

Kira Willey

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE CHILDREN'S BOOK

*Breathe Like a Bear*



Includes 75+  
easy, playful  
ways to reclaim  
your mornings, car  
rides, mealtimes,  
and more

# THE JOYFUL CHILD

Calm the Chaos, Connect with  
Your Kids, and Create More Happiness  
in Your Daily Routines

## Reader's Guide

FOR PARENTS - PARENTING GROUPS - BOOK CLUBS - EDUCATORS

## About the Book

Joy isn't the reward you get after you survive a hard season of parenting. It's already there, in the ordinary moments you might be rushing through. That's the premise at the heart of *The Joyful Child*. This book gives you the tools to actually find it—and makes it surprisingly easy to do, even on hard days.

**Kira Willey**—author of seven bestselling children's mindfulness books, musician, educator, and mother of three—has spent more than two decades helping families find calm and connection in the chaos of daily life. *The Joyful Child* is her first book written directly for parents: a warm, practical guide to transforming challenging, overwhelming, or just plain mundane moments of your day into opportunities for genuine connection and joy.

Built around the real rhythm of family life—mornings, car rides, mealtimes, playtime, and bedtime—the book offers practical strategies, easy tips, been-there stories, and 75+ one-minute mindful tools you can use immediately. No special training required. No overhaul of your schedule. Just small, intentional shifts that add up to something lasting.

*The Joyful Child* offers a refreshingly hopeful, practical approach—it's your essential toolkit for creating the calm, connected family life you've always wanted.



## How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed for flexible use—whether you’re reading the book on your own, in a group, or exploring it as an educator.

### IT INCLUDES:

- ✿ **A brief summary** of the chapter’s key takeaways
- ✿ **Discussion questions** to spark honest, real conversation
- ✿ **“Try This Week” prompts** - simple, doable actions to try right away

You don’t need to read the guide in order. Like the book itself, you can jump to whatever moment of your day needs the most support right now.

## PART ONE: The Foundation

**Chapters 1–3 set the stage.** Before offering a single activity or tip, Kira asks you to understand why your own state of mind is the most powerful parenting tool you have—and to give yourself permission to start fresh, right now.



### INTRODUCTION & CHAPTER 1: A Joyful Way Forward

Kira opens with an honest picture of what parenting actually feels like—the gap between the connection we want and the chaos we’re managing—and makes a promise: it doesn’t have to stay this way. She also dispels the most common objections parents have to adding connection activities into their day (“I don’t have time,” “I’m not into mindfulness,” “My child is too intense for this”).

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Kira writes that “children are naturally joyful beings—it’s their birthright, their default state.” This book isn’t about teaching joy; it’s about clearing what’s in the way. What do you think is getting in the way of joy in your family right now?
- She argues that parenting from a place of fear and anxiety doesn’t lead to better outcomes—it just diminishes our joy in raising our kids. How does that land for you? Where do you feel the difference between parenting from fear versus from connection and joy?



## CHAPTER 2:

# Presence is the Path to Joy

This chapter takes an honest look at the gap between the parenting experience we imagine and the one we actually live—and why it’s hardest when we’re at our most depleted. Kira explores what gets in the way of genuine presence, and how our own emotional state can either anchor our children in calm and safety or pull us both under.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- When do you feel most fully present with your child? What makes those moments different from the rest?
- She talks about “co-escalation”—when our stress ramps up alongside our child’s, making things worse for everyone. Have you experienced this? What does it feel like in your body when it’s happening?



## CHAPTER 3:

# Here’s Your How – Calm, Connect, Create

The three-step Calm, Connect, Create cycle isn’t a sequence you do once—it’s an upward spiral that becomes a new family rhythm over time. Kira walks through each step with stories from her own parenting life, and the clarifying reminder that “calm” doesn’t mean you can’t have human emotions.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- “Calm yourself first” is the book’s most counterintuitive instruction. What gets in the way of doing that for you? What would make it more possible?
- “Create” is about intentionally designing the family environment you want. If you could redesign one part of your daily routine tomorrow, what would it be?



**TRY THIS WEEK:** When you feel frustration building, try this simple STOP strategy before reacting. It takes less than a minute, but it can bring a bit more clarity and maybe even calm in the middle of chaos.

