By Dr. Lisa A. Jobe

Eliza and the Beauty of Imperfect Stars



Dedicated to my sons,
Brendan and Ryan,

Because it probably
wasn’t always easy being
raised by a mom with
perfectionism.

Eliza loved stars.
Not just the ones shining in the midnight sky.
She also loved the shiny gold stars
her teacher gave out in class.
Stars meant she got everything right.
Stars meant she didn't make mistakes.





Eliza had a binder full of perfect papers.
Math worksheets with rows of numbers.
Science reports with facts and details.
Even history timelines with tiny labels and
straight lines.
The stars sparkled off the pages
as she proudly received them.





But when her teacher announced that it was time to be creative, Eliza froze.

Relying on her imagination felt like an acrobat without a net.

Draw a rainbow? Write a script?

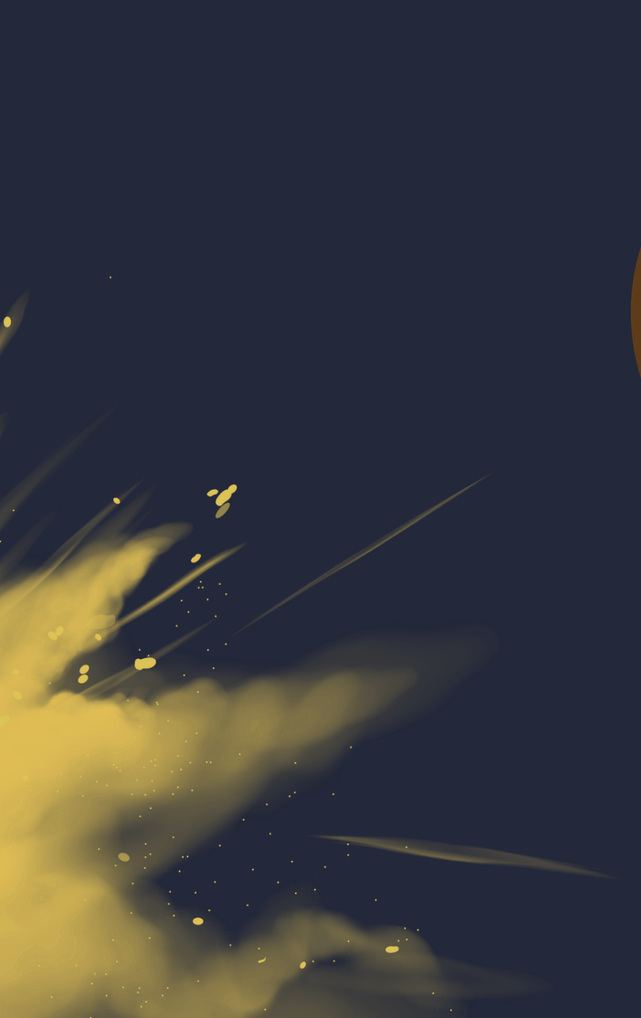
What if she picked the wrong idea?

What if her classmates laughed at her?

What if the teacher hung the artwork on the wall?

Then everyone would compare her to others who were better artists.





