



GUIDEBOOK



COURSE RECAP & CHEAT SHEET

BY MIA WISINSKI
PLAYFUL HEART PARENTING



WHAT THIS GUIDEBOOK IS:

This is a (*super-abbreviated*) recap/companion to the **Activate Play Mode** audio course!

Think of it like the “CliffsNotes” version

Feel free to skim before listening, follow along as you go, use it to jog your memory afterward – or all of the above!

Inside, you'll find:

- **Text recaps** for each course section
- **Skimmable takeaways** you can return to
- A cheat sheet you can screenshot or print to remind yourself of **key strategies** and concepts – with QR code for the strategy example videos

If you're viewing this digitally, you can **tap HERE** for all **strategy example videos**, as well as the icon or title of each strategy section to be taken to that specific video.

CHEERING YOU ON ALWAYS!

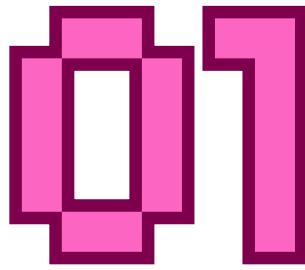
Mia Wisinski



TABLE OF CONTENTS

TAP A TITLE TO JUMP TO THAT SECTION

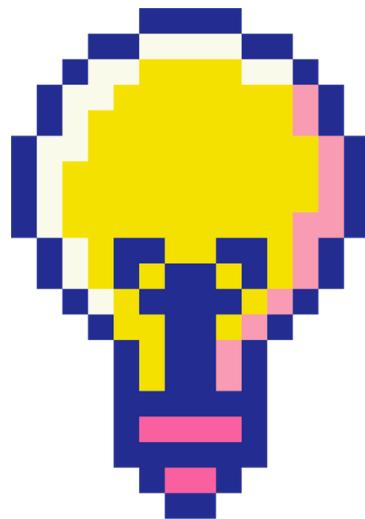
- 4 – ACTIVATE PLAY MODE: INTRODUCTION**
- 7 – INTRO: PLAYFUL STRATEGIES**
- 8 – PERSONIFICATION**
- 10 – MECHANICAL PLAY**
- 12 – CHALLENGES & GAMIFYING**
- 14 – PLAYING THE OPPOSITE**
- 16 – MYSTERY, MAGIC, & CONFUSION**
- 18 – MAKE IT A MUSICAL**
- 20 – CHARACTERS & ROLE PLAY**
- 22 – STORYTELLING**
- 24 – ROMANTICIZING THE MUNDANE**
- 26 – BODY & BREATH**
- 28 – GENERAL NONSENSE**
- 30 – HOW TO ACTUALLY ACTIVATE PLAY MODE**
- 32 – ADDRESSING COMMON CONCERNS**
- 35 – THE PLAYFUL REBELLION**
- 36 – CHEAT SHEET**
- 37 – ABOUT MIA**



ACTIVATE PLAY MODE: INTRODUCTION

PLAYFULNESS ISN'T SOMETHING YOU HAVE TO INVENT – IT'S ALREADY INSIDE YOU.

- **ACTIVATE:** IT'S ALREADY THERE – YOU'RE JUST LEARNING TO ACCESS IT MORE EASILY.
- **PLAY:** ENGAGEMENT AND ENJOYMENT (OPPOSITE OF SERIOUS) – NOT JUST FOR KIDS!
- **MODE:** A STATE YOU CAN INTENTIONALLY SHIFT INTO.



WHAT THIS COURSE IS:

Activate Play Mode helps you tap into the playfulness that's already inside you – not by adding more to your plate, but by shifting your mindset and giving you flexible tools and strategies to defuse tension, reduce power struggles, and connect through lightheartedness, even in tough moments.

WHAT IT'S NOT:

This isn't a list of bonding games or a one-size-fits-all parenting formula. We're not striving to be happy and playful all the time. We're striving to build small, sustainable patterns that make parenting feel lighter, more joyful, and deeply connected.



ACTIVATE PLAY MODE: INTRODUCTION (CONTINUED)

LET'S DE-GUILTYfy:

Parenting is hard for *all* of us. We're not meant to be perfect and playful all the time — that's unrealistic and unhealthy.

The goal here is to build playful **patterns** over time. And what a gift to model that kind of growth for our kids.

MAIN PHILOSOPHY:



"SILLINESS FOR THE SAKE OF FUN."

Make space for playfulness when ***nothing is at stake***.

In other words, don't save playfulness for when you need cooperation. Kids can tell when play has an agenda. When we only use it to "get" something in return, it loses its magic and goes against the true spirit of play.

So instead, we build a **culture of playfulness** by offering it freely and *often*, just like unconditional love!

→ NOTE:

As you explore the upcoming **strategies**, try picking one or two to practice when the stakes are low.

For example, if I talk about using *personification* to help your child try a bite of broccoli, start by bringing **your own** snack to life — **just for fun**.

When playful moments are built into your relationship **ahead of time**, they're way more effective in the tough times.



ACTIVATE PLAY MODE: INTRODUCTION (CONTINUED)

THE WHY:

Playfulness helps create a sense of **security**.



Dr. Becky Kennedy's analogy:

We are the pilots of our family; our kids look to us when things get bumpy. If we're sturdy, they feel safe.

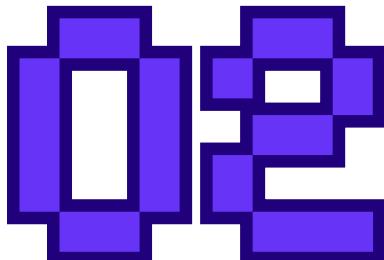
Taking it a step further, when we add in **playfulness** and lightheartedness we make them feel even safer, like flight attendants cracking jokes during the safety spiel.

THE "SCIENCY" REASONS PLAY WORKS:

- ➔ Releases **oxytocin** (bonding hormone) → strengthens connection, lowers stress
- ➔ Reduces **cortisol** (the stress hormone) → helps everyone feel calmer
- ➔ Activates the **prefrontal cortex** → boosts flexibility, creativity, cooperation
- ➔ Helps both kids and adults **shift from fight-or-flight into connection mode**

HOW PLAY HELPS WITH EMOTIONAL REGULATION:

- ➔ Think of emotions like a **car**:
 - Too revved up? Play taps the brakes
 - Stuck or disconnected? Play hits the gas
- ➔ Playfulness can help everyone **shift into a better gear**



INTRO: PLAYFUL STRATEGIES

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM EACH
UPCOMING SECTION:

- A CLEAR EXPLANATION OF THE STRATEGY
- WHY IT WORKS (EVEN IF IT SEEMS RANDOM AT FIRST)
- TIPS TO MAKE IT EASIER, MORE EFFECTIVE, AND MORE FUN
- EXAMPLES OF THE STRATEGY IN ACTION
- A “YOUR TURN” PROMPT TO HELP YOU MAKE IT YOUR OWN



CORE THEME:

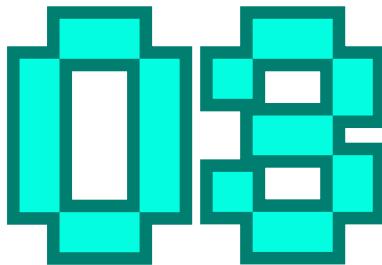
POWER REVERSAL!

