



NURTURING QUEER & TRANSGENDER JOY

A Visual Diary for Positive Identity Development

THE ROLE OF JOY AND POSITIVE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN SCHOOLS

What if one of the most powerful ways to improve student outcomes is to cultivate joy?

Educators and school personnel play a crucial role in creating and nurturing environments where students actively experience joy and develop a strong and positive sense of who they are—these are essential for youth thriving, resilience, and healthy and successful outcomes. Schools can cultivate joy through:

- » inclusive curricula,
- » supportive relationships,
- » visible representation,
- » and intentionally affirming students' identities by helping them feel seen, valued, and safe.

All students want and deserve joy, and joy is especially critical for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) youth of color, who often navigate multiple and intersecting forms of oppression. As articulated in *The Telly Cycle*, “joy is an act of resistance” (Derricotte, 2009): joy is a transformative, affirming power in the face of systemic inequities. When LGBTQIA+ students of color encounter affirming spaces in school, it can counterbalance negative messages they may receive in different contexts. Cultivating joy can improve their sense of belonging, engagement, and overall well-being. When educators center joy, they recognize students' strengths and resilience. When students develop a positive sense of identity, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging. Joy and belonging are energizing and can increase students' motivation and stamina for tasks and long-term projects. We all want our students to thrive in several ways: academically, social-emotionally, physically, and holistically. Joy and positive identity development are foundational steps to success and thriving.

ACTIVITY: JOY BOARDS

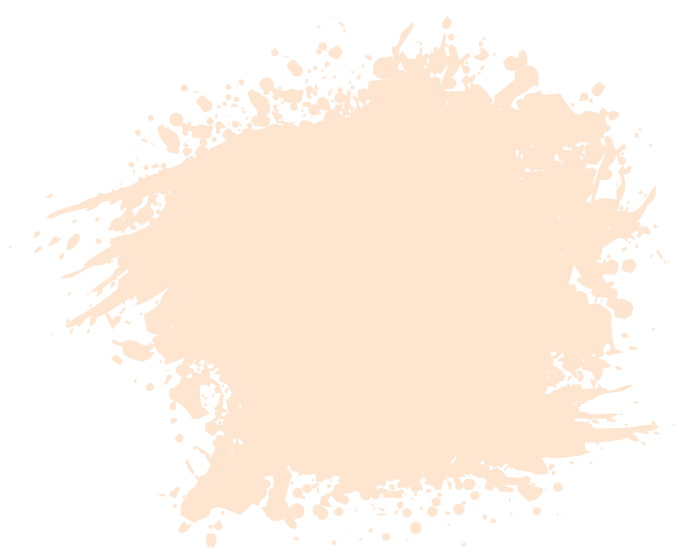
What and why? A joy board is a simple and creative activity that encourages students to reflect on experiences of joy and positive identity development in everyday lives. They will document their daily joys as a collage that continues to grow over time. This activity is grounded in the belief that even a seemingly small experience can go a long way in promoting joy and positive identity development (Flynn et al., 2025). Recognizing that everyone experiences joy and positive identity development uniquely, this joy board activity is designed to be adaptable across communities and contexts..

How?

1. Provide students with a [range of prompts \(pg 6\)](#) that invite them to consider what brings them joy, how they express their identities, and when they feel most seen, valued, and connected.
 - Students will reflect on their daily experiences of joy.
2. Students will use their creativity to represent what brings them joy more generally and in relation to their sexual, gender, racial, ethnic, and other intersecting social identities and cultures.

There are multiple ways to implement this joy board activity; choose the option that fits best with your context and your students' wellbeing:

- » **Individual or personal activity** (e.g., a student can do the joy board on their own at school or home or anywhere they feel safe to do so)—this will allow you to learn about individual students' experiences.
- » **Group activity** (e.g., a small group, during an affinity club meeting)—this fosters connection and more public showcasing of joy, and allows for understanding joy across the greater student body.



FOSTERING JOY LOOKS DIFFERENT FOR EACH STUDENT, CLASS, AND SCHOOL

As an educator, you know your setting best. Keep the following considerations in mind as you plan to facilitate this activity with your students.

BE EMOTIONALLY RESPONSIVE.

