



# Joy Intelligence™ (JQ): A Neuroscience-Based Model for Early Emotional Development

## Introduction

Youth mental health has reached a crisis point in recent years. Surveys indicate that as of 2021 approximately 42% of U.S. high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (up sharply from a decade prior), with nearly 3 in 5 adolescent girls endorsing such persistent sadness<sup>[1]</sup>. These statistics underscore an urgent need for strategies that promote emotional well-being and resilience from an early age. Traditional approaches to social-emotional learning and mental health often focus on managing or treating negative outcomes (anxiety, depression, behavioral issues) after they arise. In contrast, emerging perspectives emphasize proactively creating **emotional safety** and fostering positive states as a foundation for healthy development. Research shows that chronic emotional insecurity or neglect in childhood – essentially, a lack of emotional safety – is a significant risk factor for later mental health problems such as depression and poor emotion regulation<sup>[2]</sup>. Conversely, children who grow up in environments that **prioritize emotional safety** are better able to engage with their experiences in the present moment (“be present”) and develop adaptive coping skills.

This white paper introduces **Joy Intelligence™ (JQ)** as a measurable, evidence-backed framework for early emotional development that builds on these insights. The core thesis of Joy Intelligence is that *emotional safety enables presence, and presence allows children to access and sustain joy as a neurobiological state – one that in turn builds lifelong emotional resilience*. In other words, joy is not simply a choice or fleeting emotion but a physiological state cultivated by supportive conditions. JQ provides a structured model (the **SPJ framework: Safety, Presence, Joy**) and practical tools for caregivers, educators, and practitioners to nurture these conditions in children. By aligning with established neuroscience, psychology, and behavioral health research, Joy Intelligence offers a proactive approach to developing emotional resilience, distinct from but complementary to traditional concepts like IQ (cognitive intelligence) and EQ (emotional intelligence). The following sections present an in-depth review of the scientific foundations of emotional safety and presence in child development, define the Joy Intelligence model and its stages, illustrate its application through case examples, and explore implementation strategies across education, sports, healthcare, and family settings.

## Emotional Safety and Presence: Prerequisites for Healthy Development

Decades of research in developmental neuroscience and psychology converge on a critical point: children learn, grow, and thrive only when they feel safe. **Emotional safety**

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refers to an underlying sense of security and freedom from excessive fear or toxic stress. It is well-established that when an individual (child or adult) feels unsafe or threatened,

the brain's survival systems take over – the amygdala (the brain's threat detector) becomes dominant, and higher-order cortical functions diminish<sup>[3]</sup>. In a child experiencing anxiety, trauma, or harsh criticism, this “alarm state” impairs the very capacities needed for learning and self-regulation. The child may appear distracted, disconnected, or reactive – in colloquial terms, “not fully here” in the present moment. In these states of low perceived safety, **presence** – defined as a calm, attentive engagement with the here-and-now – is virtually impossible to attain.

By contrast, when a child feels emotionally safe (supported, accepted, and not under threat), the brain can shift out of defensive mode and engage the prefrontal cortex and other regions responsible for reflection, impulse control, and social engagement.

**Neuroscience frameworks** such as Polyvagal Theory similarly describe how a sense of safety activates the “social engagement” nervous system (promoting communication and curiosity), whereas a sense of danger triggers fight/flight or shutdown responses, precluding open learning or joyful interaction. In essence, emotional safety is the foundation upon which presence is built. Without safety, a child's neurobiology is oriented toward survival, not growth. With safety, the child can be fully present and receptive. Studies in educational settings have shown that children who perceive their environment as safe and supportive exhibit improved attention and readiness to learn, whereas those in stressful, punitive environments often struggle behaviorally and academically. This aligns with extensive evidence that secure attachment and psychologically safe classrooms correlate with better cognitive and emotional outcomes in children<sup>[4]</sup>.

**Presence**, in the context of Joy Intelligence, means the ability to remain mentally and emotionally engaged in the moment with clarity and calm. It is related to concepts of mindfulness and self-regulation. Presence is not a static trait one either has or not, but rather a *practice and state* that can be cultivated. When strong emotions arise – whether disappointment after a lost game or frustration with a difficult homework assignment – presence allows a child to notice these feelings without becoming overwhelmed, and to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively. Achieving such presence requires a regulated nervous system. Here again, science offers insight: techniques that promote mindfulness and body awareness (such as controlled breathing exercises) have been shown to increase children's capacity to self-regulate. For example, even in high-stress contexts, practicing slow, deep breathing can activate the parasympathetic (“rest and digest”) response. Functional neuroimaging studies demonstrate that mindfulness practices can quiet amygdala reactivity while strengthening connectivity between the prefrontal cortex and limbic regions, effectively improving top-down emotional regulation. In practical terms, when a child learns simple presence-building skills – like pausing to take a few breaths when upset – they are training their brain to regain safety and focus, which over time enhances resilience.

It is important to emphasize that **presence is enabled by safety** but also, in a positive feedback loop, deepens emotional safety. A child who is fully present is better able to accurately read social cues, communicate needs, and experience supportive responses from others, thereby reinforcing their feeling of safety. This interplay lays the groundwork for the third pillar of the SPJ framework: **joy**. Presence creates an openness to positive experiences; it “clears the clouds” of distress or rumination so that moments



of connection, curiosity, and happiness can be fully felt. In short, emotional safety enables a state of present awareness, and that presence in turn makes sustainable positive emotion – joy – accessible.

## Defining Joy Intelligence™ (JQ) and the SPJ Framework

**Joy Intelligence™ (JQ)** is defined as the capacity to navigate one's emotions with awareness and intentionality in order to achieve and sustain a state of genuine joy. This framework was developed to complement existing notions of IQ and EQ by focusing explicitly on the processes that lead to an enduring positive emotional state, rather than on cognitive skills or general emotional competence alone. While *Emotional Intelligence (EQ)* typically involves recognizing and managing emotions (in oneself and others) to guide behavior<sup>[5]</sup>, Joy Intelligence centers on cultivating the *prerequisites* (safety and presence) that allow positive emotions like joy to flourish and become an integrated trait. In essence, JQ is about building the neurobiological capacity for joy and resilience, not as a fleeting mood but as a baseline approach to life's experiences.

At the heart of the JQ model is the **SPJ framework – Safety, Presence, Joy** – which describes a progression of conditions necessary for optimal emotional development<sup>[6]</sup>. The three pillars of SPJ are defined as follows:

- **Safety:** The foundational pillar, referring to the conditions that allow an individual's authentic self to emerge without fear. Emotional safety means a child feels secure, seen, and accepted – free to express feelings and needs without threat of shame or harm. This encompasses both external factors (a supportive, non-threatening environment created by adults and peers) and internal factors (the child's own sense of security or "felt safety"). Safety determines *how freely a child can explore and express themselves*. A high degree of felt safety has been linked to healthier attachment, greater exploratory behavior, and better stress regulation in children<sup>[7]</sup>. In JQ terms, safety is the non-negotiable foundation upon which presence and joy rest.
- **Presence:** The second pillar, defined as the ability to harness and direct one's mental and emotional energy with focus, intention, and openness in the present moment. Presence involves being grounded and fully engaged with current experience, rather than distracted, dissociated, or trapped in reactive loops. This pillar reflects skills of mindfulness and self-awareness – noticing one's feelings and thoughts as they occur, and maintaining cognitive control (via the prefrontal cortex) even when emotions run high. Presence also implies a **state of nervous system regulation**: enough calm energy is available to pay attention, and attention can be intentionally shifted or sustained. According to the JQ framework, presence is what allows a child to *integrate* emotional information rather than being controlled by it. For example, if a child becomes angry, presence might help them recognize "I am feeling anger because this situation seems unfair" instead of lashing out blindly. Presence is cultivated through practice – exercises in reflection, breathing, and attentional focus gradually build a child's capacity to stay present, even under stress.

