Life is good Playmakers Overview:

Life is good Playmakers, formerly Project Joy, is a national movement, started in 1989, to heal and strengthen children – especially those whose lives have been deeply impacted by trauma. Millions of our nation’s youngest children have experienced profound trauma in its many forms – community violence, abuse, neglect, natural disasters, extreme poverty, and severe illness. Theirs is a tragic and largely silent epidemic, yet it cripples development, devastates young lives, and shortens life expectancy.

Play is an essential part of the cure for these wounded children. Empowering, joyful play with sensitive, caring adults can help to restore what trauma violently strips from a child. Life is good Playmakers ensures that the adults closest to these children – often frontline care providers like yourself - have the knowledge, skills, and resources to deliver the powerful medicine of play to the children who need it most. Our goal is that this manual, coupled with your experience at this training, will help you reflect on your practice with children, to build your awareness of opportunities you already have and can create to playfully engage with your children—to diminish their fears, renew their joy, and boost their capacity to learn and grow into healthy, happy adults. After all, all children deserve to grow up feeling safe, loved, and joyful.

The Impact of Childhood Trauma

Psychological trauma can be defined as an extremely threatening experience, or series of experiences, that completely overwhelms a child’s psychosocial capacity to cope. Sadly, exposure to childhood trauma has impacted millions of children nationwide (some estimate that as many as ¼ of the nation’s 80 million children have been victimized by trauma) and is considered by many to be the greatest health crisis facing our nation today.
In 1998, The United States Center for Disease Control conducted the largest study of its kind ever to show how exposure to trauma, which they called ACE (an acronym for Adverse Childhood Experience), was the root cause of many common diseases that prematurely claim the lives of millions of Americans each year. What they proved was that millions of Americans experience one or more ACEs during childhood. As a result of these experiences, many went on to develop social and emotional impairments. As a result of these impairments, some engaged in health risk behaviors (such as street drug use, drinking, smoking, etc) in an attempt to cope with the ensuing loneliness and emotional pain. In some cases, these health risk behaviors eventually led to disease and disability and, as a result in some cases, they even led to premature death (see Figure 1).

**Designed to Survive: How Children Respond to Trauma**

For all human beings, severe threat automatically triggers a physical response that is initiated by the oldest and most primitive region of our brain. This response, often referred to as the “fight or flight” response, is brilliantly designed to help us respond
immediately to threat and hopefully help us get to safety. However, when the threat is so severe that it overwhelms the individual and prevents them from taking effective action, the brain (and the entire person for that matter) can get thrown out of balance.

In the words of esteemed trauma psychologist Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, “Preventing people from moving and taking effective action is what makes trauma trauma.” The bodies and minds of young children are even more susceptible to the impact of traumatic stress because their brains are still developing.

According to Dr. Bruce Perry, “Our brains develop in use-dependant ways.” This means that if people, especially children, are put into situations where they are constantly forced to respond to threat, then the areas of their brains that are responsible for responding to threat (which are the lower, more primitive regions of the brain) will develop more than other important regions of their brains. As a result, the development of higher brain regions, which are responsible for social, emotional and cognitive functioning, run the risk of being severely compromised.

In other words, forcing a developing child to focus on surviving instead of on loving, playing, and exploring has devastating long-term effects on their health and development.

**Fear Destroys Playfulness**

Psychologist and neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp conducted a very interesting research project examining how fear impacts playfulness in young, developing mammals. During his research, he discovered that playful engagement was instrumental in the brain development of young rats. To determine this, he looked at the brain development of rats that were raised in two different types of living environments. The first environment, which he called an “enriched environment,” consisted of several rats living together with lots of toys to explore (balls, tunnels, running wheels, etc). The second environment, which he called an “unenriched environment,” housed only a single rat in an empty cage, with no toys. Over the course of several experiments, Panksepp found that rats living together in enriched environments had far greater
dendrite development (neurological connections that are representative of brain development and learning) than rats living alone in unenriched environments. He even learned that rats laugh during play. (But that’s a story for another time. Go to YouTube and search for “laughing rats” if you don’t believe me.)