Let your kid be the strong, smart, clever one – and you play the confused, scared, or overwhelmed role.

Why it works:

Kids spend most of their time being told what to do. Power reversal gives them *a chance to feel in control* in a safe, silly way. Kids know it’s pretend – but the confidence, connection, and laughter are real.

Giving kids power in play reduces the need to fight for it outside of play.

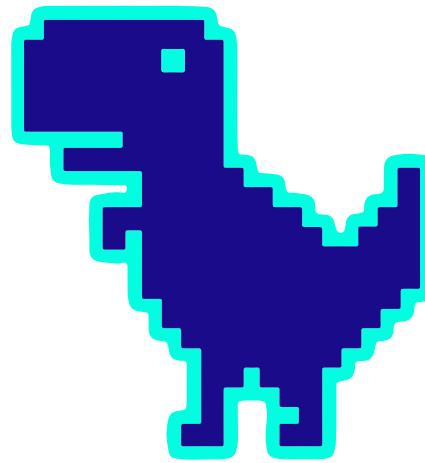


PERSONIFICATION

WHAT IT IS: BRINGING INANIMATE OBJECTS TO LIFE AS A PLAYFUL “BUFFER,” LIKE A TOY, BITE OF FOOD, OR YOUR OWN FOOT!

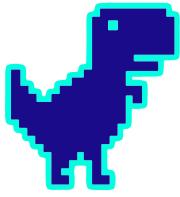
WHY IT WORKS: IT’S FUNNY, SURPRISING, AND LOWERS TENSION. THE PRETEND CHARACTER ACTS AS A THIRD PARTY TO REDIRECT SILLY OR FRUSTRATED ENERGY.

TIP: EVEN A SIMPLE VOICE CHANGE – A HIGH PITCH, AN ACCENT, OR A SILLY TONE – CAN SNAP KIDS (AND YOU) OUT OF TENSION AND INTO PLAY. A SOCK SAYING “HEY! IT’S ME! PSSST – DOWN HERE!” IN A GOOFY VOICE IS OFTEN ALL IT TAKES TO SPARK CURIOSITY AND SHIFT THE MOOD.



EXAMPLES:

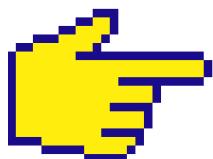
- A travel cup getting scolded for closing itself
- Toothbrush “cleaning ladies” begging not to work
- A stuffed tiger who loves eating dirty diapers
- Froot Loops refusing to “get in the bath” (milk)
- A confused Sock Monster threatening to nibble ears
- Shoes desperate to dance
- A toy dinosaur accused of tortilla theft
- Broccoli begging for “just a trim” (& screaming from bite)
- A cup whispering “Pleeeeease drink from me!”
- A teddy bear who’s afraid of missing potty time



PERSONIFICATION (CONTINUED)

TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS SECTION:

- This is **not just for toddlers**. Teens, tweens – even adults – love a little silly pretend when it's given freely.
- Even **big kids crave play**; they just need permission – don't let the dread of eye rolls stop you from even trying!
- Laughter is the **ultimate stress-buster** and de-escalator, and it's contagious.
- **Amusing ourselves** with playfulness is a great way to counteract our own burnout and stress.
- When we **fill our kids' cups** with the playful connection they crave, it can then help them move into natural independent play



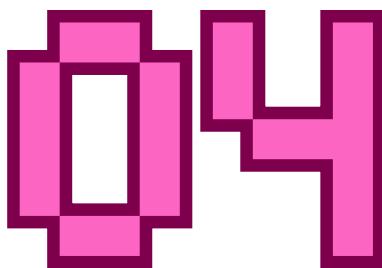
YOUR TURN!

Look around – what **object** could you bring to life **right now just for the sake of fun?**

What might it **say**?

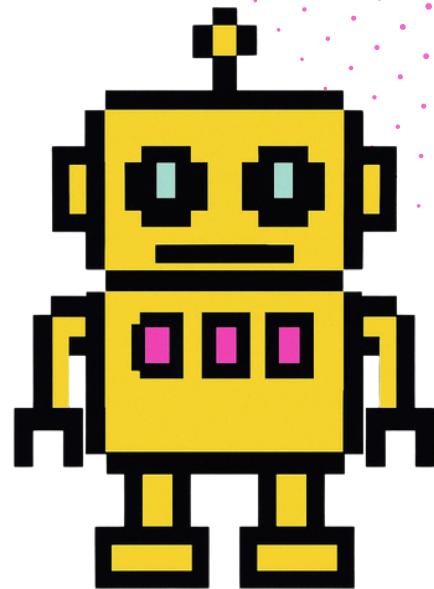
Could it be silly or **wrong** so your child gets to “correct” it?

Think about **common power struggles** – could any item involved become a playful character to shift the mood?



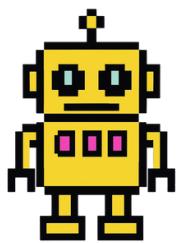
MECHANICAL PLAY

- ➡ **WHAT IT IS:** USING ROBOTIC, AUTOMATED, OR SYSTEM-LIKE BEHAVIORS, LIKE PRETENDING TO BE A ROBOT OR MACHINE.
- ➡ **WHY IT WORKS:** IT'S A LOW-ENERGY, PLAYFUL WAY TO SHIFT THE MOOD WHEN YOU'RE EXHAUSTED OR FRUSTRATED & KIDS ARE NATURALLY DRAWN TO MACHINES, ELECTRONICS, BUTTONS, AND CONTROLS. IT'S STRUCTURE + LEVITY!
- ➡ **TIP:** PRACTICE WHEN THINGS ARE CALM, SO IT FEELS NATURAL AND EFFECTIVE WHEN YOU ACTUALLY NEED IT DURING TOUGH MOMENTS.



EXAMPLES:

- “Buttons” to sit in and scoot high chair
- Robot commands for getting dressed
- “Polite Mode Auto-Translator”
- “Bath robot”
- Silly video game narration for morning routine
- “Rewind” to try again (for parents and kids!)
- GPS voice to guide transitions
- Nose-tap button for cooperation
- Volume knob
- System shutdown for overwhelm
- Becoming a construction truck for toy cleanup

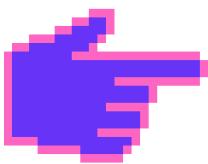


MECHANICAL PLAY (CONTINUED)

TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS SECTION:



- A playful, silly approach connects us all and helps us **respect each other**. Love and respect is a two-way street!
- You don't need a fully-baked plan – just a **playful energy**; kids pick up on it instantly, and the magic comes from following it together.
- Kids are the best when it comes to **jumping into imaginary play**, no questions asked.
- Play can reach beyond **communication barriers** and help us understand each other in a way that just regular old talking cannot always achieve.