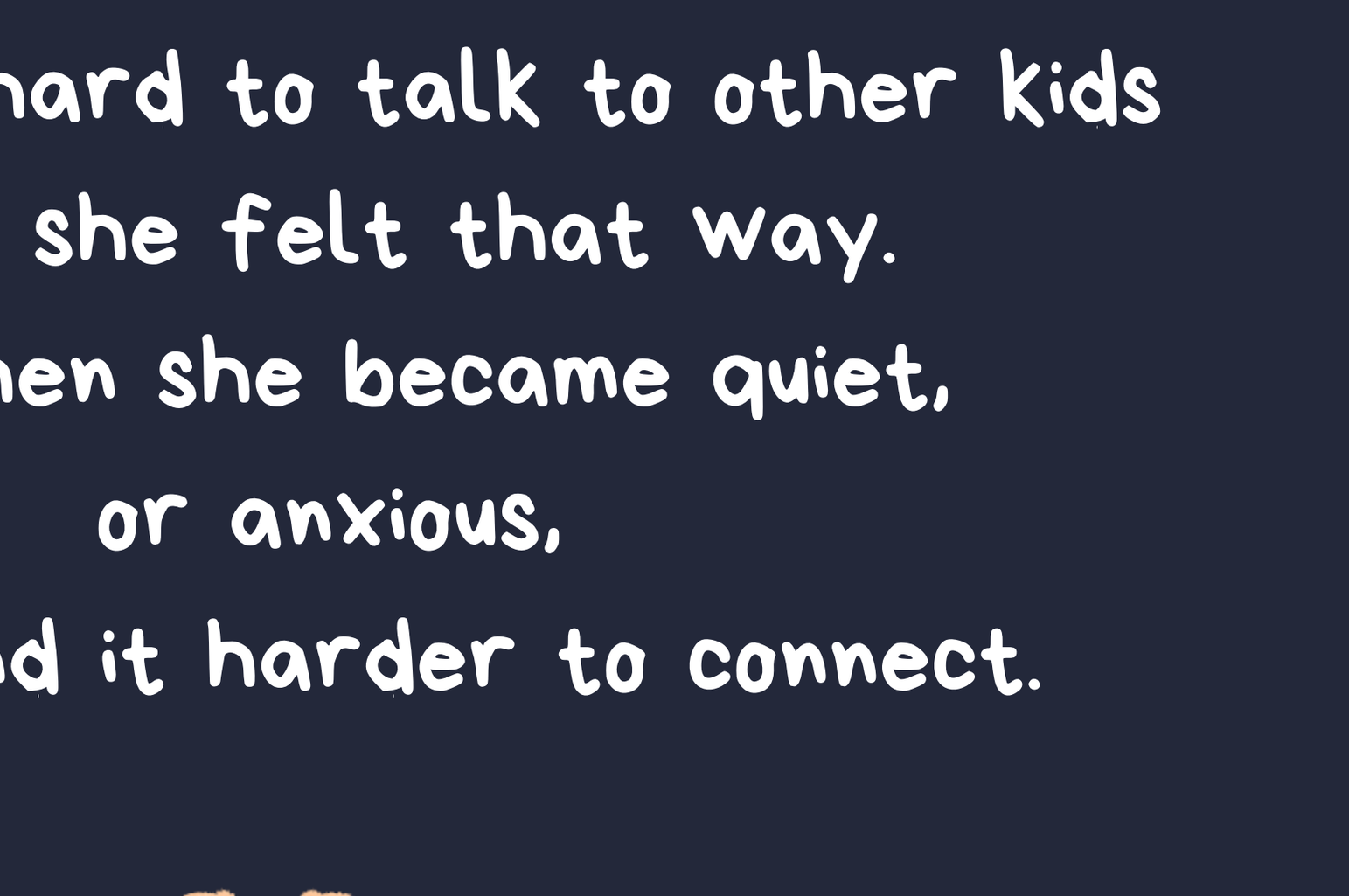




Creative work felt like
floating in space upside down.
She could see the picture in her head...
but when she tried to make it real,
it never looked quite right.

That made her upset—
and it was hard to talk to other kids
when she felt that way.
And then she became quiet,
or anxious,
and found it harder to connect.





So Eliza stuck to what she was good at. . .

Academics.



But completing her homework
took an extra long time.
and sometimes...she couldn't even begin.

The right words weren't coming to her.
Because the start didn't feel perfect enough.
The more she stared at her blank paper,
the more anxious she became.





One time, she wrote five pages
when the teacher asked for three because she
couldn't decide what thoughts to cut out.
The teacher took off two points for not
following directions!
Eliza ran home and cried in her pillow.
It wasn't fair . . .
She just couldn't reduce her word count
or her report wouldn't be perfect.







Eliza's parents and teacher worked together to help Eliza build strategies to pursue her high goals with less worry.

Mom sat on Eliza's bed one evening.
"I notice you love stars," she said.
"But not every star comes from being perfect.
Even the brightest stars start as a swirl of dust and chaos before they shine."