#### STOP.

Literally just pause whatever you’re doing (and thinking about). You don’t have to freeze, just take a brief moment to reset your attention.

#### TAKE A BREATH.

Slow inhale through your nose, long exhale out of your mouth. Repeat. Focusing on your breath brings your awareness back to your body and into the present moment.

#### OBSERVE.

Notice how you’re feeling. What’s going on in your mind and body? Are you tense? Anxious? Completely over it? Notice any thoughts or emotions—without judgment. You don’t need to fix anything right now, just acknowledge what’s there.

#### PROCEED.

Now you get to decide how you want to move forward—hopefully with a little more grounded energy and a bit more clarity than you had sixty seconds ago.

## PART TWO: Your Daily Routines, Transformed

**Chapters 4–9 move through the architecture of a family day: wake-up to bedtime.** Each chapter follows the same shape—an honest “why it’s hard” section, a vision of what’s possible, practical tools for setting the stage, specific one-minute connection activities, and a “Your Turn” invitation. Jump to whatever chapter matches your biggest challenge right now.

### CHAPTER 4:

## Rise and Shine – Reclaiming Your Mornings



Kira describes mornings as a valuable opportunity to set the tone for your child’s entire day—and makes the case that the goal isn’t efficiency, it’s connection. Rushing just stresses everyone out physically and emotionally. She offers tools for shifting from reactive to intentional before you’ve even had your coffee.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What morning strategy from “Rise and Shine” feels most doable in your household right now? What would have to change for it to actually stick?
- She asks us to think about how we want our child to feel as they walk out the door in the morning. What’s your answer? How close is your current morning to that?

### TRY THIS WEEK:

The quick 3-2-1 exercise for mindful presence. Pause what you’re doing in the morning (for just 30 seconds, yes you can) and notice three things you can see, two things you can hear, one thing you can feel. Breathe deeply in and out, and remind yourself you are here, now. Carry on with your day.

## CHAPTER 5:

# On the Road – From Backseat Battles to Joyful Adventures

Kira explores both daily commutes and longer trips, offering ways to transform travel time from a source of stress into an opportunity for real, joyful connection.



### TRY THIS WEEK:

Create one small ritual you and your child both love for your next car ride or bus trip—a question of the day, an observation game, a song you always play. Use it every time, and notice how it shifts the energy of the journey.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What do your family trips or current daily commutes actually feel like? What's the energy, and what role are you playing in it?
- Think about a positive travel memory from your own childhood. What made it stick? How does that inform what you want to create for your child?



## CHAPTER 6:

# Brain Boosters – Fun Ways to Help Kids Focus and Listen

Kira unpacks why attention is so hard for children today—too much sitting, too much screen-switching, and too little movement, among other factors—and offers the insight that for children, movement isn't a break from learning. It IS learning. She also introduces music and rhythm as one of the most powerful attention tools we have.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- The research in this chapter on children and movement is striking—children sit for an average of seven hours a day, far more than their developing brains can handle. How does that change how you interpret your child's sometimes "difficult" behavior?
- She describes how turning a repeated instruction into a song or rhythm game transforms "compliance" into play. Is there a set of directions you repeat daily that you could try putting to music or rhythm? How might that feel?

### TRY THIS WEEK:

Pick one instruction you repeat daily and turn it into a song this week. Put it to the melody of a familiar tune, make one up, or just set it to a fun beat. Notice what happens.



## CHAPTER 7:

# Let's Play – Joining Your Child's World

Free play isn't a nice-to-have, it's a developmental necessity. In this chapter, Kira pushes back on the pressure to enrich, schedule, and direct every minute of childhood—and invites us to consider what children lose when they don't have enough unstructured time. She also invites parents to rediscover their own capacity for play.

### TRY THIS WEEK:

Protect at least one hour of completely unstructured time for your child—outside if possible. Resist the urge to organize or direct it.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Do you feel pressure to “enrich” your child's schedule? Where does that pressure come from?
- Describe a moment of playing with your child where you both just got lost in it together. How did it feel?