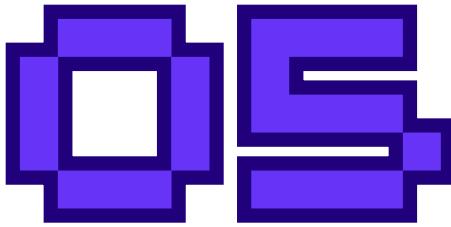
YOUR TURN!

What kind of mechanical **voice** would amuse you or your child – robot, Siri, GPS, elevator lady?

When are you most likely to feel **overwhelmed** during the day?

Can you **plan** a little mechanical-themed silliness to insert there, like a “button control” or “malfunction,” just for fun? No goal, no pressure – just connection.

BONUS: Any time your kid **laughs** throughout the day, imagine a “ding ding ding!” like from a video game – like you’re collecting **connection coins**!



PLAYING THE OPPOSITE

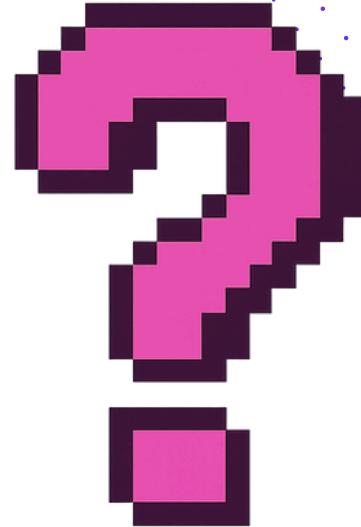
→ **WHAT IT IS:** PRETENDING TO BE CLUELESS, SHOCKED, ANGRY, OR SCARED... WHEN YOUR KID DOES EXACTLY WHAT YOU ACTUALLY WANT THEM TO DO.

→ **WHY IT WORKS:** IT FLIPS THE SCRIPT IN A SILLY WAY THAT SURPRISES KIDS, GIVES THEM AGENCY, AND INVITES LAUGHTER INSTEAD OF PUSHBACK.

→ **TIP:** CHOOSE YOUR “SETUP”:

1. BE PLAYFULLY CLUELESS
2. PRETEND TO HOPE FOR THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT YOU WANT
3. DRAMATICALLY DECLARE WHAT *BETTER NOT* HAPPEN

THEN BE SHOCKED, CONFUSED, IN AWE, SILLY-ANGRY, OR “SCARED”



EXAMPLES:

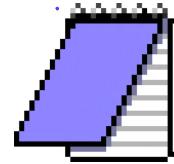
- “I hope you don’t brush so well that I get scared of your smile!”
- “You better not go potty while I’m not looking...”
- “Whatever you do, don’t smile!”
- “Don’t come near me or I’ll fart!”
- “Nooo! Don’t start reading that book out loud!”
- “I’ll leave this bite here... hope an elf doesn’t steal it!”
- “If you take that medicine, I’ll moo like an angry cow!”
- “You’re just a baby – you couldn’t do that on your own!”
- Wear socks on your ears or put clothes on backwards – be “embarrassed” when they correct you



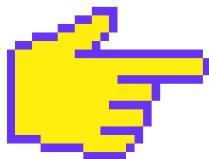
PLAYING THE OPPOSITE

(CONTINUED)

TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS SECTION:



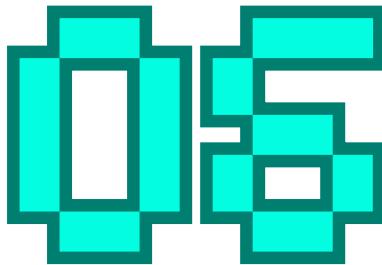
- Works **across ages** with different delivery – goofy with littles, more subtle with older kids
- Playfulness can be especially helpful for **neurodivergent** kids who crave novelty in routine moments
- Playing the opposite taps into **power reversal** by letting kids feel “right” and in control – especially helpful during transitions or power struggles.



YOUR TURN!

All kids experience some level of **powerlessness** – whether it’s from school rules, medical needs, or just the realities of being a kid.

Take a moment to consider where your child might feel **particularly** stuck, and how “playing the opposite” somehow related to *that topic* could offer them a moment of **control**, connection, and lightness.

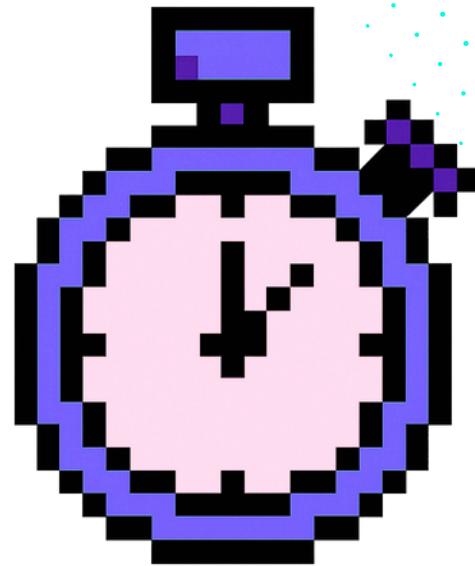


CHALLENGES & GAMIFYING

→ **WHAT IT IS:** TURNING A TASK INTO A GAME, CHALLENGE, OR CONTEST OF SOME SORT, OFTEN WITH A TIME LIMIT OR NUMBER VALUE.

→ **WHY IT WORKS:** OUR BRAINS – ESPECIALLY KIDS' – LOVE A CHALLENGE; GAMES BOOST MOTIVATION, FOCUS, AND MAKE BORING TASKS MORE DOABLE.

→ **TIP:** MATCH THE CHALLENGE TO YOUR CHILD'S ENERGY – AND USE PLAYFUL, NON-TANGIBLE "REWARDS" LIKE SILLY TITLES, ACCENTS, OR CHOOSING THE NEXT GAME TO KEEP THINGS LIGHT AND CONNECTED.



EXAMPLES:

- Race against a clean-up song; track how many plays it takes
 - Appoint kids as scorekeeper and DJ to restart the song
- “There’s no way you can do X in one minute” challenge
- “Are you strong/smart/fast enough to...?” game show style
- Who can make the most bubbles during toothbrushing
- Hide-under-blankets bedtime challenge
- “Most believable sleeper” or “most realistic spaghetti” game (for calming down before bed)
- “I’m gonna win!” races to everyday tasks
- Silent screaming contest to lower volume level

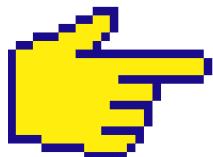


CHALLENGES & GAMIFYING

(CONTINUED)

TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS SECTION:

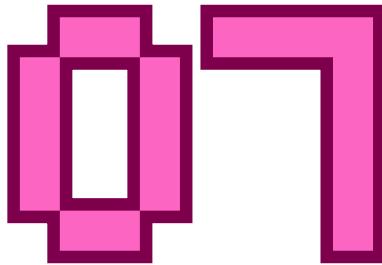
- Playful ideas **don't always work** the first time – and that's okay. The attempt itself builds connection. The more we **practice**, the better it will feel.
- It's okay to set **boundaries** directly – play doesn't replace discipline, but can often ease the tension around it. **Outside-the-moment** conversations are always best to teach values and expectations.
- Putting **siblings** on the same team “against” you is a great way to encourage cooperation.
- Matching the strategy to the **energy** in the moment (like switching from mechanical to gamifying) can be really helpful.