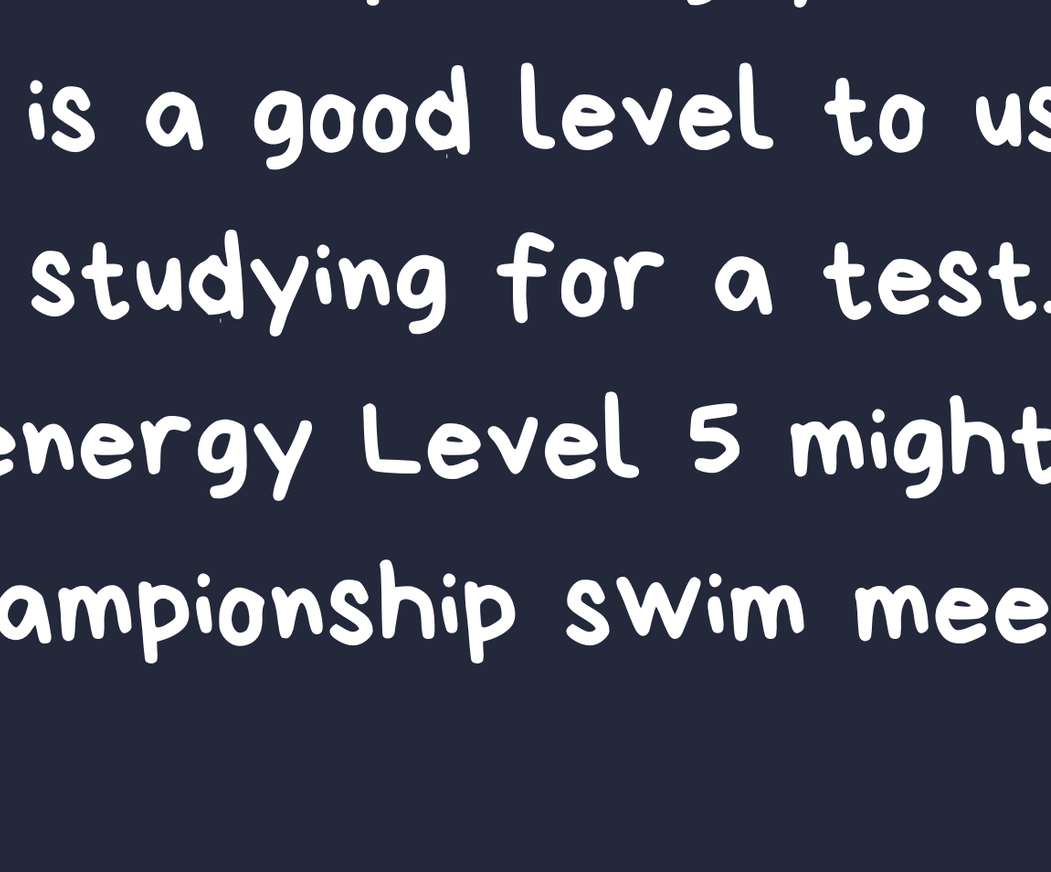
Eliza gazed out her window at the night sky, thinking about what her mom said, until she fell asleep.



Her mom also taught Eliza the "star power" system:

"Assigning a power level to your task can help you decide how much energy it needs," Mom explained.

"Level 1 is for tasks that just need a quick completion, like packing your book bag. Level 3 is a good level to use when studying for a test. Level 5 energy Level 5 might be for a championship swim meet. "







