

# building self awareness: valuing ourselves and our roles as models in children's lives

by Janet Humphryes and Stone Wolfson

Janet Humphryes, M.A., is currently the Child Development Specialist for Head Start Region VIII and president of a parent coaching organization devoted to increasing parent knowledge of child development. For 30+ years, Janet has worked with children ages 0-12, owned, opened, and directed early education schools of 15-700 children, taught at community colleges, and effected change in Denver's culture of poverty.



Think about the most recent day you spent with the children in your setting. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being a GREAT day, how would you rate it? Now think back to when you walked into that environment that day. On the same scale, how would you rate your well-being? Are the two ratings similar?

What we bring into the environments we work in sets the tone in a most powerful way.

*The outer world is like a mirror reflecting back whatever you give from within.*

*Give love, and the world loves you back.*

*Give peace, and the world becomes more peaceful.*

*Give light, and the world will be a little brighter.*

— Unknown

Did you bring love, peace, and light into your environment that day? Perhaps these qualities are missing in your life, which makes it then nearly impossible to bring them into the lives of others. The messages you hear working in the field of early childhood are not always messages of love, peace, and light — from society, from stressed parents or administrators, from disconnected children, and too often from our own selves. These messages weigh us down, burden us, strip us of the joy life has to offer — and, through us, they do the same to the children we spend our days with.

“The condition of our consciousness registers directly into the child's consciousness and it is accordingly translated into well-being or distress.”

— Polly Berends

Dealing with children's challenging behaviors has become the most requested topic for ongoing early childhood professional development in the nation today. Children's mental health is indeed a concern,

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as needs to be the mental health of all those adults who set the tone in these children's environments. Did you know that there is a direct correlation between your mental health and the mental health of the children? Of course you do; you've heard this before. Did you know that taking care of yourself is a sign that you *value you*? And, when you demonstrate that you *value you*, the children learn to value themselves as well.

There is an unspoken myth in the field of early care and education: the people in the field are needed to nurture children and keep on giving without needing anything in return — ever. Such a myth has contributed to the burnout of so many potentials! The airline message of “parents putting on their own oxygen mask before assisting their child with theirs” sheds wisdom on life itself. If we do not refuel, renew, take care of ourselves, we cannot be expected to do anything but hinder the lives of the children entrusted to our care, and perhaps even burden them with our own personal challenges. We want to have positive relationships with children, and thus we need to nurture that positive relationship with ourselves first. So let's take a look at how we can enhance such a relationship. The following exercises are offered to increase your awareness, ability, responsiveness, and aliveness. Just as athletes exercise for top form, so must those engaged in working with children exercise to become complete and joyful beings.

## Physical and emotional nutrition

Regular and nutritional meals, 8 to 12 glasses of water (64 - 96 oz.), a bit of exercise, sufficient rest (breaks) and sleep, relaxation and enjoyment, and time with significant others, are the basics of a daily healthy lifestyle. If any of these are missing from your life, make a commitment to add one per month,

Stone Wolfson, M.A., manages the Kona Autism Program for The Institute for Family Enrichment in Kealahou, Hawaii. Previously she was the coordinator of Early Childhood Education, faculty, Director, and lead instructor in the child-development center at Red Rocks Community College. She also taught young children ages 2-8 in public and private schools.



e.g., every Saturday during the next month, plan a nutritional dinner menu for the week and shop for what you need; make a daily mental note of how many glasses of water you drink and take a few more sips each day; look at the television listings to find out what time a yoga show is on and engage in it; observe what you typically do to relax and enjoy life, note how much time you devote to it, and add a few more minutes each day; and so on. Loving, caring, and attending to yourself in your everyday life is the first step toward self-awareness and valuing yourself.

### Breathe

Breathe. Breathe deeply. As you inhale, air is drawn in through your nose, warmed, humidified, cleansed (a bit) and vital oxygen is delivered through your lungs and blood to all parts of your body. Exhale, and waste products and toxins are released from the body. Oxygen is essential for optimal functioning of the brain, nerves, glands, and internal organs. The brain requires more oxygen than any other organ; without an ample supply, thinking becomes sluggish, and negative thoughts, depression, and irritation increase. Oxygen purifies the bloodstream, benefiting every part of your body and mind. Practicing *deep* breathing in the morning creates an increased breathing capacity all day. The benefits include relaxation of the mind and body, weight control, healthier lungs, rejuvenation of the glands and the skin, better digestion, and improved health of the nervous system.

### Connect with nature

Have you ever been awed by the grandeur of a mountain, a magnificent redwood, or the pound of ocean surf? Have you ever pulled your car to the side of the road to admire a rainbow? The enchantment of these moments is our connection to nature's intelligence. Reconnecting with nature connects, renews, and fulfills us, helping us feel rejuvenated, appreciative, and more peaceful. Put the magazine down and take the next five minutes to go for a walk around the outside of your home or office, or watch the clouds go by. . . . How did it feel?

### Journaling

Keeping a personal journal is another effective way to build self-awareness and self-value. Journaling gives you insight into how and why you think and behave. It

helps you understand the emotions that are influencing your actions, and helps you ponder and respond more effectively to challenges. Journaling involves simply putting pen to paper and writing whatever comes out without correcting, analyzing or critiquing. Practice makes it easier. It could involve lists, responses to quotes, special events pages, current events, genealogy pages, travel diaries, dreams, tender moments with children or lovers, important issues you are facing, affirmations, and religious or spiritual explorations. Some write letters they will never send. A favorite could be a Joy Log, in which things that make you smile and feel alive are entered. The journal can be used to record your blessings and activities that bring you joy, thrill, and passion. It can also be used to record your accomplishments — the things you are proud of — which often go unnoticed. The peace of mind that comes from journaling allows you to connect more fully to yourself and to those around you. Take a moment and write down a few of your thoughts about this article thus far.

### Play

Play has many benefits for adults. Adults who play live longer, are healthier, have better memories, are smarter and, most importantly, happier (Sutton-Smith, 1998). Adult play can take many forms — some of us play in ways that test our physical skills: we climb rocks, bicycle, hike mountains, swim, canoe, or engage in sports. Others enjoy strategy games like chess, and others like word games and puzzles. Some of us get together with friends for Bunco games, tailgate parties, movie nights, book club discussions, or pondering the mysteries of life. Some of us play quietly, joyfully collecting stamps or memorabilia, writing, sketching, photography, learning.

“How we play is related, in myriad ways, to our core sense of self. Play is an exercise in self-definition; it reveals what we choose to do, not what we have to do. We not only play because we are; we play the way we are. And the ways we could be. Play is our free connection to pure possibility. It is a day on the beach.”

— Brian Sutton-Smith

Play is not trivial. The ability to play benefits our individual lives, and it benefits our families, our co-workers, and especially the lives of the children we care for because it reconnects us to the excitement of life. Play also helps connect us

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Play also helps connect us to each other.

to each other. Do you play? Describe your play. Do you play enough?

### HeartMath®

Studies from The Institute of HeartMath® ([www.heartmath.org](http://www.heartmath.org)) have shown that when the heart and the mind are coherent, that is, working harmoniously together, we perform better, experience less stress, are more emotionally stable, enjoy greater health, and feel, generally, more positive and connected. HeartMath® provides the tools to bring our hearts and minds into coherence. One of these tools is appreciation. We all know how to use this tool and yet rarely choose to. Take a moment right now and think of something you appreciate: the sun's warmth, your health, the challenging child who brings you the opportunity to learn more about yourself, the red light that offers the occasion to admire the sky's beauty, etc. Ask children what they appreciate, write all they say on an accumulative list each week, and send the list home with a different child each week to encourage families to do the same. End each day as you lay down in bed, appreciating something about yourself, bringing your awareness to how truly wonderful you are.

### Brain Gyms®

Brain Gyms® are from the field of Educational Kinesiology, a practical and dynamic system that uses simple body movement to integrate the functions of the brain. They are the creation of Dr. Paul Dennison and his wife Gail, after 20 years of research in the fields of education, health, and personal growth. They were originally developed to correct learning disabilities and now are used internationally by people who

wish to create definite positive change in their lives. Brain Gyms® are a series of quick, fun, and energizing activities that are effective in preparing any learner, of any age, for specific thinking and coordination skills. They can also be used to help calm emotions. Beginning every day with a routine of Brain Gyms®, and doing them when stressed, promotes focused and productive classrooms where children and adults enjoy learning.