YOUR TURN!

Take a second to think through **daily struggles** and brainstorm any that could be a **game, challenge, or contest**.

While you're at it, think through what might be a funny or fun playful (not material) **“reward”** for your child— for example: *“Whoever wins, we each have to call them Your Majesty and give them a compliment every 15 minutes until bedtime!”*



MYSTERY, MAGIC, & CONFUSION

➡ **WHAT IT IS:** PRETENDING SOMETHING MYSTERIOUS OR MAGICAL IS HAPPENING. REACTING WITH CONFUSION, ASTONISHMENT, OR AWE.

➡ **WHY IT WORKS:** IT MIXES SURPRISE, SILLINESS, AND POWER REVERSAL—TURNING EVERYDAY ROUTINES INTO MAGICAL MOMENTS WHERE YOUR CHILD GETS TO BE THE CLEVER ONE.

➡ **TIP:** YOU DON'T NEED TO BE AN ACTOR. SOMETIMES A LITTLE GASP OR A WIDE-EYED LOOK AND DROPPED JAW IS ALL IT TAKES!



EXAMPLES:

- Pretend you see a character in their mouth and need the toothbrush to catch it
- Act “freaked out” that a dish “floated itself” into the sink
- Make lotion “disappear” by rubbing it in
- Act like a mysterious “force field” is blocking you from fulfilling a request until they say “please”
- Act “frozen” until someone makes you laugh
- Warn that eating their food will make you tap dance
- See silly scenes in a “crystal ball” about a future event
- X-ray vision to “see” germs, sugar bugs, or food in belly

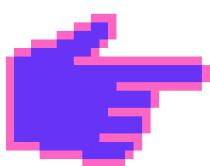


MYSTERY, MAGIC, & CONFUSION

(CONTINUED)

TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS SECTION:

- You don't need to be **over-the-top**. Low-effort sometimes works even better.
- Some of the best moments come when you least expect to have the energy for them. Play and laughter can **re-energize** you.
- Magical play is a great way to shift the energy when the **vibe is “off”** – even if the issue isn't with your child's behavior
- Magic works especially well in **transition** moments or when **motivation** is low
- We can use play to **reinforce values** in a way that feels light instead of lecturing



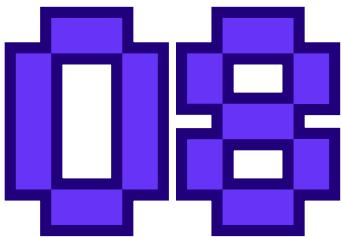
YOUR TURN!

Pick one totally normal **object** near you right now, and imagine it has a **magical power**. What could it do? How would you react?

*No wrong answers; this is just a **creativity exercise!***

Try being **shocked** by something totally normal, like:
“Wait... weren’t you just on the couch?? Do you have teleportation powers?!?”

Think about **something your child resists** – could you somehow add mystery or magic to shift the tone?

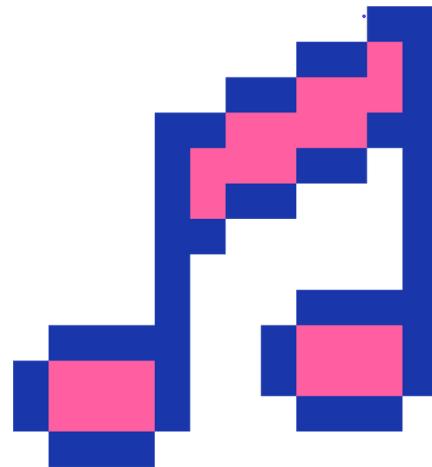


MAKE IT A MUSICAL

→ **WHAT IT IS:** INCORPORATING SILLY SONGS, RHYTHMS, AND PLAYFUL DANCING INTO ROUTINES, TASKS, OR CHALLENGING MOMENTS.

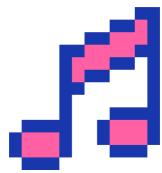
→ **WHY IT WORKS:** IT'S A FAST, POWERFUL WAY TO REGULATE BOTH YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEMS – RELEASING ENDORPHINS, CALMING THE BODY, AND SHIFTING THE VIBE. WHEN WORDS FALL FLAT, A LITTLE JINGLE OR RHYTHM CAN GRAB ATTENTION AND BRING YOU BACK INTO CONNECTION.

→ **TIP:** YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE A “GOOD” SINGER OR DANCER; LETTING LOOSE IN YOUR OWN HOME WITH YOUR OWN KIDS MODELS JOY WITHOUT WORRYING WHAT OTHERS THINK!



EXAMPLES:

- Randomly breaking into song mid-sentence
- Opera singing (instead of yelling)
- Clapping slow/fast to control dressing pace
- Dancing instead of walking to the door
- “Mandatory silent disco” to release anxiety
- “I know it’s hard to wait” to “Farmer in the Dell” tune
- Singing or chanting instructions to familiar tunes
- Singing reminders for manners or repairs after conflict
- Bursting into a random parody to lighten the mood after an intense moment
- Doing a silly dance as a “reward”

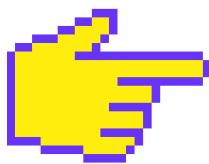
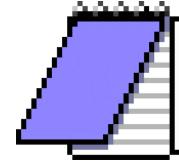


MAKE IT A MUSICAL

(CONTINUED)

TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS SECTION:

- Some kids say “**stop singing!**” or “**stop dancing!**” out of desire for control or due to sensory overload — try playful musical moments during **calm**, happy times to build comfort and connection when the stakes are low, out of the heat of a moment.
- Anticipating tricky moments and offering playful choices can prevent power struggles (like, “*Should I make up a silly song while we brush teeth or a silly dance?*”)
- Music and dance doesn’t just help kids – it helps **US** move into a more regulated state, too.

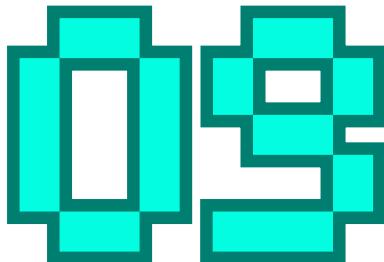


YOUR TURN!