Once Panksepp proved that rat pups did indeed play and learn, he decided to measure the impact that fear would have on play and learning. To do this, he measured the level of play activity of a group of rat pups (Figure 2) in an enriched environment. Once he determined their baseline level of play activity, he put a cat hair into their cage. As one might have guessed, upon smelling the cat hair, the rats became frightened and immediately stopped playing (Figure 3). Panksepp then removed the cat hair from the cage to see if the rats would return to their previous level of playfulness. Much to his surprise, the rats never returned to their previous level of play activity even after the “threat” (the cat hair) was removed (Figure 4). Sadly, it was concluded that exposure to severe threat, at a vulnerable young age, forever changed the development and behavior of these playful little mammals.
Obviously, human beings are not the same as rats. Although our autonomic responses to threat are actually quite similar to those of other mammals (including rats), our brains are far more evolved. We can think more complexly, feel more deeply, express a wider range of emotions, and have the potential to employ far more coping behaviors. In children, overwhelming fear can cause them to withdraw from once joyful activities, like playing (It’s difficult to pay attention to the toy blocks if your focus needs to be on basic survival.) Overwhelming fear can also cause difficulties forming trusting relationships, as well as induce feelings of powerlessness and despair.

**Playfulness - the single most important trait of childhood**

We often ask professionals who dedicate their lives to helping the most wounded and vulnerable of our nation’s children one simple question - “If you had the power to nurture just one trait in a child that would best help that child overcome any and all adversity that they face in their lifetime, what would that trait be?” In other words, what trait best helps a child develop resiliency? We have had the honor of asking this question to thousands of outstanding teachers, social workers, coaches, psychologists, psychiatrists, parents, and others, and have heard some great answers - answers like trust, confidence, self-esteem, discipline, and creativity to name a few.

One answer that we almost never hear, and the one that we believe to be most important to children, is the trait of playfulness. **Playfulness is the motivation to freely and joyfully engage with, connect with, and explore the surrounding world.** What could be more important than that? Playfulness is an approach to life – an attitude. It is a spirit with which one can approach every (and we mean every) aspect of life – the good, the bad, and the ugly.
Play v. Playfulness

When most people think of play, they usually think of it in terms of a type of activity – let’s say playing baseball, swinging on a swing, and/or making sand castles in a sandbox. However, our belief is that an activity alone can’t be considered play unless it is engaged playfully (Figure 5 is a pretty good example).

I would suggest that on any given Saturday afternoon, at ball fields across America, there are lots of children who are “playing” baseball without any sense of joy, passion, connection, or empowerment. For those children, “working” baseball would be a far more accurate description of their activity.

On the other end of the spectrum, activities that we generally think of as work - such as doing math homework, raking leaves, cooking dinner, and/or cleaning one’s bedroom - can be better described as “play” if they are approached in a playful manner. According to British historian Arnold Toynbee, “The supreme
accomplishment is to blur the line between work and play.” At Life is good Playmakers, we couldn't agree more.

**Barriers to Playfulness**

For children who have been deeply impacted by trauma, engaging the world playfully is difficult. As Panksepp’s research with rat pups suggests, it is likely that exposure to overwhelming threat during a child’s formative years can alter their potentially “playful brain” – one that is open to exploration and connection – and turn it into more of a “surviving brain” that is forced to primarily focus on avoiding threat (See Figure 6).

![Figure 6](image)

In other words, when basic survival is a child’s primary goal, it is impossible for them to engage the world playfully. What does it take for a child to engage the world playfully? It takes the cultivation of vital social, emotional, and cognitive traits such as confidence, trust, joy, creativity, passion, and love. We believe that this collection of internal traits, as well as others, can be simply organized into four domains of playfulness.
The Domains of Playfulness

Life is good Playmakers has classified the four domains of playfulness as Joyfulness, Social Connection, Internal Control, and Active Engagement. In order for a child to reach their full potential of playfulness, they must excel in each of these four vital areas (See Figure 7).