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- **Joy:** The third pillar, conceptualized not just as a momentary feeling of happiness, but as a *resonant state of positive emotional energy characterized by meaning, connection, and vitality*. Joy in the JQ framework is described as the “resonance” of

an aligned mind and body state – an experience of uplift that deepens one's engagement with life. It is important to distinguish joy in this context from superficial cheerfulness or constant pleasure-seeking. Joy here is closer to what positive psychology identifies as **heartfelt positive emotion enriched with meaning** (akin to gratitude, love, inspiration). Neurobiologically, such states of joy are associated with balanced activation of brain reward circuits and social bonding systems – for instance, increased levels of neurotransmitters like dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin that promote feelings of connection and well-being. When a child experiences true joy, they typically feel safe and present; their body is not in fight-or-flight mode but in a state of openness and optimal arousal. Critically, experiencing joy regularly is thought to build *emotional resilience*. According to Barbara Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions like joy broaden a person's mindset and repertoire of responses, which over time builds enduring personal resources such as coping skills, social support, and even physical health[8]. In children, this means that repeated experiences of joy – particularly in the context of safety and presence – can reinforce neural pathways that support flexible thinking, empathy, and the ability to rebound from setbacks. Joy becomes not a lucky momentary spark, but a *trait-like capacity* to find purpose and positivity even amidst life's challenges.

In summary, Joy Intelligence posits that a child who is emotionally safe will be able to develop presence, and a child who is present can more readily access joy; sustained joy then feeds back into greater resilience and emotional growth. This model sets itself apart from IQ (which measures cognitive abilities) and from traditional EQ in that JQ explicitly targets *the cultivation of positive emotional states and traits* as a primary goal. Notably, high cognitive intelligence (IQ) does not guarantee emotional well-being – many bright children struggle with anxiety or depression. Emotional intelligence (EQ) skills like recognizing emotions or demonstrating empathy are certainly valuable and are supported by research showing higher EQ correlates with lower stress and better mental health[9]. Joy Intelligence builds on those insights but shifts the emphasis: rather than just managing or understanding emotions, JQ focuses on *transforming the emotional baseline* of the child's life towards joy.

It is also important to emphasize that Joy Intelligence is **measurable and teachable**. Just as IQ and EQ can be assessed (via standardized tests or behavioral measures), JQ can be operationalized by evaluating factors such as a child's sense of safety (e.g. through questionnaires on perceived support), their ability to self-regulate and stay present (through attention tasks or biofeedback of stress responses), and their frequency of joyful, prosocial emotional states (perhaps via observations or self-reports). The developers of JQ have created practical tools to aid in this process – notably the *Chair of JOY® experience* and the *JQ Emotions Map™* – which will be described later. Before that, we delve deeper into the structure of emotional development as envisioned by Joy Intelligence, namely the Four Stages of Emotional Presence™ that map out how a child moves from a survival state to an expanded joyful state.



## The Four Stages of Emotional Presence™

JQ delineates **Four Stages of Emotional Presence™** – a developmental and situational model that describes how an individual's emotional state can progress from dysregulation to full presence and joy. These four stages are: **Inactive, Awareness,**

**Reflection,** and **Expansion**. They represent an increasing capacity for safety, presence, and joy. The stages can be understood both as a moment-to-moment continuum (for example, helping a child move from a tantrum to a calm, engaged state) and as a broader developmental trajectory (children gradually spending more time in the higher stages as their emotional intelligence grows). Each stage corresponds to distinct patterns of brain activity, emotional experience, and behavior:

- **Stage 1: Inactive (Survival Mode).** This is the lowest level of emotional presence – a state dominated by stress, threat responses, or emotional shutdown. In this stage, the child's **safety and presence are minimal**. The term "Inactive" refers to the child's authentic self and higher reasoning being essentially offline; what is active are primal defense mechanisms. Classic fight-or-flight (and also freeze, or the less-known "fawn/feign" appeasing responses) define this stage. A child in Inactive stage may be in a full-blown fight/flight reaction (e.g., panic, rage, running away) or in a withdrawn, numb shutdown (freeze/collapse). Emotionally, this stage is characterized by feelings rooted in fear, pain, injustice, or extreme frustration – for example, terror, helplessness, or blind fury. Communication in this stage tends to be impaired or reactive; the child may lash out or be unable to articulate feelings at all. Cognitively, the prefrontal cortex (responsible for rational thinking and impulse control) is largely **offline**, as the amygdala and brainstem stress responses take charge. Importantly, **joy is virtually inaccessible** in this state. The child does not feel safe or present, so positive connection or learning cannot occur. From a clinical perspective, Stage 1 corresponds to high dysregulation – seen in scenarios ranging from acute tantrums and trauma responses to chronic states of hyper-vigilance in children who have experienced sustained adversity. The goal in such moments is to help the child *exit* this survival mode by introducing cues of safety and co-regulation (e.g., a calm adult presence, a soothing tone of voice, breathing together) so they can move up to Stage 2.
- **Stage 2: Awareness (Recognizing and Naming).** In the Awareness stage, the child has regained enough baseline safety and calm to **notice** what they are feeling and begin to name or identify it. Presence starts to increase – the child is at least partially "showing up" to their own experience rather than being on autopilot or completely hijacked by emotion. Physiologically, the intense grip of the amygdala lessens slightly, and the prefrontal cortex begins to re-engage. The child might still be upset but can say, for example, "I am upset because my friend ignored me." That statement reflects emerging awareness: the child observes their emotion ("I feel upset") and connects it to context ("because..."). Brain regions like the **insula** and the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) are believed to play key roles at this stage. The insula helps generate the conscious feeling of emotions from body signals, and the ACC helps focus attention on those internal states and detects that "something is emotionally salient." In terms of subjective experience,

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emotions in Stage 2 often carry information that invites interpretation. The child might feel *embarrassed, confused, or frustrated* – signals that something in their environment or thoughts needs attention and meaning-making. They begin to ask, **“Why do I feel this way? What might have triggered this?”** This introspective shift is a hallmark of Stage 2. Safety is still somewhat fragile in this stage – the child is not fully secure, but they have stabilized enough to reflect minimally. Joy is typically still low or absent, but not impossible; there might be a small spark of relief simply from recognizing what’s going on (“I’m upset and I know why, which is better than feeling upset for no reason”). In practice, adults can support a child in Stage 2 by encouraging gentle labeling of emotions (“It sounds like you’re feeling left out because your friend didn’t play with you. Is that right?”). Research has shown that such affect labeling can itself help reduce emotional intensity and engage frontal brain regions for regulation. Achieving the Awareness stage is progress – the child is now safer and more present than in Stage 1, setting the stage for deeper processing in Stage 3.

- **Stage 3: Reflection (Understanding and Reframing).** By the time a child reaches Reflection, they have attained a **moderate level of both safety and presence**. They feel secure enough to delve into introspection and are fully present with their emotions without being controlled by them. This stage is characterized by active learning, perspective-taking, and reframing of the situation or one’s response to it. The child (often with adult guidance) can analyze their feelings and the context more objectively – almost as if taking a mental step back. For example, a child at Stage 3 might think: “I was really angry when my brother took my toy. I see now that I assumed he did it to hurt me, but maybe he just wanted to play. I can forgive him.” Such a shift reflects *understanding and cognitive reappraisal*. Neurologically, the **prefrontal cortex** and parts of the ACC become much more active in this stage. The brain’s “thinking regions” are integrating with the “feeling regions” – a phenomenon sometimes called **top-down regulation** or frontal-limbic integration. The amygdala’s alarm is now significantly quieter; the child still *feels* the emotion, but it no longer floods them or triggers knee-jerk reactions. The **hippocampus** (memory center) may also come into play as the child recalls prior experiences and realizes “I’ve gotten through something like this before.” Emotions in Reflection stage often include those conducive to growth: *thoughtfulness, curiosity, remorse, or hope*. The child might not be outwardly “happy” yet, but they have made meaning of the episode and perhaps identified a lesson or solution (e.g., deciding to communicate their feelings or to respond differently next time). This is where genuine **personal growth and emotional learning** occur. In therapy or educational terms, Stage 3 corresponds to successful emotion regulation and cognitive restructuring – the child has moved from just knowing what they feel to understanding what it means and what they can do about it. Reaching this stage is a major victory, as it directly builds coping skills and resilience. At this point, the child is poised to re-enter a positive emotional state; they have resolved the inner conflict enough that they can transition into Stage 4 when circumstances allow.
- **Stage 4: Expansion (Flow and Joyful Integration).** Expansion is the **highest stage of emotional presence**, where the child experiences a fully integrated, free flow of emotional energy. In this stage, *safety and presence are at their peak*, and the child has access to joy and other positive, prosocial emotions with relative ease. The term “Expansion” conveys that the child’s awareness and emotional capacity