For more information on Brain Gyms®, go to [www.braingym.com](http://www.braingym.com)



### Creative expression

Creativity is a reflection of the joy of life expressing itself through you. It can be expressed through art or any other form: a beautiful classroom, a dance, a poem, a story, a clay pot, a garden, a song, a painting, woodworking, a table setting, a newsletter, responding in creative ways to children, or in the creative choices offered to children. Creative expression leads to self-awareness in the instances when you let go of concerns about your capability, and enter into the moment when thoughts stop, judgment ceases, and your essence flows. In this process of letting your inner self flow through, you become more aware of yourself, and your processes, which bring more under-

standing, creativity, and flexibility. Every being possesses the ability to be creative, and we can add creativity to anything and everything we do. Even what some consider mundane tasks can be enlivened through creative expression, such as in this photograph of flower petals left on a bedspread by a housekeeping staff member in México — an exquisite gift of joy!

“It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look. To affect the quality of the day — that is the highest of arts.”

— Henry David Thoreau

Think for a moment how you could creatively affect the quality of your day.

### Love and joy

Love and joy attract love and joy. Everything around you reflects back to you the nature of your energy and thoughts. Connect to the love and joy that is within you, no matter what your circumstances, and you will gift children with the knowledge of the love and joy within them.

“Find something to be happy about every day, and every hour, even if only for a few minutes, and if possible moment-to-moment. This is the easiest and best protection you can have.”

— Gregg Braden

Being in a state of love and joy, allowing love and joy to permeate every cell in your body, enlivens and heals quite miraculously. Love and joy are indeed the fountain of youth! What do you most love to do? What brings joy to your soul? **GO DO IT NOW!**

“Go out into the world today and love the people you meet. Let your presence light new light in the hearts of people.”

— Mother Teresa

### Unique paths to awareness

You may have found a path to awareness that works best for you: music, meditation, playing an instrument, dance or other types of creative movement, painting,

designing beautiful environments for children, inspiring others, etc. There are many unique paths to awareness. Find yours and open yourself to a world of wonder — the wonder within you!

“No matter how brilliant our attempts to inform, it is our ability to inspire that will turn the tides.”

— Jan Phillips from *Marry Your Muse*

### In summary

Knowing how we are feeling at any given moment, and why we are behaving as we are is the goal of self-awareness. Without that awareness, change becomes impossible. Self-awareness gives us the freedom and the opportunity to change our lives and behaviors consciously and actively. Without self-awareness, our challenges rule our days and relationships. In our lack of awareness, we may not believe that we have any challenges; we see them only in other people, including children. On the other hand, we may perceive that only we have such inadequacies, believing that everyone else is better and more capable than we are.

Lack of self-awareness, thus, inhibits our connection to others. Our inability to see ourselves clearly fogs our ability to see others authentically. This leads to enormous feelings of disconnection, an illusion though it is. There is no doubt that we live in an interconnected universe. Every thought changes everything around us, and reflects our self back to us. When we live in the illusion that we are disconnected, when we are not aware of our own feelings and reasons for acting as we do, we are blind to the effects of our thoughts and actions on the people and children around us. We do not accept responsibility for our role in what we create.

Self-awareness is the realization that we are responsible for how we feel and act, and for the models we set for others. Self-awareness also brings the realization that change is possible, and that choices abound — including the choice to be joyful. Personal joy emanates from our hearts outward. It transforms the energy in our environment and relationships. It moves our world one step closer to peace and harmony. Self-awareness is the ultimate act of responsibility. It is the gate to change. It is the door to connection. It is the home of joy.

End each day  
as you lay down  
in bed,  
appreciating  
something  
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# Beginnings Workshop

Our inability to see ourselves clearly fogs our ability to see others authentically.

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? Your playing small doesn't serve the world. As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fears, our presence automatically liberates others.”  
— Marianne Williamson, 1992, “A Return to Love”

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[www.joy-fullconnections](http://www.joy-fullconnections)

Using Beginnings Workshop  
to Promote Professionalism  
by Kay Albrecht

**The connection:** The connection between our mental health and the mental health of the children we teach is a strong one. Work with teachers to identify ways to value themselves in tangible ways that lead to increased positive mental health.

**Just do it!** There is at least one idea in each section of this article that is just perfect to try out. So, start at the beginning and just do it. Then, figure out ways to help your teachers do the same. Be a good model first, then see what happens.

**Be the solution:** Support teachers in including nutritional meals and snacks; plenty of water; a bit of exercise; sufficient rest, relaxation, and enjoyment; and time with significant others any way you can. Be creative and figure out ways to walk with teachers as they get plenty of physical and emotional nutrition.