Joyfulness

Joyfulness is defined as the child’s sense of love, fulfillment, and hope that is expressed with displays of pleasure and exuberance. It differs from happiness in that it is more stable and far less influenced by external factors. For example, as a die-hard Red Sox fan, I can’t say that I am happy when they lose. However, my joyfulness allows me to still love the team and remain hopeful and optimistic about what tomorrow’s game may bring. Joy is not the absence of sadness. It is the spirit of love and hope that remains deep inside you that gives you the strength and courage to persevere despite the sadness. I am reminded of one of my favorite jokes in which a
seven-year-old boy is joyfully singing and dancing in the outfield during a Little League baseball game. His dad arrives at the game a little late, sees his son having the time of his life and proceeds to ask him the score. Overjoyed, the little boy shouts that the score is 27 to nothing! Excited, the dad shouts back, “Wow! You guys are winning 27 to nothing?” The little boy replies, “Heck no dad, we’re losing 27 to nothing!” Surprised, the dad asks, “Then what are you so happy about?” To which the boys proudly replies, “We haven’t even been up yet!”

This joyful little boy could have responded in many different ways to his dad’s question. He could have said that he was happy to be playing baseball; happy to feel the warm sun on his face; happy to have a dad who cares enough to watch his baseball game, or a whole host of other little “blessings.” Joy is not dependant on the score but rather on our “love of the game.” It is our loving and hopeful spirit that gives us the strength to never to give up.

**Social Connection**

*Social Connection is defined as the child’s cooperative interactions with others and the surrounding world.* Dean Martin once sang, “You’re nobody ‘til somebody loves you,” and Barbara Streisand once sang, “People who need people are the luckiest people in the world.” Who knew that this once famous crooner and this still kind-of-famous diva were such experts on attachment? People – especially children – need adults to love and care for them. It’s as simple as that. It is this love and caring that enables children to develop secure attachments that ultimately give them the confidence to explore the world around them. This confidence is essential to helping children reach their playful potential.

Humans are herd animals. We travel in packs (called families / communities) and don’t do well in isolation. This does not mean that we don’t enjoy being alone at times. People – especially those who have the option of returning to loving networks of social
supports – also enjoy moments (even hours and days) of solitude. Yet the universal act of laughter gives us good reason to believe we need connection with others. It has been said that laughter has no foreign accent. Think about it. It’s true. All over the world, human beings “choose” to laugh (did you know that most laughter is not an involuntary response to humor but a conscious choice) in order to signal to other people that they are safe to connect with. Perhaps it’s true that the shortest distance between two people is a laugh.

**Internal Control**

*Internal Control is defined as the child’s sense of safety, worth, and competence that allows them to engage with the surrounding world.* All people, especially children, need to feel some level of safety and competence in order to effectively explore the world around them. After all, the world is a terrifying place for someone who views him or herself as powerless and incompetent. Children deserve to feel as if they are safe, special, and of great value. From this foundation of safety and competence, we develop a psychosocial “base camp” from where we can embark on life’s adventures and return to when these adventures prove too difficult or when we need to rest and “restock our supplies.” One of my favorite Internal Control stories is about a five-year-old girl who is drawing a picture in her art class. The teacher, seeing her hard at work, asks her what she is drawing. The little girls inform her that she is drawing a picture of God. Surprised, the teacher says to the little girl, “But nobody knows what God looks like.” To which the little girl replies firmly, “They will when I’m done!” It is this kind of confidence and healthy “self-centeredness” that allow for us to continue to go out into the world and explore despite all of our vulnerabilities.

**Active Engagement**

*Active engagement is defined as the child’s enthusiastic and complete immersion in an activity.* In other words, Active Engagement is not only about being completely in the moment, but really enjoying that moment too. Children who have experienced severe trauma have difficulty being in the moment. They are often so
preoccupied by their past experiences and so anxious about what they can expect (or not expect) in the future, that as a result, traumatized children often find it exceedingly difficult to be present. Without the ability to be in the moment, healing can’t occur. Experiences of safety, joy, wonder, and love can only be felt in the moment. Even when we reflect on past joys, it is the moment of reflection, not the past experience, where joy is felt. With this in mind, we need to create environments where children can experience moments of wonder, passion, imagination, and joy—moments that are powerful enough to help soothe past fears and sorrows, and prepare a space in which joy can take root.