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have broadened – their mood, mindset, and interactions are expansive, not constricted. This state closely aligns with what positive psychology describes as *flow* or *flourishing*. The child feels **grounded and safe** (their nervous system is in a balanced state, not in threat mode), and **highly present** (attentive, engaged, “in the zone”). In this optimal state, communication is fluid, creativity and playfulness emerge, and the child can connect deeply with others. Biologically, the brain exhibits harmonious coordination: the prefrontal regulatory circuits maintain healthy dialogue with emotional circuits (the amygdala, etc.), indicating robust top-down regulation. Studies suggest that in such states, even the brain's default mode network (involved in self-referential thinking and insights) may activate in useful ways, contributing to moments of creativity and self-understanding. Neurochemically, Stage 4 tends to correlate with the **release of “feel-good” neurotransmitters** and hormones. Dopamine and endorphins may be elevated (supporting motivation and pleasure), as well as oxytocin if the joy involves social connection (supporting bonding and empathy). The **anterior cingulate cortex** at this stage often shows patterns associated with empathy, compassion, and problem-solving, reflecting the child's ability to handle emotions effectively and even turn them into pro-social action. Notably, *even traditionally “negative” emotions can be integrated into a larger positive experience at this stage*. For example, a child might still remember feeling sad or angry earlier, but in Expansion they might feel **gratitude or pride** for having overcome that challenge. A sense of meaningful resolution often accompanies the joy – e.g., “I feel joyful because I learned something or restored harmony.” In everyday scenarios, Stage 4 might look like a child enthusiastically playing and collaborating after having calmly resolved a conflict, or a student entering a state of energized concentration and curiosity in class once they feel fully safe and engaged. This is the target state that educators, coaches, and therapists aim to facilitate, because it is where **optimal learning, bonding, and psychological growth occur**. The Joy Intelligence model emphasizes that all children are capable of reaching Expansion with the right support, and that by practicing the skills associated with the lower stages (recognizing, naming, reframing emotions), children can more readily expand into joy. Over time, strengthening Joy Intelligence means helping children spend more of their life in the Expansion state and recover to it more quickly after setbacks.

In practice, the Four Stages of Emotional Presence provide a roadmap for adults working with youth: first, **recognize the child's current stage** and meet them with appropriate support (for instance, if a child is in Inactive/Survival mode, prioritize strategies that restore safety and basic regulation rather than insisting they discuss their feelings). Then, help the child **progress to higher stages** by scaffolding their emotional processing – for example, gently guide an upset child (Stage 1) to breathe and feel calmer (toward Stage 2), then label the feeling (solidly Stage 2), then reflect on it (Stage 3), and finally move forward with a sense of resolution or positive re-engagement (Stage 4). This staged approach is supported by clinical frameworks (such as trauma-informed therapy and cognitive-behavioral techniques) and by neuroscience evidence on stepwise deactivation of the threat response and activation of executive functions. It's worth noting that children will naturally fluctuate between stages across different situations and days – no one stays in Expansion all the time – but the goal of development is to increase their **baseline level of presence and joy** and reduce time spent in dysregulated states. Joy Intelligence thus gives a language to track and facilitate this growth.



## Tools and Practices Supporting Joy Intelligence

Translating the SPJ framework and the four stages into real-world practice requires tangible tools that children and those who work with them can use. Joy Intelligence™ provides two signature tools: the **Chair of JOY®** experience and the **JQ Emotions Map™**.

These tools are designed to support nervous system regulation, emotional literacy, and the habit of accessing joy. They draw upon evidence-based techniques (mindfulness, breathing exercises, emotion identification, cognitive reframing) packaged in user-friendly formats for schools, families, and youth programs.

### The Chair of JOY®: A 4-Step Mindfulness Practice

The Chair of JOY is a simple yet powerful practice that helps children (and adults) quickly shift into a calmer and more positive state. As the name suggests, it often involves literally sitting in a special, designated chair (or any comfortable seat) to focus on joy. The **Chair of JOY experience consists of four steps: Sit, Breathe, Think, and Feel**. This guided sequence typically only takes a few minutes, but each component is grounded in neuroscience:

- **Sit:** The act of sitting down intentionally is the first step. Physically pausing and sitting sends a signal to the body and mind to halt the chaos and enter a reflective mode. In many mindfulness-based interventions for youth, creating a routine around a specific posture or location (like a "calm corner" or a particular chair) helps condition a relaxation response. The Chair of JOY leverages this by becoming an anchor or context cue for safety. When a child takes their seat in the Chair of JOY, the implicit message is "now I am safe, I am supported, and I have permission to step out of the fray."
- **Breathe:** Once seated, the child is guided to take slow, deep breaths. Deliberate breathing exercises are well-known to stimulate the vagus nerve and promote parasympathetic nervous system activity, which counteracts the fight-or-flight response. Even very young children can learn belly breathing or counting breaths as a way to self-soothe. Research has documented that paced breathing (for example, inhaling for 4 seconds, exhaling for 6 seconds) can reduce heart rate and cortisol levels, and improve heart-rate variability – a marker of calm autonomic nervous system state. In the Chair of JOY practice, breathing is crucial for moving the child into at least Stage 2 (Awareness) by quieting the amygdala's alarm and allowing presence to begin emerging. The breathing step often involves a brief instruction such as "take three deep breaths and feel the air filling your belly," which focuses the child's attention on the here-and-now and on their body's sensation (grounding them).
- **Think:** After calming the body and opening the mind, the child is next prompted to *think* of something positive – typically a memory, place, or person that brings them joy, or something they feel grateful for. This step is essentially a cognitive redirection toward a positive mental image or thought. It harnesses the mind's ability to generate positive emotions through visualization and recall. From a

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psychological standpoint, this is similar to techniques used in positive psychology interventions (like gratitude journaling or guided imagery of a “happy place”) which have been shown to increase positive affect and reduce anxiety. By consciously recalling a joyful memory (“Think of a time when you felt really happy or loved”), the child activates neural networks associated with that positive experience. Notably, this step also reinforces that *joy is accessible from within*. No matter the external stressor, the child learns they can invoke a pleasant emotional state by shifting their thoughts. Over time, this builds mental resilience; the child’s brain gets practice in quickly transitioning from distress to a positive appraisal or memory.

- **Feel:** The final step is to fully *feel* the joy that was invoked by the positive thought. Here the child is encouraged to immerse in the emotion – to smile, to notice the sensations of warmth or happiness in their body, and to savor it for a moment. This is an exercise in *emotional presence at the positive end of the spectrum*. Often, a facilitator might ask the child to describe how the joy feels, or to “let it shine through you,” effectively training the child to recognize and amplify pleasant emotions. Neurologically, this step can reinforce the associative learning between the context (sitting and breathing) and the reward (feeling joy), which makes it more likely the child will be able to self-initiate the process in the future. Moreover, the conscious savoring of positive emotion is linked to increased production of those feel-good neurotransmitters discussed earlier, such as dopamine and oxytocin, strengthening the neural pathways of positivity. In terms of the four stages, the “Feel” step ideally brings the child into Stage 4 (Expansion), at least momentarily – they experience the resonance of joy with presence and safety fully online.

The entire Chair of JOY practice thus encapsulates moving a child from a potentially dysregulated state to a joyful, present state in four guided steps. It is deceptively simple, yet touches on multiple evidence-based mechanisms: breathing for physiological calming, cognitive reframing toward positive content, mindfulness in focusing on an emotional experience, and anchoring in a safe space. Early anecdotal reports and case examples from programs using the Chair of JOY suggest that even a 3-minute JOY session can reset a child’s mood during a school day or practice. Over time, regular use of this routine may help children more quickly exit the lower stages of emotional presence (Inactive/Awareness) and reach Expansion. While formal research on the Chair of JOY is forthcoming, its design aligns with established clinical tools (for instance, elements of Trauma-Focused CBT’s calming and positive imagery techniques) and can be seen as a child-friendly distillation of mindfulness meditation. For policymakers and youth program leaders, the key takeaway is that structured *joy practices* like this can be implemented at virtually no cost and with minimal training, yet yield significant benefits in regulating children’s nervous systems.

## JQ Emotions Map™: Building Emotional Literacy and Navigation Skills

Another cornerstone of Joy Intelligence is the JQ Emotions Map™, a tool to support emotional literacy and help individuals “move through emotions with precision and purpose”. The Emotions Map is essentially a structured schema of human emotions, organized in a way that is meant to be intuitive and actionable for children and adults alike. Its development drew from extensive research: over 3,000 emotion words were

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identified from psychological literature and human experience, then distilled down to about 160 core emotions through analysis and expert input. Finally, the map was refined to a set of 80 **clearly defined emotions**, grouped into the four stages of emotional presence. The result is a visual and conceptual “map” that individuals can use to identify what they are feeling, understand its significance, and consider potential paths forward toward joy.