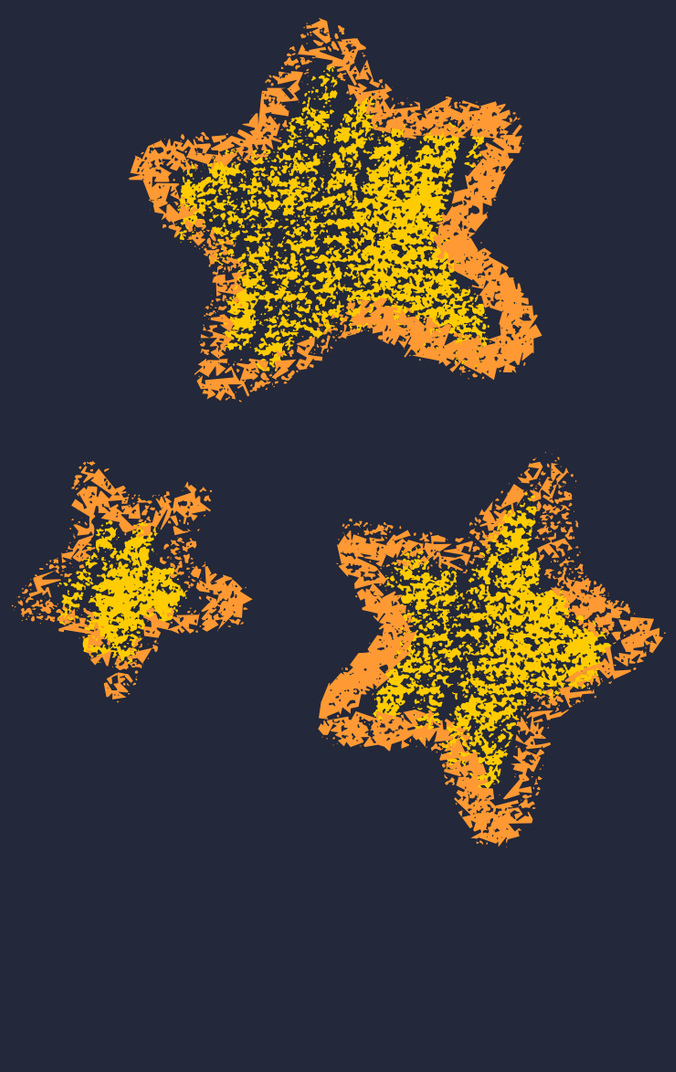
"If you are making your bed before school, you can assign it a level 1 and just pull up your comforter," Mom continued.

Eliza grinned.
"But if Grandma comes to visit. . . "

Mom winked as she agreed, "If Grandma comes, do me a favor please, and give it a 'Level 3' effort."

Eliza smiled in understanding.







The next day, Dad showed her his sketchbook.
"I was trying to draw a spaceship for you," he said.
"But it kind of looks like a gigantic floating crayon."
Eliza laughed. It did look like a crayon.
"That's okay, Dad, I think it's wonderful," she assured him.
Dad gave her a proud smile while his eyes sparkled with fun.



Take the first Step



Her parents also saw that beginning tasks was hard,
So they taught her how to take tiny steps:
Just one idea. One sentence. One piece of the puzzle.

"You don't have to finish it perfectly," Dad told her.
"You just have to take the first step."





They also taught her how to calm the anxious swirl in her heart that she felt when things didn't feel perfect:

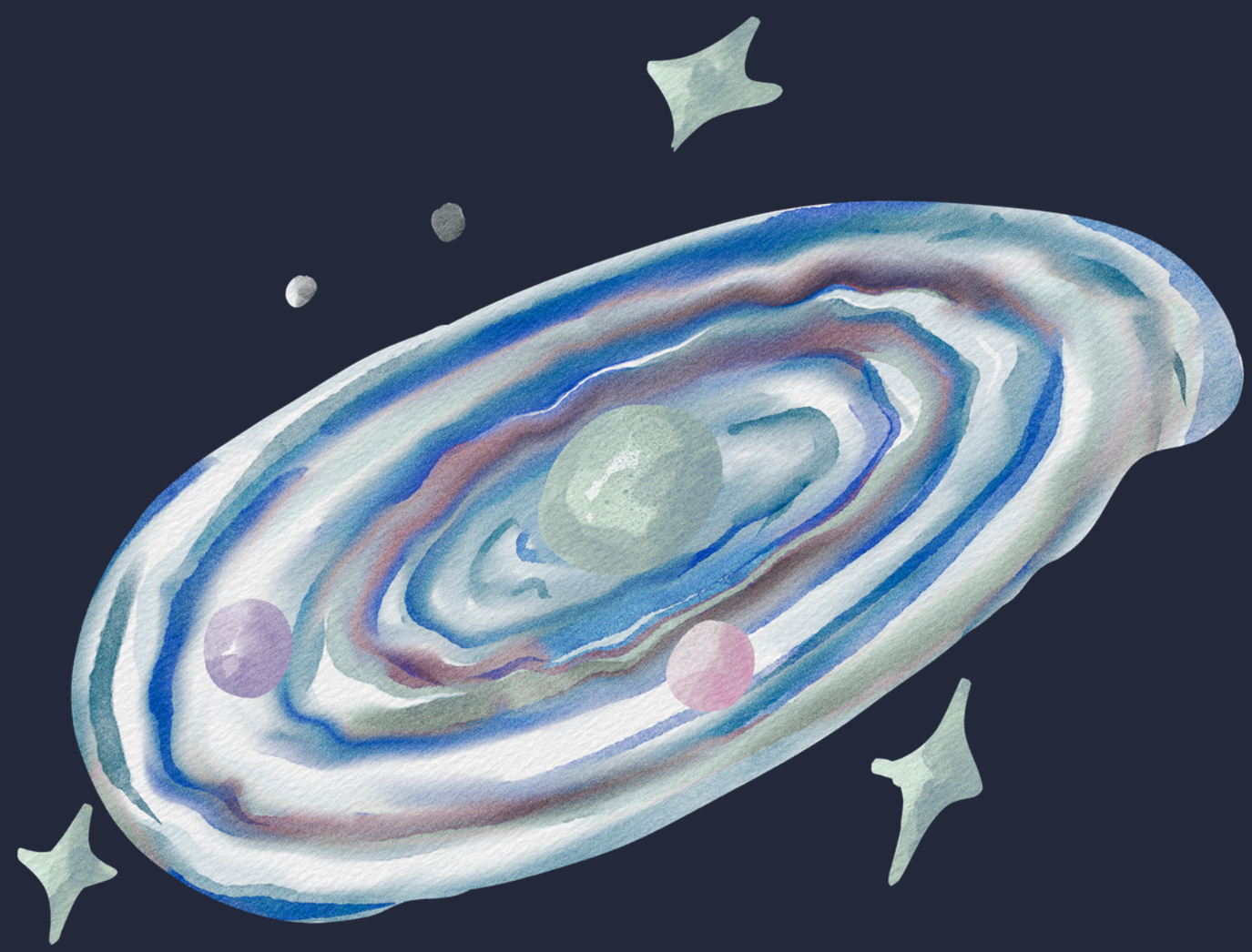
She learned to place one hand on her heart and one on her tummy.

Inhale: smell the imaginary roses.
Hold: enjoy the pretty scent.
Exhale: blow on the dandelions.
Hold: Make a wish.

She practiced over and over on the way to school.

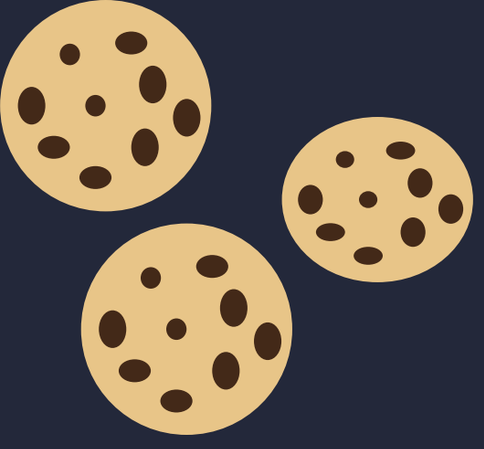
One day, Eliza's teacher announced an art project.
"Today we're going to paint beautiful pictures of the galaxy."
Eliza's tummy twisted. She just knew hers wouldn't be considered beautiful.
At least, compared with the galleries she pictured in her mind.
But then she remembered: tiny step.
She picked up a paintbrush and dipped it in the paint.
With a big breath, she touched the canvas with her brush. . . .