- » Joy is usually a pleasant emotion, but it can arrive with other, heavier emotions. Prepare to be responsive to a range of emotional experiences that students might have during this activity. For example, a student might remember an activity they enjoyed doing with an elder who is no longer alive. If the student feels comfortable, they can talk about what they are feeling, or take time out from the activity. It may be helpful to use a grounding technique, like the Five Senses technique, noticing and naming what emotions are coming up, doing a body scan, engaging in deep belly breathing, journaling, listening to music, etc. Students may return to the activity when they feel ready, or go on to a different activity.

CONSIDER THE DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE OF YOUR STUDENTS.

- » Younger students (e.g., middle school) may need the support of doing this exercise guided by a supportive adult, either individually or in a group. Older students (e.g., high school) may be able to do this activity alone, with written guidance.

CONSIDER YOUR SCHOOL'S SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND POLITICAL CONTEXT.

- » The goal is to facilitate this activity in a way that is safe, affirming, and sensitive to you, your students, and your school's social, cultural, and political context, laws, and policies, particularly when working with LGBTQIA+ students of color. Consider how factors such as safety, visibility, outness, and community norms may shape how students engage with this activity. Adapt your approach with sensitivity to how your students may be impacted.

This activity was designed to be adaptable to suit a variety of contexts, based on the considerations above. Examples include:

- » Facilitating this activity with a class, a club, or one individual student.
- » Giving students the opportunity to create their own Joy Board or collaborate on one shared Joy Board.
- » Providing a variety of prompts, including prompts that ask students to reflect on joy in their gender, sexual, and cultural identities, as well as prompts that ask students to reflect on their identities more holistically.
- » Providing options for how to assign the prompts. You may choose which prompts to assign, and some prompts may be beneficial to revisit at different times. Or you may allow students to respond to whatever prompts resonate with them.
- » Providing options for how students might share their joy boards. In settings that may be more hostile to LGBTQIA+ students of color, you may even choose not to have students share their Joy Boards, but instead keep them private like a journal. Or, you may opt to use the group version of the Joy Board if it might be safer to allow students to share anonymously.

JOY BOARD: INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY

MATERIALS

- » [Daily Diary Prompts \(Pg 6\)](#)
- » Poster board
- » Collage supplies (markers, glue, photos, magazines, paint, etc)

TIME

- » Students: 2-3 hours over the course of two weeks (can be homework and/or class time)
- » Faculty: 1 hour to review and reflect on student work

CONTEXT

- » Classroom setting
- » As part of a club or affinity group
- » Counselor or school psychologist might use this to support a particular student

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Introduce the activity.** Talk about the importance of reflecting on joy in school and in our personal lives. Explain the activity to students, letting them know that they will be spending two weeks making a collage of what brings them joy. Let students know whether their joy boards will be kept private (for themselves), shared with you, or shared with others in your class. ([Click here for an example of how to introduce the activity](#)).
2. **Students reflect on what brings them joy.** Assign [daily diary prompts \(pg 6\)](#) to students over the course of two weeks, either as classwork or homework. Students should spend up to 10 minutes a day responding to these prompts. Encourage students to start collecting materials that represent their diary responses. Materials are meant to be creative (e.g., photos, quotes/lyrics, magazine clippings, memes, drawings, notes or cards from friends/family, etc.).

Resource: You can use this [Daily Diary Google Doc Template](#) with students.

3. **Students create their joy boards.** At the end of the two-week period, students will review their diary responses and the materials that they've collected and create a collage that represents the joy that they have for themselves and their identities. This can be done as homework or during school time.
4. **(Optional) Showcase the joy boards.** You may have students give presentations to the class/club, share a little about their boards in small groups, do a gallery walk, etc.
5. **Discuss what you've learned.** Facilitate a discussion about what students learned about themselves (or their peers, if they viewed each other's joy boards) and the importance of joy in their lives. Consider asking:
 - » What did you notice about the experiences that brought you (or others) joy?
 - » What do you think your joy board says about who you are?
 - » Do you notice any difference in yourself when you make time to reflect on joy in this way?
 - » How does joy help you?

FACULTY REFLECTION

Review & reflect: Your students' joy boards can give you insights for supporting their mental wellbeing. Remember to review with **curiosity**; you are **not evaluating** student performance.