Key features of the **JQ Emotions Map** include:

- **Rooted in Science:** The structure of the map is explicitly informed by neuroscience (e.g., the understanding of emotional arousal and brain states as discussed in the stages), principles of emotional intelligence (awareness, self-regulation, resilience), and behavioral psychology (habit formation, pattern interruption). For example, emotions associated with the Inactive stage on the map correspond to those that commonly arise from “fight/flight/freeze” states – such as terror, rage, or numbness – which aligns with neurobiological threat responses. Emotions in the Expansion stage on the map include those linked to optimal neurotransmitter function and social bonding – e.g., love, curiosity, confidence – reflecting the neuroscience of positive states. By grounding the taxonomy in scientific concepts, the Emotions Map ensures that using it is not just a touchy-feely exercise but a step towards evidence-based emotional processing.
- **Common Language for Emotions:** A major barrier in emotional development is often a limited vocabulary to describe feelings. Children (and many adults) might default to saying they feel “bad” or “mad,” which oversimplifies their inner experience and can impede effective coping. The JQ Emotions Map provides a richer vocabulary, distilled to 80 key terms that are “data-backed, relatable, and easy to understand”. These 80 emotions are further distilled to 20 fundamental emotions that can be taught with flashcards or activities as a starting point for younger children. By having a shared set of terms, educators, parents, and children can communicate more clearly about internal states. For instance, a child might learn the difference between *anxious* (fearful about what might happen) and *overwhelmed* (feeling too many demands at once), or between *content* and *joyful*. This clarity allows more targeted strategies – you respond differently to a child who says they feel “lonely” than one who says they feel “irritated,” even if both might have presented as “sad” initially.
- **Stages and Progression:** Critically, the Emotions Map groups emotions into the four JQ stages – Inactive, Awareness, Reflection, Expansion – creating a compass for movement. This means the map not only labels where you are, but also suggests where you can go next. For example, if a child identifies an emotion in the *Inactive* category (say, “**angry (enraged)**”), the map and accompanying guidance might show that moving to *Awareness* stage emotions could involve feelings like “**hurt**” or “**skeptical**” – which signal the need to interpret and find meaning – and then moving further to *Reflection* might involve “**forgiving**” or “**curious**”, and ultimately to *Expansion* might include “**peaceful**” or “**empowered.**” In this way, the Emotions Map serves as a journey planner: it validates the current feeling and highlights that it is part of a continuum. The

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message to the child is, "It's okay to feel what you feel, and here's what that feeling could be telling you, and here's what you might feel when you've worked through it." This approach is very much in line with cognitive-behavioral techniques that encourage reappraisal ("What is this emotion telling me?") and solution-focused therapy that looks at the next steps. It also instills hope – by seeing that *joy is not a static trait but a reachable state* on the map, children learn that emotions are temporary and changeable.

- **Real-Time Emotional Navigation:** The JQ Emotions Map is intended to be a practical tool used in real time. For instance, a teacher might have a poster of the map in the classroom's "quiet corner," and a student who is upset can go to that space, locate their current emotion on the map, and use it as a starting point to calm down and problem-solve. Similarly, a therapist might use the map in a session to help a child articulate their feelings and then discuss what could help them move towards a more positive state. The creators describe it as a tool to "apply emotional data in real time", turning emotional literacy into an actionable strategy. This resonates with the concept of *emotion coaching* in parenting literature – where parents guide children through recognizing and handling emotions – and provides a concrete aid for that process. In effect, the Emotions Map externalizes the child's internal experience onto a diagram they can interact with, making the abstract concept of "emotional regulation" more tangible.

Early experiences with the JQ Emotions Map in pilot programs have reported that children find it engaging – it can even be gamified (e.g., "Where are you on the map today? Can we move one step toward joy?"). By giving emotional exploration a visual and exploratory quality, it reduces stigma or fear around "negative" emotions: all emotions have their place on the map, and even the unpleasant ones are part of one's journey rather than something to suppress. This aligns with modern clinical wisdom that validates emotions rather than dismissing them, teaching kids that feelings are not good or bad in themselves, but signals we can learn from.

In summary, the Chair of JOY and the JQ Emotions Map are complementary tools – one primarily helps *shift the physiological and emotional state* in the moment (through mindfulness and positive recall), and the other helps *build understanding and language* for what one is feeling and how to navigate through it. Both tools are structured yet adaptable: a school might implement daily "JOY sessions" where an entire class does the Chair of JOY routine together, and use the Emotions Map during social-emotional learning lessons or conflict resolution discussions. A therapist or coach working with a young person can incorporate the Chair of JOY as a grounding exercise at the start of a session and the Emotions Map as a framework for the session's emotional work. A parent might create a "joy corner" at home with a comfy chair and a kid-friendly emotions poster, encouraging the child to use them whenever needed. By integrating such tools into regular practice, the abstract goals of Joy Intelligence become concrete habits. Over time, these habits wire the child's brain towards better self-regulation and a more resilient, optimistic baseline. In the next section, we will illustrate how the absence or presence of these principles plays out in a real-life anecdote, and connect it to relevant literature.



## Case Study: Emotional Safety Undermined in Youth Sports – and How JQ Could Help

Consider a common real-life scenario: a ten-year-old child at a weekend baseball practice. Sports contexts can be joyous and growth-promoting for children, but they can also become sources of intense emotional stress, especially when the atmosphere lacks emotional safety. In this case, imagine the child, "Alex," is up to bat during a drill. He

swings and misses the ball three times. Frustrated, Alex lowers his head. From the sidelines, his father, who is also an assistant coach, yells sharply, "Come on, focus! We talked about this – you have to try harder, stop being lazy!" The tone is scolding and exasperated. Alex's face flushes; he grips the bat tighter. On the next pitch, he swings wildly and misses again. This time the father throws his hands up and mutters loud enough for others to hear, "Unbelievable. He's never going to improve with that attitude." Alex's shoulders slump and tears well up as he leaves the batter's box. Instead of receiving comfort or guidance, he is met with the coach's brusque command to "take a lap to cool off." Another parent might think Alex is having a tantrum or acting unprofessionally for a kid, but what is actually happening is a collapse of emotional safety and presence.

Analyzing this scenario through the JOY Intelligence framework: Alex started practice perhaps in a fine mood (let's say moderate presence and even some joy in anticipation of play). However, as soon as mistakes were met with a caregiver's anger and ridicule, Alex's sense of safety was shattered. The father's behavior – yelling, showing disappointment publicly – constituted an emotional threat. From a child's perspective, a parent's disapproval can feel profoundly unsafe; evolutionary psychology tells us that children are wired to seek parental approval as a sign of security. Alex likely experienced a spike of **fight-or-flight arousal**: his brain's amygdala sounded the alarm ("I'm not good enough, I'm in trouble, I'm shameful in front of everyone"). What we see externally – tightened grip, wild swings, eventually crying – corresponds to a progression into the **Inactive/Survival stage** of emotional presence. Alex's ability to stay present and focused evaporated as the stress took over. Indeed, studies show that **parental pressure in sports can significantly increase a child's anxiety and decrease their enjoyment and performance**<sup>[10]</sup>. In Alex's case, each critical shout from his father not only failed to improve his batting, it actively *undermined* his self-regulation: his attention narrowed (tunnel vision from stress), motor coordination likely decreased due to muscle tension and loss of concentration, and emotionally he felt primarily fear and shame – hallmarks of Stage 1 (Inactive) where joy is impossible to access.

Now consider the **consequences** if such patterns repeat over time. Research in sport psychology consistently finds that children with over-involved or harshly critical parents often experience less motivation and more stress in sports, sometimes leading to burnout or quitting altogether<sup>[12]</sup>. Parental expectations and criticisms become a source of pressure that erodes the intrinsic fun and joy of play. In Alex's scenario, if unresolved, he may start to associate baseball – or even other challenges – with feelings of inadequacy and panic. His joy in the activity is replaced by fear of failure, which is not a recipe for resilience or long-term participation. This aligns with broader behavioral health literature: children who regularly receive messages that their feelings or efforts are not good enough often internalize those and develop poorer self-esteem and higher risk of depression or anxiety. Essentially, repeated **emotional undermining** by caregivers is a

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form of emotional neglect or abuse, and its impact can mirror that of other adverse childhood experiences in terms of mental health outcomes[13].