**Action Steps**

Now it’s time to put all this theory into action! One thing to keep in mind is that the best way to bring joy and playfulness to your children is to have it yourself! You need to be a living example of joy, love, creativity, and peace in order to nurture these same qualities in your children. With this in mind, we strongly encourage you to actively and playfully participate in the following activities with your children. This way, *all of you* can lead healthier, more joyful lives. And just as important as actively playing is being aware of your own playfulness and opportunities to engage the world and others playfully.

Breathe deeply, smile, and enjoy…
Let the games begin...

**WELCOME WAVES**

Very simply, the children lie on their bellies in a circle. The facilitator guides the children to look around the circle at all of their friends. Once everybody has made eye contact, the facilitator guides the children to wave at each other and share greetings (i.e. “Good Morning Shandra,” “Hello Albert,” “Hi Keshau,” “Goodnight Ms. Joyce”).

One fun variation, after the group has had ample time to welcome each other, is to have the group make different faces at each other (i.e. lemon taste face, silly face, fishy face, lion roar face, monkey face, etc.).

Another variation of the game is to ask the children to name things that they notice about their friends. For example, “Julie is smiling,” “Jaheem has glasses on,” “Sheila is making silly faces,” “We all have a nose and a mouth,” etc.

**HOT, HOT HANDS (Rubbing, Rubbing, Rubbing, Warm)**

Sitting in a circle the facilitator asks the group if they are ready to get warmed-up! He or she guides the children to quickly rub the palms of their hands together. The faster they rub, the warmer their hands will become (rub, rub…rub-rub…rub-rub… waaarrmm). You can tell the children that the warmth that they feel in their hands is happy energy or love, which they can share with other parts of their body through touch. Guide them to use their hot hands on different parts of their body to help them warm-up and get ready to play together.

**NAMEBALL**

Children sit pretzel-legs in a circle. The facilitator introduces the name ball to the group (any soft ball will do) and passes it around the circle. When each child has the name ball in their possession, they are asked to say their name anyway they would like (for example, if they are feeling happy, they may choose to say their name in an upbeat and happy way, if they are feeling shy they may choose to say their name quietly, if they are tired they may choose to say their name with a big yawn, if they are feeling strong they may choose to shout out their name…etc.). Once the child says their name, the rest of the group echoes back that child’s name just as he or she originally said it. If a child chooses not to say their name, the adult can ask if that child would like for the group to help them say their name. If the child still declines, the facilitator should thank the child for telling the group what they want and let the child know how happy they are that the child is part of the group.
NEWSBALL

In this game, the children sit in a circle and use the Newsball (any soft ball will do) to tell news about themselves with the group. Everyone in the group will “share” news, even if they do not tell news, simply because they’re in the circle. Everyone shares news either by telling or listening! The news may be about something they did, something they like, something that happened to them, a favorite TV show or movie, what they had for breakfast, anything! It’s also important to specifically say that their news can be any kind of news (and give some examples of kinds of news: happy news, sad news, good news, difficult news, serious, silly, funny news, etc.)) Really, ANY kind of news! When a child is holding the ball, they can first say how they would like the group to respond to their news, and then they can share their news. Some children may want to get a standing ovation after their news, others might like a silent appreciation as the group puts their hand to their heart, and still other children may want to make up their own unique response. The rest of the group listens to the news and responds as the “teller” asked, and then raise their hand or ask for the ball when they would like a turn to tell news.

BODY SHAKES

Standing around the circle, you can talk about the energy that we all have in our bodies that sometimes gets stuck. Children are each asked which part of their bodies they would like to shake and wake, in order to release that energy and get it moving. If a child suggests hands, the whole group shakes their hands while chanting, "hands shake, hands shake, hands shake, STOP!" If the next child suggests shoulders, the whole groups shakes their shoulders while chanting, "shoulder shakes, shoulder shakes, shoulder shakes, STOP!" The game continues until each child has had a turn to suggest a type of "body shake." After each turn, we thank each child for his or her great suggestion.