Think of one moment in your day that’s **mildly tricky** – bedtime? Mornings? Diaper changes?

How could you incorporate a simple **song, chant, or dance** move into that moment *before* any tension builds?

You don’t have to write a full musical or even rhyme or make any sense. Just a **parody** of a favorite song or a funny repeatable **jingle** might be all it takes to turn things around.



CHARACTERS & ROLE PLAY

→ **WHAT IT IS:** PRETENDING TO BE ANYONE OR ANYTHING BUT YOURSELF OR PRETENDING YOUR CHILD IS ANOTHER CHARACTER.

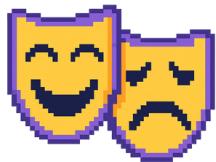
→ **WHY IT WORKS:** KIDS NATURALLY LOVE PRETEND PLAY — IT'S HOW THEY MAKE SENSE OF THE WORLD — SO WHEN WE JOIN THEM IN IT, EVEN MUNDANE TASKS CAN BECOME MOMENTS OF CONNECTION AND COOPERATION.

→ **TIP:** JUST THROW SOMETHING OUT THERE WITHOUT OVERTHINKING IT. YOUR ACCENT CAN BE TERRIBLE. YOUR CHARACTER CAN BE MADE UP ON THE SPOT. WHAT YOUR KIDS WILL FEEL IS YOUR WILLINGNESS TO TRY.



EXAMPLES:

- Playing a villain trying to vacuum toys before kids clean up
- Becomes circus announcer for “handwashing show”
- Becoming coffee shop “customers” at bath time
- Turning into “Butt-Wiper 3000” for potty time
- Pretending baby sibling is a “giant” or “alien” to ease tension when they disrupt older sibling’s play
- Becoming a silly, wild alter-ego character to release steam
- Pretending to be an animal (or that your child is an animal)
- Becoming a narrator or sports commentator for the routine
- “Mommy/Daddy Monster” – stomp/roar/chase
- Becoming a nervous/clueless personal assistant or butler

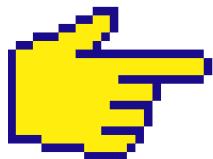
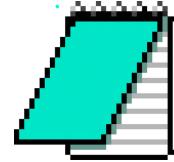


CHARACTERS & ROLE PLAY

(CONTINUED)

TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS SECTION:

- Playing a **version of yourself** (villain, butler, monster, etc.) works just as well as invented characters
- Kids often lead the way when they see you're simply *open* to play – **follow their lead**
- Sometimes playfulness is just as much for us as it is for the kids, because it helps us **reset**.
- Lightening the mood with silliness often works better than trying to teach a **lesson** when everyone's tired, hungry, or dysregulated.
- It's okay to say "no thank you" to play. Then, when you *do* have the **capacity**, saying yes (*even without a plan*) can open the door to meaningful, connected moments.



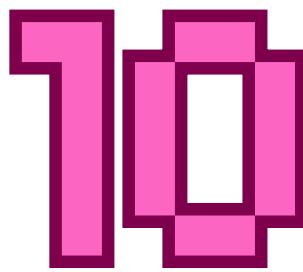
YOUR TURN!

Easy Characters to Try:

Cowboy, butler, witch, sportscaster, monster, salesperson, animal, or a character from your child's favorite book/movie/TV show – whatever feels fun.

Pick one and think of how you could drop it into daily routines like brushing teeth, getting dressed, or clean-up time.

You can be the character or **bestow** it upon your kid and see where they take it.



STORYTELLING

→ **WHAT IT IS:** NARRATING REALITY OR COLLABORATING ON A FICTIONAL STORY FOR PROCESSING, CONNECTION, REGULATION, REPAIR.

→ **WHY IT WORKS:** STORIES HELP KIDS (AND US) PROCESS STRESS, SHIFT PERSPECTIVE, AND RECONNECT – BECAUSE IMAGINATION CREATES DISTANCE FROM TENSION AND MAKES SPACE FOR HUMOR, COLLABORATION, AND JOY.

→ **TIP:** YOU DON'T NEED A PERFECT PLOT – JUST START NARRATING WITH A SIMPLE “ONCE UPON A TIME,” INVITE YOUR CHILD TO ADD SILLY TWISTS OR SOLVE THE PROBLEM, AND LET THE STORY UNFOLD TOGETHER.



EXAMPLES:

- Build a collaborative story one sentence or word at a time (great for car rides, restaurants, waiting rooms, bedtime)
- Narrate real events like a silly adventure (e.g., a raccoon who bumps his paw if your kiddo got hurt)
- Add a magical twist to daily routines (e.g., a brave toothbrush exploring a cave)
- Tell a story to help repair after yelling (“the panda mom who roared too loud”)
- Make up a silly tale about an upcoming event to reduce anxiety (“chicken school!”)
- Let kids add “fortunately / unfortunately” twists to a chaotic day’s retelling

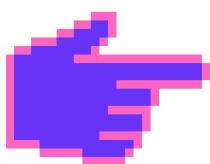


STORYTELLING (CONTINUED)

TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS SECTION:



- **Narrating** real events with a fun twist makes it easier to process scary or stressful moments
- **Humor** (especially silly or gross) helps kids release big emotions – so bring on the poop & farts!
- Storytelling works for any age – it builds trust, memories, and creative thinking and is a great way to connect kids across **age gaps**.
- When we use storytelling to reconnect or reset the energy, we often regulate **ourselves** too
- Storytelling lets you weave in **hot topics** *outside of tense moments*, using playful characters and silly scenarios to plant the seeds without the pressure.



YOUR TURN!

Think about a **calm** time of day – like car rides, bath time, or bedtime – when you could tell a silly story *just for fun*.

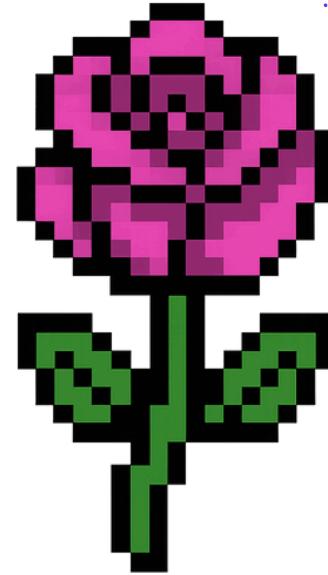
Then think about how in the future you might try using this strategy to weave in a **hot topic** – like brushing teeth, for example, making up a story about an alligator whose breath was so stinky it wilted the swamp.

Make it funny, make it **weird** and let your kids steer the story if they want!