How could applying Joy Intelligence principles alter this story? Let's rewind and imagine an alternate approach: Alex swings and misses, and his father notices Alex getting flustered. Instead of scolding, the father calls time-out and approaches Alex calmly. He puts a hand on Alex's shoulder (a reassuring gesture) and quietly says, "It's okay, you're safe and I'm here to help. Take a deep breath with me." They briefly step aside. The father leads Alex in one or two deep breaths (addressing the immediate fight-or-flight

arousal and grounding Alex's presence). He then asks, "What are you feeling right now?" Alex might mutter, "I'm just angry I keep missing." The father responds in a normal tone, "I get it. Missing can be frustrating. I sometimes feel angry when I mess up, too." This validates Alex's feelings (maintaining emotional safety by not dismissing or judging the emotion). Then the father uses **emotion coaching**: "Being angry can make our bodies tense up. Let's loosen your grip a little and just focus on one thing – keep your eye on the ball, okay? You've hit lots of balls before, you know how to do it. Let's try again and have fun with it. No matter what, I'm proud of you for trying."

This response is rich with JQ-aligned techniques. By prompting deep breaths, the father helped Alex regain a measure of **presence** rather than spiraling into panic. By naming the emotion (anger) and empathizing, he guided Alex into **Awareness and Reflection** – Alex feels understood and can make sense of his anger ("dad also feels this way sometimes, it's normal"). The suggestion to loosen the grip and focus on one thing is a small adjustment that further eases the tension and provides a simple mindful point of focus (the ball), again reinforcing presence. Importantly, the father explicitly conveys **unconditional support ("no matter what, I'm proud of you")**, which directly bolsters Alex's sense of **safety**. Now Alex can swing with a freer mind; maybe he hits the ball, maybe he doesn't, but he is far more likely to remain emotionally intact either way. In fact, by reframing it as "have fun with it," the father reintroduces **joy** into the equation – reminding Alex that the goal is enjoyment and learning, not perfection. This approach exemplifies **emotion coaching parenting**, which studies have shown leads to better self-regulation and social outcomes in children[14]. Specifically in sports, research finds that when parents are supportive rather than pressuring, children's enjoyment goes up and their amotivation (lack of motivation) goes down[15]. Additionally, "appropriate parental participation" – characterized by praise, understanding, and a balanced involvement – correlates with increased youth athletes' enjoyment and sustained participation[16].

Thus, in the alternate scenario, Alex is able to remain in at least Stage 2 or 3 (aware and reflective rather than purely reactive) and perhaps even regain some joy by the end of practice, feeling proud of making contact with the ball or simply happy to have a caring dad by his side. This positive outcome can reinforce a virtuous cycle: Alex learns that mistakes are recoverable and not a threat to his safety or self-worth, which makes him more confident and resilient in future challenges. Over time, dozens of small moments like these – whether in sports, academics, or interpersonal conflicts – build up the child's *Joy Intelligence*. Conversely, dozens of moments like the first scenario would tear it down, contributing to a child who is anxious, disengaged, or emotionally volatile.

This case study, while focused on a sports context, is broadly applicable. Whenever a caregiver or authority figure responds to a child's difficulty with harshness, ridicule, or



neglect, the child's emotional safety is compromised and their capacity for presence and joy shrinks. Unfortunately, such scenarios are not rare. Many well-meaning coaches or parents believe that pushing a child harder will toughen them up, whereas the science indicates that **support and emotional attunement produce far better outcomes in both performance and well-being**[\[17\]](#). The Joy Intelligence approach offers a structured reminder that *how* we respond to a child's emotional state is pivotal. By keeping Safety-Presence-Joy in mind, adults can choose strategies that validate and regulate (ensuring safety and presence) and then inspire and encourage (fostering joy and resilience). The next section will zoom out to examine the larger trends in youth mental health and why

models like JQ are timely, followed by practical implementation models for various settings.

## The Case for Joy: Mental Health Trends and the Cost of Emotional Neglect

The importance of proactively teaching emotional skills and cultivating positive states in youth is underscored by troubling mental health trends. We have already noted the high rates of adolescent sadness and hopelessness reported in recent surveys. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated disruptions intensified these issues, but the rise in youth mental health challenges precedes 2020 and continues today. According to the U.S. CDC, markers of poor mental health and suicidal thoughts among teens have been on an upward trajectory over the past decade[\[18\]](#). Beyond self-reported feelings, objective diagnoses of mental disorders in youth have also climbed: anxiety disorders and depression in children and adolescents are more commonly diagnosed now than a generation ago. Emergency department visits for youth psychiatric issues (like panic attacks, self-harm, severe mood episodes) have likewise increased. The U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory in late 2021 declaring youth mental health a national crisis, citing not only the pandemic but also factors like social media influences and academic pressure.

While many factors contribute to these trends, one often underappreciated factor is the role of **emotional neglect and dysregulation in early life**. Emotional neglect – failing to provide a child with adequate attention, understanding, and responsiveness to their emotional needs – can be psychologically damaging even in the absence of physical abuse or material deprivation. Longitudinal studies have demonstrated that children who experience emotional neglect have significantly higher risk of developing depression, anxiety disorders, and difficulty in emotional regulation as they grow older[\[19\]](#). In one study, emotional neglect was specifically associated with a higher likelihood of adolescent depression, unless buffered by strong social support[\[20\]](#). Another line of research links childhood maltreatment (including emotional neglect) with disruptions in the development of brain regions involved in emotion regulation, such as the prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate. In practical terms, a child who never felt safe to express emotions or had no one to help name and soothe those emotions may grow up without the tools to handle stressors, leaving them vulnerable to mental health problems. This is consistent with evidence that childhood trauma and chronic stress can lead to a heightened baseline of physiological arousal (hypervigilance) or conversely emotional numbing, both of which interfere with forming healthy relationships and coping with challenges.



Emotional **dysregulation** in youth – meaning the inability to manage emotional responses within an adaptive range – is a common pathway through which various adverse experiences translate into psychological disorders. Dysregulation can manifest as excessive anger outbursts, severe anxiety, self-harming behavior to cope with feelings, or shutting down (dissociating) when emotions become intense. Often, underlying these patterns is a history where the child was not taught or not given a safe space to learn how to regulate. This might happen in a family that discourages talking about feelings (“get over it” or “big boys don’t cry”), or in an overstressed classroom where teachers only focus on discipline and academics, or in any environment where

the child's emotional expressions are met with punishment or indifference. Over time, the message internalized is that emotions are either not valid or too overwhelming to handle – leading to either suppression or chaos, and eventually to anxiety, depression, or behavioral issues.

The **long-term consequences** of untreated emotional dysregulation and neglect are far-reaching. Aside from diagnosable mental illnesses, they include poorer academic and occupational outcomes (since focus and interpersonal skills are affected), higher susceptibility to substance abuse (some youth turn to drugs/alcohol to self-medicate emotional pain), and even physical health issues (chronic stress in youth can contribute to inflammatory conditions and weaken the immune system). In a very real sense, failing to address children's emotional development early is costly not just to those individuals but to society, which may later bear the burden in higher healthcare needs, lost productivity, and social problems. Conversely, the **benefits of proactive emotional teaching and support** are robustly documented.

**Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)** programs in schools, which are broadly aimed at teaching students skills like recognizing emotions, empathy, decision-making, and relationship building, have been extensively evaluated. A meta-analysis encompassing hundreds of studies and over 270,000 students found that SEL interventions led to significantly improved social-emotional skills, better classroom behavior, less emotional distress, and even an academic boost equivalent to about 11 percentile points in achievement[21]. These results held across grade levels and demographics, highlighting that *teaching emotional and social skills is as fundamental as teaching literacy or math* in terms of its impact. Notably, SEL programs that foster a supportive climate (emotional safety) and give children tools to navigate feelings (presence and constructive expression) align very well with the SPJ framework – though they may not explicitly use the same terms, the goals are resonant. For example, an SEL lesson on “calming down when angry” directly contributes to a child's ability to move from Stage 1 to Stage 2 or 3 in the JQ model. Over months and years, such education can shift a child's trajectory away from the pitfalls of dysregulation.