- » Examine the boards individually.
 - *In what ways (or to what extent) do you see examples of students feeling accepted, like they belong, and like they can express themselves authentically?*
 - *What can you do to support each individual's joy?*
- » Consider groups of students—are there any trends for students who share certain identities? Consider such factors as race, sex and/or gender identity, sexuality, socio-economic status, high performing or low performing students, etc.
 - *What can you learn about how identity might influence experiences of joy?*
 - *Are there differences between groups in their experiences of acceptance, belonging, and self-expression?*
 - *How can you use that information to increase joyful experiences for these students?*

Be an agent of change: Now that you have reflected on what joy means and looks like for your students, particularly groups of students who share certain identities, consider how you'd like to promote joy at the interpersonal, structural, and institutional levels in your school. *Remember, even a small gesture can go a long way.*

EXAMPLES OF PROMOTING JOY AT THE INTERPERSONAL LEVEL:

- » Use students' preferred pronouns.
- » Display objects that affirm students' identities (e.g., pride flag, rainbow pin, poster for cultural holidays, multi-language signages).
- » Support affinity and identity-based student groups (e.g., Gay-straight alliance (GSA)).
- » Create a safe and inclusive space for students to share their joy boards with their peers, to the extent they feel comfortable.
- » Your ideas:

EXAMPLES OF PROMOTING JOY AT THE STRUCTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL:

- » Advocate for building gender-neutral bathrooms.
- » Use gender inclusive language for school forms; e.g., changing "mom & dad" to "parents/gaurdians").
- » Your ideas:

EXAMPLE: HOW TO INTRODUCE THIS ACTIVITY

Today, I want to invite us to think about joy, which is one of the most powerful ways to foster our well-being. There is a saying that “joy is an act of resistance”—being mindful about joy can help to protect yourself from getting dragged down by all the challenges that we face in life. To help us stay focused on joy, we’ll spend the next couple of weeks reflecting on joy and making a “joy board” collage. We’ll do some daily writing about joy to help us get focused and inspired. We’ll use that inspiration to start collecting items that remind us of joy—these might be photos, quotes/lyrics, magazine clippings, memes, drawings, notes or cards from friends/family, etc. Then we’ll use those items to create collages that show what joy looks like for each of us. At the end of this activity, we’ll do a gallery walk to view everyone’s joy boards, and we’ll talk about what we learned about joy for ourselves and others.

DAILY DIARY PROMPTS:

Provide the prompts below to inspire students as they reflect on what brought them joy that day. You might provide a new prompt every day, revisit prompts that you had previously assigned, or offer several prompts at once and allow students to choose one or multiple to respond to. You do not need to assign—nor do students need to respond to—every prompt listed below. If helpful, students can use this [Daily Diary Google Doc Template](#) for the list of prompts and space to write their responses.

- » How do all the parts of who you are come together in your life? Describe a moment when you felt authentically recognized.
- » Write a letter to your younger self about identity, growth, and joy. What would you want them to know?
- » Write a letter to your future self about identity, growth, and joy. How would you like to express yourself?
- » Write about a person, or community that affirms your identity. How do they support your growth and happiness?
- » Write about a challenge you’ve faced related to your identity. How do you define yourself beyond those limitations?
- » Describe a time when you felt completely and truly accepted. What made that moment special? Who or what contributed to that moment?
- » List songs or artists that make you feel empowered or joyful. Why do they resonate with you?
- » Describe your ideal day filled with joy and peace. What are you doing, and who are you with?
- » What is one thing, big or small, that made you proud of who you are today?
- » What made you smile today?
- » What is an accomplishment, big or small, that you’d like to celebrate today?
- » Who or what are you thankful for today?
- » What were your “highs” or positives/highlights about being who you are today?