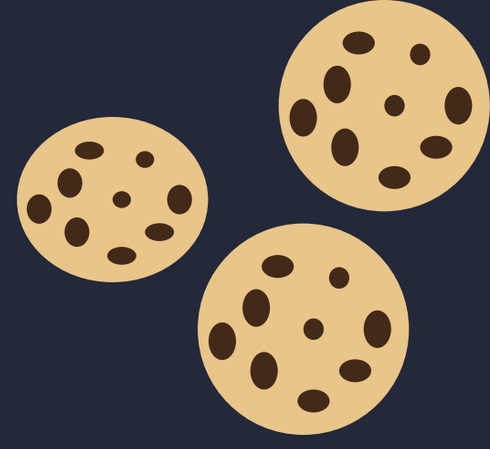




Her finished painting was a little messy.
Her stars weren't sparkly.
But her teacher gave her something new:
A shiny sticker that said "You're a Star!"
"For trying something different!" she said.
Eliza's heart gave a tiny cheer.







Eliza's teacher also started making little notes on her homework with how much time the teacher suggested it take.

Eliza's parents taught her how to weigh her homework time in costs and benefits.
"If I do all that extra work, will it be worth the time?"

They also helped her think about activities she could enjoy after finishing her homework, like inviting a friend over to bake cookies. These incentives helped adjust her efforts to "good enough."





The more Eliza made time for fun,
the more joyful she felt.
She made messy crafts with friends
and hung them with pride on the family refrigerator.

They made up silly plays,
Inviting neighborhood kids to be their audience.
Eliza was finding joy in her creativity.
And that helped her take creative risks.





Best of all, Eliza was able to help her
classmates who struggled like she once did.
When a girl in class started to throw her
clay project in the garbage in disgust,
Eliza walked over to her table
and admired her work.
"Who are you making it for?" She asked.
"It's for my mom, and
I wanted it to be perfect for her,"
her classmate wailed.



"My paperweight that I made my dad was pretty lopsided," Eliza told the girl,
"But he has it on his desk in his office where everyone can see it.
I bet your mom will think your flower pot is perfect, too, because you made it just for her."
She leaned over and whispered,
"P
arents are like that."
They grinned at each other as they continued creating with new enthusiasm.





Eliza still loved stars.

But now she knew:

Some stars shine on school papers.

Some stars shine through imperfection.

And some stars shine from within her heart

like when she was able to help a friend.

And that's the brightest kind of star there is.



Teacher & Parent Guide

Helping Children Develop Strategies to Manage Perfectionism

1. Levels of Effort Chart

Teach students to match their effort to the importance of the task. Use this scale:

- 🌟 Level 1 – Quick Try (e.g., brainstorm, rough sketch)
- 🌟 Level 2 – Medium Effort (e.g., short homework or rough draft)
- 🌟 Level 3 – Thoughtful Work (e.g., one-time projects or classwork)
- 🌟 Level 4 – Important Task (e.g., final presentation or big homework)
- 🌟 Level 5 – Star Power (e.g., passion project, performance, showcase)

2. Tiny Steps Strategy

Help children overcome overwhelm by breaking down tasks:

- Write one sentence
- Choose one color
- Take one breath
- Pick up and put away one toy.

3. Mindful Breathing

Teach children to regulate stress using this simple repetitive calm breathing script:

"One hand on your heart, the other on your tummy. Breathe in like you're smelling a rose. Hold the beautiful scent. Breathe out like you're blowing on a dandelion. Hold while making a wish."

4. Costs vs. Benefits Choices

Instead of just 'yes or no' or 'right or wrong,' encourage weighing:

- What do I gain?
- What might I miss?
- How much do I care about the result?

5. Celebrate Risk-Taking

Model and reward trying something new—especially when it's not perfect. Use praise like:

- "That was outstanding effort!"
- "You tried something different!"
- "You met your personal goal!"
- "That idea was unique!"

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