Beyond formal curricula, there is evidence for specific techniques: **mindfulness training for youth** can reduce symptoms of anxiety and improve attention; **emotion coaching by parents** (where parents validate and guide children through emotional episodes) has been linked to better emotional competence and fewer behavioral problems[22]; **positive psychology exercises** like gratitude journaling in adolescents have shown increases in well-being and decreases in depressive symptoms. Even something as simple as regular family discussions about emotions or a teacher regularly checking in on students' feelings can serve as a protective factor, because they normalize emotional processing as part of life.



Crucially, building emotional resilience does not mean shielding children from all adversity. It means equipping them with the internal and external resources to cope with challenges in healthy ways. Lifelong resilience – the ability to bounce back from setbacks – is strongly tied to having had at least one supportive caregiver or mentor, and to having learned skills for self-regulation and optimistic thinking in youth. Joy Intelligence encapsulates these elements by focusing on nurturing a baseline state (joy) that inherently carries hope and confidence, and the scaffolding (safety and presence) required to reach that state.

In light of the youth mental health crisis, models like Joy Intelligence are particularly timely. They shift the narrative from a reactive stance (intervene when a child is already in crisis) to a *preventive and developmental stance*. By investing in emotional development early – in preschools, in pediatric care, on sports fields, and around dinner tables – we can strengthen children's mental health before serious problems take root. The cost of implementing such programs and practices is relatively low (often just training and time), especially compared to the cost of clinical treatments later. As one example, a study found that for every dollar invested in evidence-based SEL programs, an average of \$11 were saved in future costs related to interventions, public services, or loss of productivity due to problems those SEL programs helped avert[23].

In sum, the data and clinical experience converge on a clear mandate: proactively **teach children how to be emotionally safe, present, and joyful**. Doing so not only helps prevent the worst outcomes (like emotional disorders and trauma effects) but actively cultivates the best outcomes (like well-being, strong relationships, and a readiness to contribute positively to society). The next section turns to the practical question of how to implement Joy Intelligence principles and tools across various real-world settings – from classrooms and sports leagues to healthcare settings and homes – so that emotional safety and joy become integrated into the fabric of youth development.

## Implementation Models for Schools, Sports, Healthcare, and Families

Realizing the vision of Joy Intelligence™ requires adaptation to the contexts in which children live and grow. Here we outline how the SPJ framework and associated practices can be integrated into different systems – education, athletics, healthcare, and family life – providing examples and best practices drawn from research and pilot programs.

### Schools and Educational Settings

Schools are a primary environment where children spend a large portion of their day, making them ideal for implementing structured emotional development programs. Many schools have already adopted Social-Emotional Learning curricula or trauma-informed practices, which pave the way for Joy Intelligence elements.

**1. Embedding SPJ in School Culture:** School-wide initiatives can be introduced to prioritize safety and presence. For instance, educators and administrators can receive professional development on creating a classroom climate of psychological safety – emphasizing respect, inclusivity, and acceptance of mistakes. Research by the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development emphasizes that a caring



school climate is foundational to student success<sup>[24]</sup>. Teachers should be trained to use supportive language, to recognize signs of emotional distress, and to respond with empathy rather than immediate punishment. A concrete strategy is implementing a “peace corner” or “JOY corner” in each classroom – a space equipped with comfortable seating (perhaps a “mini Chair of Joy”), visual aids like the JQ Emotions Map, stress-relief objects, and step-by-step calming instructions. Students can self-direct to this corner when overwhelmed, or teachers can gently guide them to it. Unlike the punitive connotation of a “timeout,” this is presented as a positive self-care station to regain safety and presence. Many trauma-informed schools have adopted similar calm-down

corners and report reductions in disciplinary incidents and improvements in student self-regulation over time.

**2. Joy Practices in the Daily Routine:** Schools can incorporate brief Joy Intelligence practices into the daily schedule. For example, starting the morning with a 5-minute Chair of JOY group session can set a positive tone. A teacher might lead the class: everyone sits comfortably, takes three deep breaths together, thinks of something they are grateful for today, and shares (voluntarily) a positive intention. This mirrors mindfulness or socio-emotional check-ins which have shown benefits such as improved attention and lower stress in students. Another opportunity is after recess or lunch (times when students might return to class dysregulated or distracted) – a short guided breathing and grounding exercise can help re-establish presence for learning. The key is consistency; if students know that these practices are a normal part of their day, they more readily engage and internalize them.

**3. Curriculum Integration:** Elements of JQ can be woven into existing SEL or health curricula. For instance, when teaching about emotions, the JQ Emotions Map could be a central tool – students can learn the four stages and identify emotions in each, discuss scenarios of moving from one stage to another, and role-play responses that help someone climb the stages. They can also learn about the brain in age-appropriate ways: a common and effective lesson is the “hand model of the brain” (after Dr. Dan Siegel’s work) where kids learn about the prefrontal cortex vs. amygdala – basically why we “flip our lid” and how breathing can put the “wise leader” part of the brain back in charge. Incorporating this neuroscience demystifies their experiences and aligns perfectly with the rationale of Joy Intelligence. Middle and high schools could integrate Joy Intelligence concepts in advisory programs or psychology electives, potentially measuring “Joy Quotient” through surveys as a fun and educational exercise. Importantly, lessons should also clarify how JQ differs from and complements IQ and EQ – fostering respect for diverse strengths. A student strong in Joy Intelligence might be one who uplifts peers and stays calm under pressure, qualities as worthy as academic prowess. Recognizing and praising such strengths (e.g., a teacher might say, “I noticed how well Mia handled that conflict – she showed great presence and kindness”) reinforces their value in the school community.

**4. Assessment and Monitoring:** Implementation can include monitoring emotional well-being as a metric, not to label students, but to inform support strategies. Schools might use brief periodic questionnaires (like a mood check or resilience survey) to gauge how students are feeling and coping. Some pioneering schools conduct a “pulse survey” each week where students anonymously indicate their stress or happiness level. Trends can inform if adjustments are needed (for instance, if many students report low safety, the school might initiate anti-bullying efforts more aggressively). Counselors and school



psychologists should be part of the implementation team, bridging Joy Intelligence practices with any needed individual interventions.

**Evidence & Outcomes:** We anticipate that schools implementing Joy Intelligence-focused programs will see improvements similar to those documented for SEL and mindfulness programs: better student attention, less disruptive behavior, higher empathy and peer support, and even academic gains<sup>[25]</sup>. For example, in one district that piloted daily mindfulness and emotional check-ins, suspension rates dropped and reading scores rose – attributed to students being more present and less anxious in class. By making emotional safety and joy explicit goals of education (and not just

implicit or secondary), schools prepare children not only to score well on tests but to handle life's tests with resilience and optimism.

## Youth Sports Programs

Sports are a powerful context for youth development, offering physical, social, and emotional growth opportunities. However, as seen in the case study, the culture of youth sports can sometimes drift into win-at-all-cost or overly stressful territory. Implementing Joy Intelligence in sports means reshaping coaching and parenting approaches to prioritize the *emotional experience* of young athletes alongside skill development.

**1. Coach Education:** Coaches of youth teams (recreational or competitive) should be trained in creating an emotionally safe team climate. Many coaching clinics now include modules on positive coaching techniques. Incorporating JOY principles, coaches would learn to emphasize effort and personal improvement over outcome, to respond to mistakes with constructive feedback and encouragement rather than anger, and to model emotional regulation themselves (e.g., staying calm and solutions-focused when the game gets tense). The research is compelling here: a study in youth sports found that players' enjoyment was positively related to coaches' supportive behavior and negatively related to perceived coach/parent pressure<sup>[26]</sup>. Joy Intelligence can give coaches concrete strategies, like starting practice with a short team "mindfulness huddle" where players take a breath and set a positive intention (similar to the Chair of JOY steps), or ending practice by each player sharing one thing they enjoyed or are proud of that day (reinforcing joy and reflection). If a player is visibly upset (perhaps after a poor performance or conflict with a teammate), coaches with JQ training would know to take a timeout, ensure the player feels heard and safe, and perhaps use the Emotions Map language: "It seems you're feeling frustrated and embarrassed; those are normal – let's talk about it. What might help you feel better right now?" This approach could mitigate many meltdowns or conflicts on youth teams.

**2. Parent Orientation:** Youth sports leagues can also hold orientations or send resources to parents about Joy Intelligence and emotion-focused parenting in sports. Many leagues already distribute a "code of conduct" to prevent unruly parent behavior. Alongside rules (e.g., no yelling at referees), why not include positive guidelines: "After games, focus on asking your child what they enjoyed or learned, not only whether they won. Encourage and applaud effort. If your child is upset, reassure them that it's okay to feel that way and you're proud of their courage to play." By educating parents on the long-term value of emotional support – which research suggests leads to not only happier kids but often better performance and longer sports participation – leagues can shift the culture from the bleachers to the bench. Parents might also be introduced to the concept of the Chair of JOY: for instance, one could suggest that on the car ride



home after practice, if the child is frustrated, the parent can lead them through the Sit-Breathe-Think-Feel process ("Let's take a moment in the car before we drive off, take a deep breath, and think of one fun thing that happened today"). This not only helps the child self-regulate but also calms the parent and frames the ride home discussion in a positive light.

**3. Team Workshops:** Particularly for travel or high-level teams with adolescents, coaches might integrate a few short workshops or discussions on mental skills that align with JQ. Topics could include handling performance anxiety (safety), visualization and focus techniques (presence), and team-building activities to celebrate successes and foster joy. Some teams employ sports psychologists to teach deep breathing or imagery

for peak performance, which dovetails with Joy Intelligence's methods. A key message for athletes is that *enjoyment and emotional well-being are not at odds with competitive success – they enhance it*. Indeed, self-determination theory in sports suggests that intrinsic motivation (love of the game) and a supportive environment lead to greater perseverance and performance than fear of failure or extrinsic pressure.

**Outcomes:** By implementing these changes, sports programs can expect improved youth outcomes such as higher **athlete retention** (fewer kids quitting due to burnout or low enjoyment, as corroborated by findings that supportive parenting and coaching reduce dropout), better **sportsmanship and teamwork** (emotionally intelligent players are more empathetic teammates), and potentially **better performance** (because players are less tense and more focused when they feel safe and joyful). Success can be measured in part by surveys of player enjoyment mid-season and at end of season: ideally, most players should report positive experiences. The ultimate goal is that youth sports truly fulfill their role as a training ground for life skills – with emotional resilience and joy chief among them.

## Healthcare and Hospital Settings

Children encountering the healthcare system – whether for routine checkups or serious medical treatments – are often in vulnerable emotional states. Hospitals and clinics can incorporate Joy Intelligence principles to ensure that the medical environment, which can be scary and alienating for a child, instead includes elements of emotional safety and even moments of joy to aid healing.

**1. Trauma-Informed Care in Pediatrics:** Pediatric hospitals have been increasingly adopting *trauma-informed care*, which aligns with SPJ by first asking "How can we make this child feel safe?" Medical procedures and settings can be adjusted in small ways: allowing a parent or familiar caregiver to be present whenever possible (to provide a secure base), explaining procedures in child-friendly language (so the child isn't left in anxious uncertainty), and offering choices to the child (to grant a sense of control and presence). For example, instead of forcing a child into an MRI machine with only stern instructions, a technician might use a visual aid and playful narrative ("this machine is like a big camera taking pictures of your superhero brain, it will make some noise but that's okay, you'll have headphones with your favorite music"). By demystifying the process and engaging the child's imagination positively, the child's fear can be reduced. This approach is backed by studies showing that preparing children with information and coping strategies leads to less anxiety and better cooperation during procedures.

**2. Play and Joy Interventions:** Hospitals are perhaps paradoxically one of the earliest adopters of "joy" interventions through their Child Life programs. Certified Child Life

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Specialists use **play therapy, art, and humor** to help hospitalized children cope. The Joy Intelligence framework would encourage making these practices standard, not optional. For instance, the availability of a "comfort menu" – a list of playful or soothing activities the child can choose from during a stressful moment (blowing bubbles during an injection, watching a favorite cartoon during a dressing change, having a therapy dog visit after surgery). These techniques are not mere distraction; research shows that play therapy in hospitals can **reduce children's anxiety and pain, improve their cooperation with treatment, and lessen negative emotions**. One systematic review of play interventions found improved child–healthcare provider relationships and more positive attitudes from children toward treatment when play was integrated. Joy Intelligence would advocate for incorporating something like a "Joy Checklist" for pediatric patients:

has the child engaged in a joyful activity today? If a child has been in the hospital for days, ensuring time for play, creativity, or social interaction is as important as checking their vital signs, because it directly impacts emotional well-being and recovery. Even in short clinic visits, pediatricians might use a brief Chair of JOY technique: e.g., if a child is crying in fear of a shot, the doctor could have them and the parent take a deep breath together and then ask the child to think of their favorite happy place while the shot is given – effectively a fast combination of breathe+think+feel to minimize trauma.

**3. Emotional Mapping in Behavioral Health:** For children undergoing therapy (e.g., psychological counseling) as part of their health care, the JQ Emotions Map can be a therapeutic tool. Therapists in clinics might use it to help kids articulate feelings about illness or hospitalization. For example, a child with a chronic illness might frequently feel "scared" or "angry" (Stage 1–2 emotions). Mapping these and validating them ("It makes sense to feel scared about treatments") before guiding the child towards emotions in Stage 3–4 (perhaps "hopeful" or "determined") could facilitate emotional processing. Over the course of treatment, progress might be seen as the child reports more time feeling in Reflection/Expansion and less time in Inactive. Additionally, parents of pediatric patients can be educated to use SPJ at home – creating safe emotional spaces for the child to express fears, practicing presence through mindful breathing or storytelling, and celebrating joyful moments as part of the child's healing journey (e.g., a "daily joy" ritual where they identify one good thing that happened, no matter how small).

**Outcomes:** Emotional safety and joy in healthcare are not just niceties – they correlate with tangible improvements. Children who are less anxious heal faster and have fewer complications; their immune function can be better when stress is reduced. Hospitals implementing these practices have observed things like reduced need for sedation in procedures (because children cooperate more when calm) and higher patient/family satisfaction scores. One could measure, for instance, the effect of a play intervention on reported pain levels or physiological stress markers (some studies show significantly lower cortisol levels in children allowed to play before surgery). In essence, Joy Intelligence approaches in healthcare make the medical process more humane and effective, treating the child as not just a body to fix but a whole person whose mind and heart strongly influence their health.

## Family and Home Environment

Finally, the family is the primary context of emotional socialization for most children. Parents and caregivers can adopt Joy Intelligence practices in everyday parenting, creating a home where emotional safety is assured, presence is practiced, and joy is cultivated.

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**1. Emotion Coaching Parenting:** Building on the work of John Gottman and others, parents can learn to be “emotion coaches” for their children. This means actively listening and validating when a child has feelings, setting limits gently when needed, and guiding the child towards solutions or understanding. For example, if a child comes home from school in tears because a friend was mean, an emotion-coaching parent would resist saying “Don’t cry, it’s not a big deal” (which dismisses the feeling). Instead, they might say, “I see you’re really upset. That must have hurt your feelings when your friend did that. Do you want to talk about it or maybe do something to feel better?” This approach aligns perfectly with SPJ: it provides **safety** (the child knows it’s okay to feel and share negative emotions without punishment), encourages **presence** (by inviting the child to explore what happened and what they feel, rather than bottling it up or

escaping), and ultimately can lead to **joy or at least comfort** (as the parent might help the child reframe, recall strengths, or engage in a joyful distraction after processing). Numerous studies support that this style of parenting yields children with better emotional regulation, fewer behavioral problems, and even higher social competence. It is essentially the application of Joy Intelligence on a micro, moment-to-moment scale within the family.

**2. Family Routines that Foster Joy:** Families can establish routines that intentionally cultivate joy and emotional connection. For instance, a daily family dinner is an opportunity for everyone to share “one good thing and one challenging thing” from their day. This practice simultaneously builds presence (everyone listens mindfully) and normalizes discussing emotions. The family can celebrate the good (reinforcing joy) and collaboratively support on the challenges (reinforcing safety and problem-solving). Another idea is a weekly “JOY activity” – perhaps each weekend the family does something fun together that the child helps choose (a bike ride, a board game night, cooking a favorite meal). These positive shared experiences strengthen attachment and create a reservoir of positive emotions that families can draw upon during tough times. Even small insertions, like bedtime gratitude (asking the child at tuck-in, “What are you thankful for today?” which studies suggest can improve mood), can tilt a child’s mindset toward optimism over time.