SHAKE IT UP

The children stand in a circle holding onto the handles of the parachute. The adult either invites the children to begin shaking the parachute or asks for their ideas about what they could do with the parachute, and the children decide to shake it. While they are shaking, the adults leads in chanting, "shake-shake, shake-shake, shake-shake, stoooomooop (a hand motion accompanies the stop command)" Adults and children can explore their creativity by thinking of all kinds of different shakes to do, making sure every child who wants to pick/make up a shake gets a turn. If a new shake gets invented, just ask the inventor to demonstrate it, so everyone else can do it too!

THE COOL BREEZE BLOWS 1.0

Chairs are arranged in a circle with one chair for each child and the adult(s). The adult starts the game by saying, “The cool breeze blows for everyone who…” and then completes the sentence by saying something that some of the children may have in common. For example,
the adult might say, “The cool breeze blows for everyone who loves ice cream” or “The cool breeze blows for anyone wearing a red shirt” or “The cool breeze blows for anyone who has a baby sister,” etc. Anyone seated in the circle for which the statement rings true, simply has to get up and move to a different seat in the circle (switching seats with other children with whom they have something in common). If only one child gets up, leaving them unable to switch seats with someone else, they can simply take a bow and sit back down in their original seat. It is important to give children permission to choose how much they want to share with the group. All children can elect to stay seated even if “the cool breeze blows for them.” When the adult has offered enough “cool breeze blows for…” questions for the children to be engaged and understand the game, you can then ask children for ideas. They can simply volunteer for a turn, and when you pick them, they say what the “cool breeze blows for” to start the round.

**Example questions**
The cool breeze blows for anyone who:
- Has a brother or sister
- Has a pet at home
- Likes to play outside
- Likes to dance
- Likes to draw pictures
- Likes to use their imagination
- Likes to eat pizza
- Likes to read stories

**A fun variation of the Cool Breeze Blows (Version 1.5):** Add a type of movement each time you say a “Cool Breeze Blows statement.” Or, instead of saying “The cool breeze blows for anyone who…” you can start the game by saying “The big bunny hops for anyone who…” and that lets everyone know to move to a new seat by hopping. You can make up a new phrase for lots of different movements – hopping, skipping, galloping, shuffling, crawling, slithering and many more!

**FLOWER AND BUBBLE WAND BREATHING**

Children are invited to pick an imaginary flower from the ground and hold it on one hand. They are also asked to pick up a bubble wand—that they might blow soap bubbles with—with their other hand. They are guided to smell the flower in their hand as they breathe in deeply through their noses and then blow out bubbles through the wand as they breathe out slowly and deeply through their mouths. Repeat this breath several times until the children’s breathing has slowed and their bodies are more relaxed.

(Another variation) **COOKIE & HOT COCOA BREATHING**

This time, children are asked to hold a freshly baked cookie in one hand, and a mug of hot cocoa in the other hand. As they breathe in, they “smell the cookie,” and while breathing out, blow on the hot cocoa to cool it down. Repeat this several more times until everyone’s breathing has slowed. And then you can pretend to eat the yummy cookie!!
**WARRIOR BREATHING**

Children are invited to place both of their hands in front of their faces, palms facing and as close as they can be, without actually touching palms together. They are guided to breath in deeply through their noses and then breath out deeply through their mouths. During the in breath children are instructed to spread their arms wide and during the out breath, children are instructed to gradually bring their hands close together but not touching.

**BALLOON BREATHING**

Children are asked to place both hands on top of their heads and as they breathe in, to raise their hands in the shape of a filled balloon above their heads. As they breathe out, they push their hands down toward their heads as if they are emptying the balloon. Repeat this movement and breath several times.

**BIRTHDAY CANDLE BREATHING**

Children are asked to hold out one hand with all five fingers extended and pretend each finger is a candle on a birthday cake. Then, children are invited to take a slow, deep breath in, so they can blow out one candle. When the candle is blown out, they put the finger down. Everyone breathes deeply and slowly in again, in order to blow out the next candle. Repeat these slow deep breaths until all the candles are out. This breathing exercise is fun to do together, and it also really helps the children keep their breathing slow and purposeful!
Interested in reading more about the publications specifically mentioned in the manual?


Other references that have helped educate us:


