

This was one of those times when I was grateful that I had become a joyful leader and that I was leading a joyful team. Each day, early childhood professionals determine how they will respond to a situation or event. The response greatly influences the outcome. This can especially be true in early childhood classrooms, as Erica discovered:

Tommy was a new child in Erica's preschool classroom. On his first day, Tommy displayed some challenging behavior that was dangerous to the other children. Erica learned that he was facing several challenges at home and needed extra care and attention. When Tommy was feeling anxious, he would shout at his teachers and the other children, throw toys, and sometimes even kick and punch the teachers when they tried to intervene. The teachers consistently gave Tommy positive care and attention and did their best to minimize his anxiety.

One morning, while on the playground, Tommy began swearing and throwing toys. The teachers moved the other children away from him and gave him some space to express his emotions. Erica started to talk to him quietly and calmly. She invited him to go into the quiet, empty classroom with her. As she moved closer to him, he ran into the classroom, hid behind the dollhouse, and began throwing the dolls at her. Erica crouched down and said, "I know you're having big feelings right now. Would you like me to sit with you or give you some space?" Tommy didn't respond verbally, he just continued throwing the dolls. Erica said, "I'm going to move over here and play with some bean bags, and you can let me know if you want me to come back." After Erica moved away, Tommy stopped throwing the dolls and began crying. Erica wanted to scoop him up in a hug, but she knew that would only upset him more. She said, "Would you like to come over here and play with the bean bags?" Tommy stopped crying and a few minutes later said, "Yes." Erica asked Tommy where he would like to throw the bean bags, and he said that he wanted to throw them to her outside.

Erica and Tommy went back outside to play catch, and his expression and demeanor completely changed. He had the biggest smile on his face. He began doing spins as he threw the bean bags, throwing them backwards over his head, closing his eyes and throwing them, and laughing the whole time. Erica shared his enthusiasm and commented positively on his creative throwing skills. Soon some other children began to show interest in the game and a few asked if they could participate. Tommy said they could join them, and three children started throwing bean bags in creative ways. He seemed so proud of himself whenever he would catch a bean bag from one of the other children. Tommy continued to do well the rest of the day, and he eagerly talked about how much fun he had playing with the bean bags.

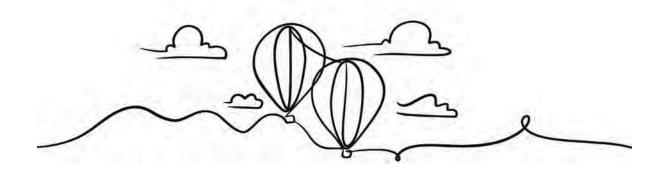
Erica's response to Tommy's challenging behavior led to a positive outcome. She was a joyful leader, making a positive difference in the lives of the children in her class.

Joyful leaders can set the tone for how others will act and react. Your responses to situations, especially difficult ones, influence how your team or children in your classroom will react. Not all situations will turn out the way you want them to, but by being a joyful leader, you will be better able to address each situation positively.

JOYFUL LEADERS



- lift others and spread joy;
- help others be the best versions of themselves;
- are present and actively listen with intent;
- strive to make joyful connections with others;
- are encouraging, offering positive viewpoints;
- have a sense of playfulness and fun with the individuals they lead; and
- are aware that they will face daily struggles, but that there will also be moments of joy.



MY JOURNEY

As noted previously, joy was not always an essential part of my leadership. I had to make a big shift in my outlook and communication. It took time and intentional actions, but I've become a joyful leader leading a joyful team. I share my journey here to inspire you to start your own journey on becoming a joyful leader.

I lead a team of seventeen early childhood professionals, including trainers, coaches, assessors, and an administrative assistant. After hearing and learning more about Lee's work on joy, I wanted to adopt a more joyful attitude and to share what I had learned with my team. As I prepared for an upcoming team retreat, I developed a short presentation on joy. I encouraged my staff to share three things that brought them joy. During our retreat, I also invited my team members to share a story about a time they felt joy. As they shared their stories, their faces lit up, and they were truly joyful!

We discussed how we could bring more joy into our work with early childhood professionals. One idea was to create training presentations on topics related to joy, such as "The Joyful Teacher" and "Bringing More Joy into Early Childhood Classrooms" that we could teach to early childhood educators. I encouraged everyone to notice little moments of joy and to share these experiences with each other. When we became more attuned to seeing joyful things in the world, our spirits were lifted, and we became more observant. We found that sharing our joy with others helped them feel more joyful.

Think for a moment: What brings you joy?

- Write down three things that bring you joy.
- Ask your team members or children in your classroom to share three things that bring them joy.

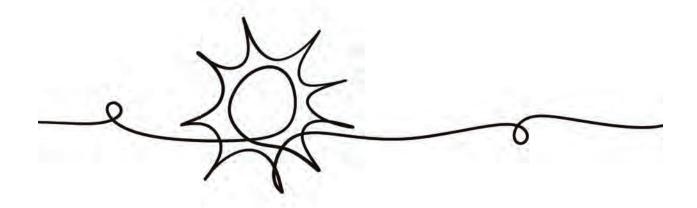
JOYSPOTTING

The more I learned about joy, the more I started to recognize joyful things in my environment. I started intentionally looking for things. I noticed a bunny hopping in my yard and saw some amazing artwork during a weekend trip. I was joyspotting. Lee (2019b) describes joyspotting as tuning your attention to joy in your surroundings. It is noticing someone's polka-dotted socks or the colorful butterfly flitting among the plants. Joyspotting can positively influence how you feel. Why does joyspotting work? According to Lee (2019a), "One reason might have to do with what positivity researchers call upward spirals. It turns out that emotions have feedback loops: when we feel a burst of joy, it makes us more attentive to joy in our surroundings and more likely to engage in behaviors that help us find more joy, such as interacting with other people or doing an activity we love." I have found that joyspotting has created an upward spiral within my team. Noticing joyful things in our environment has helped us be more joyful.

My team started texting each other pictures of things they found joyful. Several team members commented on how the word joy popped out at them wherever they went. One team member was shopping and saw some word tiles that read "Choose Joy." She said as soon as she saw the tiles, she knew she needed to buy one for everyone on our team. Another member of the team created personalized whiteboards for team members that included a picture of one of the things that brought them joy. My board had a picture of a purple iris (my favorite flower). Other boards featured hummingbirds, cherry blossoms, and a pineapple.

Interested in joyspotting? I found some great ideas on where to look for joy in Lee's "The Joyspotter's Guide," which can be found on her website. The guide lists twelve ideas on where to look for joy. Here are four ideas to get you started:

- * Look up! When I looked up, I saw beautiful light fixtures at a hotel and a restaurant.
- * Look down! When I looked down, I saw a fun sidewalk mosaic featuring sea life.
- * Keep an eye out for color. When I kept an eye out for color, I came upon some sculptures in vibrant jewel-tone hues.
- * Zoom in. When I zoomed in, I saw the most amazing papier-mâché animal figures in the window display of a children's art museum.
- Start joyspotting, and share joyspotting ideas with your team.
- Encourage your team to start joyspotting and to share their joyspotting with each other.



BECOMING A JOYFUL LEADER

As mentioned earlier, you do not need an official title to be a leader. When individuals guide and inspire with joy, they become joyful leaders. Throughout this book, I will be referring to the individuals that you lead as your "team." Whether your team is teachers you supervise or children you teach, you can be a joyful leader leading a joyful team. Please replace the word team with whatever term best matches your situation. Your team may be students, parents, teachers, coaches, trainers, or other individuals you influence. Think of your "team" as we explore different aspects of joyful leadership.

As I became a joyful leader, it felt good to focus on joy, and I began infusing joy into everything I did. I changed the name of the icebreakers I implemented during training sessions to Joyful Beginnings (more about this later in this book). My team began looking at our surroundings at work and thinking about how we could make them more joyful. We started setting up joyful environments for meetings and training sessions, which increased the energy and excitement in the room. For example, we added items such as sunflowers, seashells, and decorative birdhouses. My team and I looked deeper at the concept of joy and began discussing topics such as creating joyful connections with others, building more joyful relationships, and being a joyful influence on others. Over time, joy became part of our team culture and an integral part of who we were, both personally and professionally. Does that mean that everything we did was joyful? Of course not. We still faced times of discouragement and disappointment, but we were able to face the hard days with resilience and adapt to our difficult circumstances. We remembered that joy would come back, and it did.

The wonderful thing about joy is that it does not cost anything and is something that can be readily shared. As my team felt more joy, they wanted to share the message of joy and gratitude with the individuals they teach. One of my team members was working with a group of preschool teachers over a series of several months. The teachers would come to their evening classes tired, often hungry, and not always in the best of moods. She gave the teachers a joy journal and invited them to write down one thing or experience that had brought them joy that day. Then, several teachers were invited to share their joy with the class. At first, the teachers grumbled and not many of them wanted to share; however, over time, they became more excited about writing in their joy journals and were eager to share their joy. The teachers'



The past few years have been very difficult for the early childhood field. Many leaders are burnt out and looking for ways to recapture their enthusiasm.

In Find the Joyful Leader Within: Banishing Burnout in Early Childhood Education, author Teresa A. Byington offers strategies for helping teachers reimagine purpose, develop meaningful connections with staff and families, communicate with care, and reflect to build on strengths. Help your staff rediscover their connections, teamwork, and camaraderie.

- * Rejuvenate your commitment.
- Reimagine your purpose.
- * Reclaim your spark.
- Rediscover your joy!



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