11

ROMANTICIZING THE MUNDANE

- **WHAT IT IS:** USING LANGUAGE THAT MAKES EVERYDAY TASKS FEEL WHIMSICAL, ADVENTUROUS, OR FANCY.
- **WHY IT WORKS:** KIDS ARE NATURAL “YES, AND-ERS” — THEY JUMP RIGHT INTO IMAGINATIVE PLAY, AND WHEN WE FRAME TASKS AS ADVENTURES, IT SHIFTS THEIR FOCUS FROM THE CHORE TO THE FUN.
- **TIP: MAIN CHARACTER ENERGY** – LET THEM BE THE VIP, ASTRONAUT, OR SPA GUEST WHILE YOU PLAY THE NERVOUS HELPER; IT’S NOT BEING THEIR “SERVANT” FOR REAL; IT’S JUST CONNECTING THROUGH ROLE PLAY + POWER REVERSAL.



EXAMPLES:

- Bath time becomes a fancy spa – (no props needed)
- The shower turns into a rainforest waterfall
- The car is a spaceship – buckle up for blastoff!
- Each bite of food unlocks the castle to free a dragon
- Broken ornament gets a dramatic farewell speech
- Dinner is a fancy restaurant with “no smiling allowed”
- Getting dressed becomes a fashion show
- Grocery trip turns into a timed game show
- Running errands becomes a spy mission



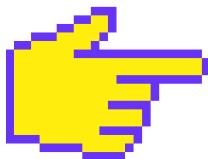
ROMANTICIZING THE MUNDANE

(CONTINUED)

TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS SECTION:



- Sometimes just a **hint** of the game – like a silly phrase or goofy accent – is all it takes, and often **saves more time** and energy than a power struggle.
- Imagine your most playful, calm, and creative self – and try **channeling that version of you** when tension starts to rise.
- Play can ease **food challenges** – helping kids relax, engage, and try new things without pressure.
- When we let ourselves laugh, we **model joy** – and show our kids that fun isn’t just for little ones, it’s for life!



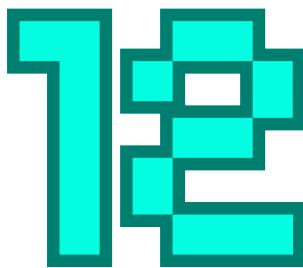
YOUR TURN!

Pick a part of your routine that *isn't* a power struggle and ask yourself: “*How could I add some playful language here?*”

Then try thinking about a part of the day that *is* hard.

Is there a way to turn it into an imaginative **adventure** or make it “**fancy**” somehow just with the *language* you’re using? No extra physical energy or props required – just the words you’re using.

This kind of play builds memories and helps us find joy in the **ordinary**. Even if your child doesn’t laugh or play along every time, they’re soaking up that lightness.

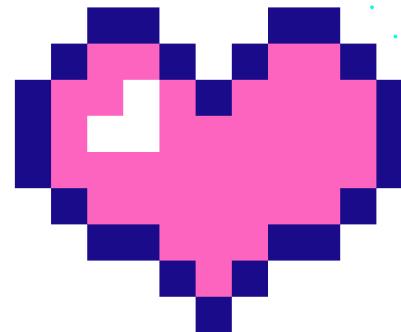


BODY AND BREATH

➡ **WHAT IT IS:** MAKING BREATHING, MOVEMENT, AND PHYSICAL CONTACT FUN, HELPING EVERYONE RESET AND REGULATE.

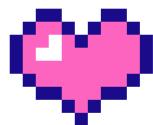
➡ **WHY IT WORKS:** TURNING BREATH, MOVEMENT, AND TOUCH INTO PLAYFUL MOMENTS GIVES KIDS A GENTLE, NATURAL WAY TO RESET THEIR BODIES AND FEEL SAFE, CONNECTED, AND SUPPORTED.

➡ **TIP:** PRACTICE DURING CALM MOMENTS SO THESE TOOLS FEEL FAMILIAR WHEN YOU NEED THEM MOST.



EXAMPLES:

- “Smell a cupcake / Blow out birthday candles”
- Blow giant imaginary “bubbles”
- Make couch cushion a “villain” for kids to stomp & wrestle
- Huff and puff game: blow each other across the room
- Balloon pop contest – slow exhale with a “ssss” sound
- Roar like a lion cub (big breath and exhale)
- Pillow whack game: “Is that all ya got??”
- Push against hands or wall to release frustration
- Lemon face/orange face scrunch and stretch
- Magnetic shoulders: “Power ON!” scrunch, “OFF!” drop
- Pillow sandwich game or “Mommy Limbo” for playful touch
- Secret silly handshake for playful physical contact

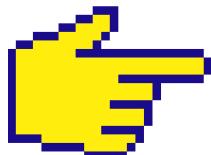
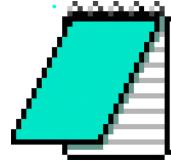


BODY AND BREATH

(CONTINUED)

TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS SECTION:

- These tools work best when practiced in **calm moments**, so they're easier to lean on when things get tough.
- When a meltdown is already underway, it's not the time to introduce something new, especially something playful – it might even feel **dismissive** to some kids.
- Playful physical outlets give kids a safe space to release big emotions – and contrary to common fears, this actually **reduces aggression**
- Kids often can't *talk* their way through big emotions – but playful movement and laughter can help those feelings surface and **release** in a way words can't.



YOUR TURN!

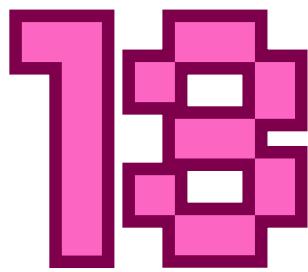
Easy Characters to Try:

Think of a time of day that often feels **tough**.

Choose **one** breathing idea or one movement idea to try during a **calm** moment so your child is familiar with it *before* you ever try it during a meltdown or challenging moment.

Think about what your child tends to do when they're **frustrated** – hit, kick, run away? How could you **redirect** that physical energy into a playful outlet like stomping or pillow wrestling?

The goal is never to **force** calm – it's to help create the conditions for calm to **return**. Play helps us do that.



GENERAL NONSENSE

→ **WHAT IT IS:** RANDOM SILLINESS TO DIFFUSE TENSION – NICKNAMES, BANANA PHONES, FART NOISES, SILLY FACES AND SOUNDS.

→ **WHY IT WORKS:** NONSENSE INTERRUPTS TENSION WITH SURPRISE AND HUMOR, HELPS US ALL RELAX AND LAUGH, AND REMINDS US THAT WE'RE ON THE SAME TEAM!

→ **TIP:** DON'T OVERTHINK NONSENSE – RANDOM, SILLY MOMENTS WORK BEST WHEN THEY'RE SPONTANEOUS, SURPRISING, AND LET YOUR CHILD FEEL LIKE THE CLEVER ONE.