## CHAPTER 8:

# Time to Eat – Ending the Mealtime Madness



Kira describes feeling genuinely blindsided by how much feeding small humans was going to dominate her days. She reframes those meals not as a logistical burden, but as chances to build connection with your child. The key is releasing the outcomes we can't control and focusing on what we actually can.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What's the hardest part of mealtime in your home right now? Picky eating, getting everyone to the table, the “witching time” hour before the meal, the cleanup? What strategy in this chapter might help?
- She talks about “relationship over rules” as the guiding principle at the table. What's one mealtime rule you've been enforcing that you might be willing to soften or rethink?

### TRY THIS WEEK:

Let go of one mealtime expectation this week—maybe it's the clean plate, sitting still, or the mandatory trying of a new food. Notice if anything changes.



## CHAPTER 9:

# Good Night – Winding Down (Even on Hard Days) with Closeness and Calm



Kira spent three years in survival mode with a child who had severe sleep troubles. She shares what she eventually learned: bedtime isn't about compliance—it's about closing the day together in a way that builds trust and emotional safety. She offers practical tools that turn the last hour of the day into something you actually look forward to.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Does bedtime currently feel like something you “have to survive” or something you look forward to? What would it take to move it a few degrees in the direction you'd prefer?
- Kira says “take care of your own bedtime basics before starting your child's routine.” This sounds obvious, but most of us don't do it. What would getting yourself ready first actually require?



### TRY THIS WEEK:

Get into your cozies and do whatever else you need to do for yourself before starting the bedtime routine. Notice how it feels to take care of yourself this way. See if you show up differently with your child during bedtime.



# PART THREE: Help for When Things Fall Apart



## CHAPTER 10: SOS – Your First Aid Kit for Big Feelings

**The book's final chapter addresses the inevitable: meltdowns.** Kira has fireman-carried a hollering child out of a grocery store and talked a preschool director off the ledge after her son bit the director's daughter (among many, many other meltdowns). From that hard-won experience, she offers tools for staying anchored during your child's storm—and the reminder that these moments, weathered together, can deepen your bond rather than damage it.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Kira says “our job in a meltdown is NOT to end it, stop it in its tracks, or make it go away as quickly as possible.” Does that reframe feel realistic in the heat of the moment? What makes staying anchored hardest for you?
- She argues that practicing soothing tools with your child during calm moments is essential—so they're available and familiar when things get intense or challenging. How can you build that kind of practice into your daily routines?

### TRY THIS WEEK:

Practice asking “What else?” with your child in a low-stakes moment—after school, at dinner. Let them talk until they run out. Don't interrupt, redirect, or problem-solve.



# A Note for Educators

The tools in *The Joyful Child* belong in every classroom, too. Kira has spent decades leading mindfulness and movement programs in schools, and she knows that the same conditions that help children thrive at home (calm adults, movement, music, emotional safety, unstructured play) are the conditions that help them learn at school.

## KIRA'S FRAMEWORK TRANSLATES DIRECTLY TO EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS:



**\* Calm:** A regulated teacher creates a regulated classroom.  
Before redirecting a child's behavior, check your own state first.

**\* Connect:** Children learn from people they feel connected to. Even 30 seconds of genuine attention, or a question that shows you see who they are, changes the dynamic.

**\* Create:** The rituals and rhythms you establish in a classroom function exactly like the routines in this book. Music at transitions, movement breaks, a simple breathing activity before a test—these aren't just nice-to-haves. They're based in brain science, and they work.



### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Kira says that “for children, movement isn't a break from learning. It IS learning.” How does that land in the context of your school environment? What barriers keep you from implementing movement?
- She describes children's behavior as communication. Think of a student whose behavior is challenging right now. What might they be communicating?
- The book addresses the concept of co-regulation: that children calm down by attuning to the calm of the adults around them. What does that mean for your role in the classroom?
- Which of the book's tools—music, movement, breathing, rhythm—do you already use? Which would you like to add to your classroom practice?



## About Kira Willey



[kirawilley.com](http://kirawilley.com)



**Kira Willey** is an author, recording artist, and educator whose children's books—including the internationally bestselling *Breathe Like a Bear*, published in 24 languages—have helped millions of parents and teachers bring calm and connection into everyday life. She is co-creator and host of three PBS kids' shows and the creator of Rockin' Yoga school programs. A mom of three, she's spent more than two decades working alongside parents and educators in schools, workshops, and teacher trainings. *The Joyful Child* is her first book written directly for parents.



Find the activities, songs, and videos from the book, plus additional resources, [here!](#)