**3. Managing Caregiver Emotions:** A critical part of creating emotional safety at home is how caregivers manage their own emotions, especially conflict and stress. Parents practicing JQ principles should model the behaviors: if they are angry or anxious, they can narrate coping (“I’m feeling frustrated, I need to take a breath”) rather than explode or fall apart in front of the child. Of course, parents are human and will sometimes raise their voice or get overwhelmed. What matters is repairing those moments – for example, if a parent yells, they later apologize and explain, “I’m sorry I yelled. I was very stressed by work, but that’s not your fault. Let’s talk about what upset you earlier.” This kind of repair restores the child’s sense of safety and teaches them that relationships can withstand and mend after emotional ruptures. It also models accountability and empathy. Families might even establish a code word or signal for when anyone (child or parent) is nearing dysregulation and needs a break – turning it into a mutual understanding that it’s time to pause (presence) and use a coping tool (maybe even sit in a self-styled “chair of joy” at home). By treating emotional episodes as normal and workable, rather than shameful, the family creates a culture where everyone feels safe to express feelings and confident that they can navigate through them.

**4. Measuring Home JQ:** While not formal, parents can reflect on or track changes in their child’s Joy Intelligence. Are tantrums (Stage 1 moments) becoming less frequent or shorter? Does the child recover more quickly (progress through stages) after a

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disappointment than they used to? Do they show more empathy or patience with siblings (indicating more time in Presence/Expansion)? Keeping a journal or notes might help some parents be mindful of growth and areas to work on. Moreover, when parents see improvements – e.g., a child used belly breathing to calm down – they should **praise the process**: “I noticed you took some deep breaths when you got mad. That was a great way to calm yourself. I’m proud of you.” Acknowledging such moments reinforces the child’s skills and motivates them to continue using them.

**Outcomes:** Families that adopt these practices often report stronger parent-child relationships and more harmonious home life. Children develop secure attachments and trust in their caregivers, which longitudinal research links to better emotional and social

outcomes in adulthood. One could argue that the ultimate “output” of Joy Intelligence in the family is a young adult who has internalized a secure base (safety), can be mindful and resilient under stress (presence), and approaches life with a generally positive, hopeful outlook (joy). These attributes translate into success in myriad forms – not just academic or career success, but the ability to form healthy relationships, to cope with adversity without collapsing, and to find meaning and happiness in life. Indeed, as one prominent study put it, emotional intelligence (and by extension Joy Intelligence) is a better predictor of adult well-being than IQ in many cases.

Implementing Joy Intelligence at the family level does not require external funding or programs – it mainly requires *intentional effort and learning on the part of caregivers*. Parenting programs or resources could incorporate SPJ concepts to help parents, especially those who did not themselves have good emotional role models, to learn these techniques. Community workshops, pediatrician handouts, or even social media campaigns could disseminate Joy Intelligence tips to a wide parent audience. Given that parents ultimately shape the next generation’s emotional habits, empowering them with this knowledge could have a multiplicative effect on society’s mental health.

## Conclusion

Emotional resilience is often described as the cornerstone of a healthy, productive life. With rising mental health challenges in youth, there is a critical need to re-envision how we cultivate that resilience from the earliest years. The Joy Intelligence™ framework presented in this paper offers a science-backed, developmentally informed model to do just that. By asserting that *emotional safety enables presence, presence allows access to joy, and sustained joy builds resilience*, JQ encapsulates a powerful trajectory for positive development. This thesis is not just a philosophical statement – it is supported by a convergence of findings from neuroscience (e.g., the role of safety in activating higher brain function), psychology (e.g., the benefits of mindfulness and positive emotion), and behavioral health (e.g., outcomes of SEL and emotion coaching).

Throughout this white paper, we explored how Joy Intelligence distinguishes itself from traditional IQ and EQ paradigms by focusing on the conditions and states that underlie emotional thriving. IQ might ensure a child can solve math problems, and EQ that they can read someone’s facial expression, but JQ strives to ensure the child approaches the world with an open heart, a regulated nervous system, and an innate orientation towards hope and connection. In practice, Joy Intelligence does not compete with IQ or EQ but complements them – a child who feels safe and joyful will likely perform better cognitively and relate better socially.

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We defined the SPJ pillars and four progressive stages of emotional presence, giving concrete structure to concepts that can otherwise seem abstract. We demonstrated, via case study, how these principles play out in everyday situations like a parent-child interaction on the sports field, and how different responses aligned with or against SPJ can lead to profoundly different outcomes for the child. We presented tools – the Chair of JOY and Emotions Map – that operationalize the framework, turning theory into accessible practice. These tools illustrate that even complex emotional processes can be broken down into step-by-step techniques that children can learn and enjoy.

A review of youth mental health data and research on emotional neglect underscored the stakes: ignoring children's emotional needs or assuming they will “just figure it out”

has dire consequences, whereas intentional teaching of emotional skills has remarkable benefits, from improved mental health to better life functioning. In an era where schools and health systems are stretched dealing with crises like teen suicide, anxiety epidemics, and behavioral disorders, Joy Intelligence offers a preventive ethos – invest early in building the foundation of emotional safety and joy, and many problems can be mitigated before they fully emerge.

Our implementation discussion provided a blueprint for action across sectors. **In schools**, integrating JQ means safer and more engaging classrooms where students can focus and collaborate, yielding both academic and socio-emotional gains. **In sports**, it promises to reclaim the play and growth aspects of athletics, keeping youth in the game mentally and physically. **In healthcare**, it humanizes medical treatment and leverages positive emotions as part of healing. **In families**, it empowers parents to raise resilient kids who not only overcome challenges but also savor life's beautiful moments. These recommendations are actionable: many are extensions of initiatives already proven (like SEL curricula or child life programs), now united under a common framework of Joy Intelligence.

For policy leaders and advocates, adopting Joy Intelligence in youth programs could be revolutionary. Imagine state education standards that include emotional safety measures, or coaching certifications that require emotional intelligence training, or pediatric practices that routinely assess a child's emotional well-being as part of check-ups. Such moves would institutionalize what this paper argues: that fostering joy and presence is as essential as any reading or vaccination program for the long-term welfare of our children. The cost of implementation is modest, often just training and time, but the cost of inaction is seen in the sobering statistics of youth depression, self-harm, and disconnection.

It is important to note that while the term “Joy Intelligence” is novel, it fundamentally repackages **evidence-based elements** – in a way that is perhaps more inspiring and cohesive for stakeholders. By speaking of *joy* (a term that resonates emotionally) in the context of science and development, we create a bridge between rigorous research and the heart of what every caregiver wants for their child. Joy is not a fluffy extra; it is a sign of a well-regulated, meaningfully engaged nervous system and mind. Neurobiologically, a joyful child is usually a child in the “green zone” of the nervous system – socially connected, cognitively receptive, and adaptable. Thus, aiming for joy is aiming for an optimal developmental state.

As we prepare this white paper for potential submission to academic and clinical journals in behavioral health, education, or youth development, we also acknowledge the need for continued research. Joy Intelligence as a framework should be empirically studied:

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for example, can we develop a reliable “JQ” measure and track its improvement with interventions? What are the longitudinal outcomes of children in programs explicitly using Joy Intelligence tools versus control groups? How do cultural differences play into expressions of safety, presence, and joy, and how might the model be adapted accordingly? These questions offer rich avenues for further inquiry. Initial indications from allied research (some of which we cited) are encouraging, but building a dedicated evidence base for JQ will strengthen its credibility and adoption.

In closing, Joy Intelligence represents both a return to basics – recognizing that every child first needs to feel safe and loved – and an innovative leap – asserting that joy itself can be a learned competency and a metric of developmental success. For policymakers, investing in JQ-informed initiatives could reduce downstream costs in mental health and correctional systems. For superintendents and youth program directors, it offers a framework to unify academic, social, and emotional goals under one umbrella of positive development. For therapists and researchers, it provides a holistic model that can enhance therapeutic and assessment approaches, focusing not just on alleviating pain but on building positive capacity. And for families, it is a reminder that moments of connection and joy in the living room or on the playground are not “bonus” moments – they are foundational experiences that shape a child’s brain and resilience for life.

By enabling emotional safety, we allow children to be fully present. By helping children be present, we open the door for them to experience joy. And by nurturing genuine joy, we raise a generation of emotionally resilient individuals who can not only weather life’s storms but also illuminate the world around them. The science and practice reviewed here make a compelling case that **Joy Intelligence™** is an idea whose time has come – a model of early emotional development that is measurable, teachable, and deeply needed in our homes, schools, and communities.

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