JOY BOARD: GROUP ACTIVITY

MATERIALS

- » [Daily Diary Prompts \(Pg 6\)](#)
- » Submission box with a lock
- » [Submission forms \(Pg 9\)](#)
- » Bulletin board or large sheet of poster paper
- » Stapler or tape

TIME

- » Set up: 30 minutes
- » Maintenance: up to 1 hour per week

CONTEXT

- » Classroom setting
- » As part of a club or affinity group
- » Hallway bulletin board

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Prepare.** Set up the joy board, which may be a bulletin board in your classroom or in the hallway of your school. Include some kind of locked box in which students can anonymously submit their daily joys. You might find a way to secure the box on or near the joy board, or you might keep the box in your classroom (and ask other teachers to do the same). Print copies of the [submission forms \(Pg 9\)](#) and leave them next to the submission box.
2. **Introduce the joy board.** Talk about the importance of reflecting on joy in school and in our personal lives. Explain that the purpose of the joy board is for students and faculty to anonymously share their daily joys with each other—this board will allow the school community to reflect on the joy that you all experience. Tell students that they will submit their joys by filling out a [submission sheet](#) and placing it in the submission box; then, submission sheets will be reviewed by faculty for appropriateness before being posted on the joy board for others to see.
3. **Review submissions.** Choose a day and a time that you can review submissions on a consistent basis. Consider having other faculty join you in this process. If submissions appropriately respond to the prompt(s) and do not use harmful language, cut along the line on the submission form and post the response on the joy board.
4. **Collectively review the joy board and discuss.** Take time as a class to review the joy board. Have a discussion about their observations and what faculty can do to promote more joyful experiences in school. Consider asking:
 - » What did you notice about the things that bring people joy?
 - » What do you think the joy board says about our school community?
 - » What can school faculty learn from these submissions? What do you think we can do to promote students' joy?

FACULTY REFLECTION

Review and Reflect: This joy board can provide insights for supporting your school community's wellbeing. Remember to review with **curiosity**; you are **not evaluating** the quality of the submissions. If this is a school-wide board, meet with other faculty to discuss and share insights. In your reflection, consider:

- » *In what ways (or to what extent) do you see examples of students feeling accepted, like they belong, and like they can express themselves authentically?*
- » *Do you think these submissions represent experiences from a majority of your student population? Is it possible that some voices or experiences are missing? Why or why not?*
- » *How are submissions from students different from the submissions from faculty? How are they the same?*
- » *How (or to what extent) are students' examples of joy connected to faculty's examples of joy?*
- » *What can faculty do to support students' joy?*

Be an agent of change: Now that you have reflected on what joy means and looks like for your students, consider how you'd like to promote joy at the interpersonal, structural, and institutional levels in your school. Remember, even a small gesture can go a long way.

EXAMPLES OF PROMOTING JOY AT THE INTERPERSONAL LEVEL:

- » Welcoming and complimenting students as they walk into your classroom.
- » Display objects that affirm students' identities (e.g., pride flag, multi-language signages, popular memes and cultural references).
- » Your ideas:

EXAMPLES OF PROMOTING JOY AT THE STRUCTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL:

- » Show students that their voice matters; give them opportunities to contribute to decision making that impacts their experiences in school and incorporate their feedback.
- » Create a list of local BIPOC and LGBTQ+ groups that could provide you and your students with useful resources and opportunities to connect joy with social action.
- » Your ideas:

SUBMISSION SHEET

Use the space below the line to share your response to one of the following prompts:

- » Describe a moment when you felt authentically recognized.
- » Write a letter to your younger or future self about identity, growth, and joy. What would you want them to know?
- » Who affirms your identity? How do they support your growth and happiness?
- » Write about a challenge you've faced related to your identity. How do you define yourself beyond those limitations?
- » Describe a time when you felt completely authentic and accepted. What made that moment special? Who or what contributed to that moment?
- » What songs/artists make you feel empowered or joyful? Why do they resonate with you?
- » Describe your ideal day filled with joy and peace. What are you doing and who are you with?
- » What is one thing, big or small, that makes you proud of who you are today?
- » What made you smile today?
- » What is an accomplishment, big or small, that you'd like to celebrate today?
- » Who or what are you thankful for today?
- » What were your highlights about being who you are today?

Date: _____

Are you a: ☐ student ☐ faculty member

WHAT BRINGS YOU JOY?

JOY BOARD EXAMPLES:



ATtribution

This product was developed by Jill Davidson, PhD, NCSP (Retired School Psychologist), Colleen Eakins (Graphic Designer at Colleen Eakins Design), Diane Hsieh, Ph.D. (Applied Researcher), Ethan H. Mereish, Ph.D. (Associate Professor at the University of Maryland, College Park), Heather Poparad, M.Ed. (Positive Youth Development Professional), and Janayah Williams. Isabel Lopez, Ph.D provided support.

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