EXAMPLES:

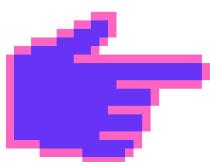
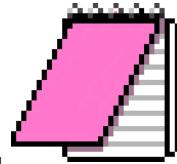
- Turning your hand into a pretend ringing phone to “take their call”
- Placing one Cheerio in a bowl as a joke
- Asking for their weirdest laugh
- Silly faces or sounds to cut tension
- Using a spatula to “pry” a child out of bed
- Saying “1, 2, 3... FART!” instead of “cheese” for a photo
- Pretending there’s a farting monster in the pajama drawer
- Having a silly two-voice conversation with yourself
- Playing “What have you DONE?!” in funny voices to prompt post-transition bonding and laughs.
- Giving instructions in gibberish



GENERAL NONSENSE (CONTINUED)

TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS SECTION:

- Even if they don't play along, your **energy shift** alone can reset the moment.
- Humor is great for **reconnecting** after school or during transitions.
- The goal isn't just to **distract**, but rather to loosen up the vibe, co-regulate, and remember why we like each other!
- When it comes to **potty humor**, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em! (we can always have the conversation that this is an "in-our-home" kind of humor but not for school, public., etc.)
- This isn't about cutting off every big emotion with a laugh. **Tantrums** are normal. **Emotions** are valid. But sometimes laughter is just another kind of **release**, like crying. It helps everyone reset.



YOUR TURN!

Try this rapid-fire **creativity warmup**:

Look around you. What's one **object** you could use the "**wrong**" way? A paper towel roll as a unicorn horn? A plant as a pet? Pick something and pretend it's something ridiculous.

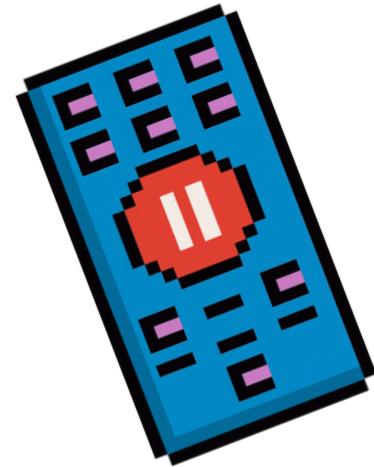
Now, let's play with **silly voices**. Take a basic line like:
"You forgot to throw away your trash!"

Say it in as many **weird** voices as you can, back to back – no thinking, just go for it. The weirder, the better.

14

HOW TO ACTUALLY ACTIVATE PLAY MODE BEFORE YOU EXPLODE!

PICTURE A GIANT **REMOTE**. WHEN OVERWHELM BUILDS, PRESS “PAUSE” IN YOUR MIND – LIKE YOU’RE A TOY OR ROBOT BEING PAUSED. THEN, TAKE A BREATH AND **ASK YOURSELF THESE FOUR QUICK QUESTIONS:**

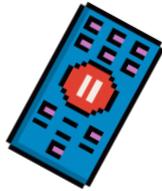


- 1 WHAT’S GOING ON INSIDE ME?** AM I TIRED, STRESSED, OR OVERSTIMULATED? IS SOMETHING ELSE AFFECTING MY REACTION?
- 2 WILL THIS MAKE THINGS BETTER OR WORSE?** AM I ABOUT TO ESCALATE A POWER STRUGGLE OR REPEAT A PATTERN I USUALLY REGRET?
- 3 DOES THIS ALIGN WITH MY VALUES?** DOES MY RESPONSE MATCH THE KIND OF PARENT I WANT TO BE?
- 4 COULD PLAYFULNESS WORK HERE?** IF YES, QUICKLY SCAN THE ENERGY AND PICK ONE OF THE STRATEGIES.

“PRESS PLAY” MINDSET:

Try something and consider it an experiment:

- Expect it *not* to work
- Hope for the best
- Celebrate either way (because even if it flops, you still interrupted your own stress spiral even if for a moment – and that’s a massive win.)



HOW TO ACTUALLY ACTIVATE PLAY MODE BEFORE YOU EXPLODE!

(CONTINUED)

PLAYFULNESS FOR REPAIR:

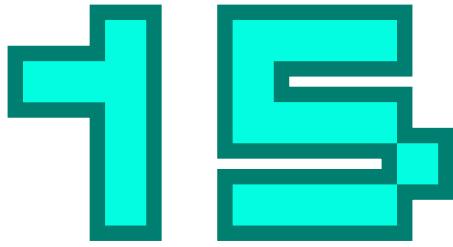
- Didn't hit pause in time? It happens. Good news! Playful **repair** is powerful.
- Try: "*Oops, I think I hit my **grumpy mode**. Let me switch it real quick.*" OR: "*Can you hit my **rewind button**? I want to try that again.*"



You're not just apologizing – you're **modeling ownership, humility, and reconnection** through play.

SOME GO-TO SELF-REGULATION MOVES

- **Robot** voice when overstimulated
- **Opera singer** or rockstar instead of yelling
- **Answering machine** voice when you need 5 seconds of silence – "*Mommy isn't here right now – BEEP!*"
- Roar like a silly **monster** to release tension
- "*I'm gonna **huff, puff, and blow** you away!*"
- Do something so ridiculous that you **make yourself laugh**.



ADDRESSING COMMON CONCERNS

→ WHAT IF PLAYFULNESS BACKFIRES?

Playfulness does not mean chaos. It doesn't mean giving up your boundaries. It's just bringing lightness into a moment. If it does backfire, it usually means our kids were craving play so much that they latched on too hard. It's okay — adjust in real time, and when things are calmer, try again in smaller doses.

→ WHAT IF I'M TOO TIRED OR OVERWHELMED?

Then don't overdo it. Some of the lowest-effort ideas can be the most effective. Talking in a robot voice, pretending a toy is whispering to you — these things take *less* energy than a power struggle. Sometimes their giggle is the thing that *gives* you energy.

→ WHAT IF I DON'T FEEL LIKE A PLAYFUL PARENT?

Then start really small. This might not come naturally, especially if it wasn't modeled for you. That's normal. Ease in with one tiny moment at a time. A funny walk. A weird voice. A playful name. It counts. Every effort counts.

→ I ALWAYS DEFAULT TO “SERIOUS MODE.” HOW DO I SHIFT?

Try a simple mental ritual. Visualize pressing a remote's pause button. Ask: “Could playfulness work here?” And then go with a quick idea from the strategies here. Even a “failed” attempt still interrupted the old pattern. That's a win.

ADDRESSING COMMON CONCERNS

(CONTINUED)

→ **WHAT IF MY SENSITIVE KID RESISTS OR GETS MORE UPSET?**

Totally valid. Some kids aren't ready to switch gears when emotions are really big. Don't force it. Meet them where they are. Connect first, soothe, then maybe try playful energy to help come out of it. You can also test the waters gently – just a tone shift or a little silly question.

→ **I WORRY THIS WILL TAKE TOO LONG OR GET TOO WILD...**

Practice when things are *chill*. The more we play during non-stressful times, the less likely things get out of hand during urgent moments. And remember – gamifying and “playing the opposite” can save tons of time in the long run.

→ **DOES GIVING MY KID POWER IN PLAY UNDERMINE MY AUTHORITY? WHAT ABOUT MAKING SURE THEY LISTEN TO ME WHEN IT'S URGENT?**

Kids know the difference between play mode and real-life instructions. Kids can tell when you're being serious, especially in situations where safety matters. You're not giving up your role – you're strengthening connection.

→ **WHAT IF IT'S NOT WORKING?**

That's okay! Maybe it's just not the right moment or the right strategy/energy. What's underneath the behavior? What other needs could be showing up? Keep trying things when it feels right. And remember – playfulness isn't a fix-all. It's one tool in the toolbox.

ADDRESSING COMMON CONCERNS

(CONTINUED)

→ WHEN DO WE TEACH KIDS THAT NOT EVERYTHING IS FUN?

We already are! And we still can. Playfulness and “real-life” lessons/tasks go hand in hand. A “sugar bug” voice can coexist with teaching about cavities. Kids eventually learn that not everything is fun – but starting at home, they also learn that life *can* be fun.

→ WHAT IF MY PARTNER ISN’T ON BOARD?

Model it. Let them see it work. Let them feel the shift in energy at home. That’s more powerful than any explanation. You can also talk about it from your own perspective – what you’re working on, how it feels to you. Not to convince them to do things “your way,” just to share.

→ WHAT IF MY CHILD IS NEURODIVERGENT – OR I AM?

Many parents have shared that a playful approach in parenting – especially for kids with ADHD or autism – *can* be a wonderful way to connect and make everything feel better and more smooth. *But* just like with any human, what works for one won’t always work for another. The flexibility of these strategies lets you adapt, experiment, and find what clicks with your child’s unique wiring – and with yours!

→ WHAT IF I’M MORE OF A “TASK” PERSON? I CONNECT BEST WHEN THERE’S A GOAL. (PUZZLES, CRAFTS, ETC.)

Many of us grownups are wired that way! Here’s a reframe: connection is the only goal. Playfulness builds emotional safety and closeness. It’s productive in a totally different way. Crafts, puzzles, baking – all of those are great, too! This type of connection is just different.

15

THE PLAYFUL REBELLION

WHY ALL OF THIS MATTERS SO MUCH:

→ **QUIET REBELLION:** CHOOSING PLAY, ESPECIALLY IN HARD MOMENTS, PUSHES BACK ON A WORLD THAT SAYS TO BE SERIOUS AND *IN CONTROL* ALL THE TIME.

→ **SELF-RESTORATION:** IT BRINGS US BACK TO THE PART OF OURSELVES THAT'S CREATIVE, JOYFUL, AND STILL ALIVE UNDER THE SURFACE (THIS IS STAMPED OUT OF US BY SOCIETY AS WE GROW). YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE THEATRICAL – JUST WILLING TO LOOSEN YOUR GRIP.

→ **REMEMBERING WHAT MATTERS MOST:** THIS CAN BE TRANSFORMATIONAL FOR US. PLAY HELPS US SHAKE OFF SOME OF THE WEIGHT OF THE HEAVINESS OF THE WORLD AND REMINDS US WE'RE PEOPLE WHO DESERVE TO LAUGH AND CONNECT. AND IT MODELS THIS FOR OUR CHILDREN.

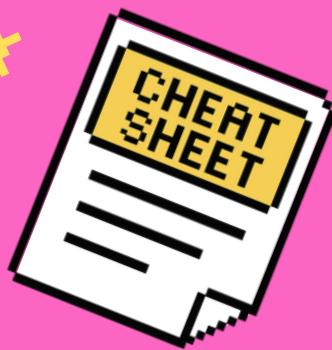


WHY THIS COULD "ACTUALLY" CHANGE THE WORLD!

- Choosing play over power is a radical shift from the traditional parenting model – it says **connection matters more than control**. Instead of enforcing obedience, we invite cooperation through laughter, empathy, and **mutual respect** – *flipping the script* on outdated ideas about authority.
- Activating play mode builds a **better world** – one joyful moment at a time. It teaches kids flexibility, self-worth, and compassion, while helping parents break cycles of stress in favor of warmth, silliness, and trust.



ACTIVATE PLAY MODE



Use this as a quick reference to jog your memory of the core APM strategies.

Reminder: Practice play when stakes are low and vibes are good – **Rule #1:** For the sake of fun!

POWER REVERSAL

Kiddo = strong, clever, powerful.

Grownup = confused, weak, foolish, scared, wrong, “furious.”

PERSONIFICATION



Bringing inanimate objects to life as a playful “buffer,” like a toy, bite of food, or your own foot.

MECHANICAL PLAY



Using robotic, automated, or system-like behaviors, like pretending to be a robot or machine.

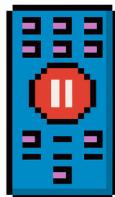
PLAYING THE OPPOSITE

? Pretending to be clueless, shocked, angry, or scared when your kid does exactly what you actually want them to do.

GENERAL NONSENSE

 Random silliness to diffuse tension – nicknames, banana phones, fart noises, silly faces & sounds.

ACTIVATE PLAY MODE



- 1 What's going on inside me?
- 2 Will this help or escalate?
- 3 Does this match my values?
- 4 Could playfulness help? What could that look like right now?

Then:

- Scan the energy, pick a strategy
- Expect it *not* to work
- Hope for the best
- Celebrate yourself either way!

CHALLENGES & GAMIFYING

 Turning a task into a game, challenge, or contest of some sort, often with time limit or number value.

BODY & BREATH

 Making breathing, movement, and physical contact fun, helping everyone reset and regulate.

SCAN FOR
STRATEGY
EXAMPLE
VIDEOS



MYSTERY, MAGIC, & CONFUSION

 Something mysterious or magical is happening. React with confusion, astonishment, or awe.

ROMANTICIZING THE MUNDANE

 Using language that makes everyday tasks feel whimsical, adventurous, or fancy.

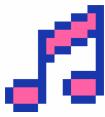
STORYTELLING

 Narrating reality or collaborating on a fictional story for processing, connection, regulation, repair.

CHARACTERS & ROLE PLAY

 Pretending to be anyone or anything but yourself OR that your child is a character.

MAKE IT A MUSICAL

 Incorporating songs, rhythms, and dancing into routines, tasks, or challenging moments.



ABOUT MIA ⊕ PLAYFUL HEART PARENTING

Mia Wisinski has been a theater educator, performer, songwriter, and more – but her favorite role by far is being Mommy to Zal and Novi, and “Mama Mia” to Aliya!

Her passion for play, creativity, and laughter led her to start Playful Heart Parenting in 2023, where she's since connected with hundreds of thousands of parents who are looking to bring more lightness, humor, and connection into daily life with their kids.

As a mom of two young children and a stepmom to an older child, Mia deeply understands the complexities of blended families and the challenge of showing up for kids at different ages and stages.

Her mission is simple: **To help families create more joyful, meaningful moments through laughter – even on the busiest days and in the hardest seasons.**

You can find more of her ideas, tips, and heart-filled stories on Instagram at **@playfulheartparenting**.