

children at play  
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P R E S E N T S

# UNLEASHING THE POWER OF PLAY

Dr. Peter Gray



## I. The Decline of Play and the Rise of Mental Disorders

### A. The decline of play over the past 50-60 years [in the United States]

- Evidence for a gradual, but overall dramatic decline, especially in outdoor play.
- Reasons: Rise in fears; increased weight of schooling; rise in “schoolish” approach to childrearing.

### B. Rise in anxiety, depression and sense of helplessness among children and adolescents

- Five to 8 fold increase in Major Depression and anxiety disorders in young people, based on the MMPI and Taylor’s Manifest Anxiety Scale. Rise in suicides.
- Decline in young people’s sense of control over their lives, based on Locus of Control Scale.

### C. Decline in empathy and rise in narcissism

- Evidence from Narcissistic Personality Inventory & Interpersonal Reactivity Index.

### D. Decline in creativity

- Evidence from Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking. Decline at all grade levels.

### E. Reasons to believe the decline in play is a cause of these deleterious changes

- Animal play deprivation studies. Also, based on what play IS, we would expect such changes.

## II. What Exactly Is Play and Why Is It Such a Powerful Vehicle for Learning?

### A. Universal varieties of play

Note how each variety relates to crucial category of human development.

- Physical play: locomotor, chasing, rough & tumble.
- Linguistic play.
- Constructive play.
- Fantasy play; sociodramatic play.
- Formal games with rules.

### B. Defining characteristics of play

#### 1. Play is self-chosen and self-directed.

- Play is how children learn to create & direct their own activities, learn to negotiate & compromise.
- Difference between a pickup game (which is play) and a Little League game (which is not).

#### 2. Play is motivated by means more than ends (is intrinsically motivated).

- Play is how children discover & pursue their passions.
- Note also the repetitive nature of play. Play is practice, doing it over and over to get it right.

#### 3. Play is guided by mental rules.

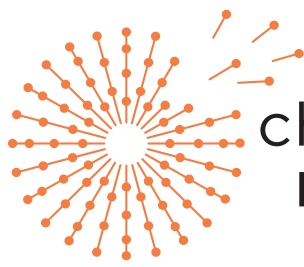
- Examples of rules in rough & tumble, constructive play & sociodramatic play.
- Play is nature’s way of teaching children to control their impulses and behave in accordance with shared conceptions of how to behave. The art of being human.

#### 4. Play is imaginative.

- Play is always removed mentally from the real world, always imaginative & creative.
- Imagination underlies all higher order human thinking. Designing, hypothesizing, planning.

#### 5. Play is conducted in an alert, active, but non-stressed frame of mind.

- Note how this follows from the other characteristics. Some call this state flow.
- This is the ideal state of mind for learning, creativity, insight.



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## C. The power of play lies in its triviality.

- The sense in which play is frivolous or trivial. How that triviality is the foundation for play's educative power: Non-stressed state; freedom to fail; a mind open to new possibilities.
- The play world as a simulation world, to practice for the real world.
- Play is trivial, but not easy. Much of the joy of play lies in the challenges.



## III. What and How Children Learn Through Play: A Review

### A. Play and physical development

- Play is how children develop strong hearts and lungs and strong, well-coordinated bodies.

### B. Play and intellectual development

- Evidence that a playful state of mind promotes creative thinking & executive processing.

### C. Play and social/moral development

- Play is how children learn to make friends, follow rules, see from others' points of view and negotiate differences.

### D. Play and Emotional Development

- Emotional regulation theory of play, deriving from animal research.
- Young animals (and children) put themselves into moderately frightening situations in play: In running, leaping, climbing; in playful chasing; playful fighting. Idea that they are learning to deal with fear. Children also play at frightening themes in make-believe.
- Children also inevitably get angry in play, but learn to control anger so play can continue.
- Play deprivation experiments with animals. Without play, they grow up emotionally crippled.

## Suggested Readings

### Books

Peter Gray. *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life*. Basic Books. Includes elaboration on and documentation of all the ideas and evidence mentioned in this talk.

Lenore Skenazy. *Free-Range Kids: Giving Our Kids the Freedom We Had Without Going Nuts*. Wiley.

Mike Lanza. *Playborhood: Turn Your Neighborhood into a Place for Play*. Free Play Press.

### Articles

Peter Gray's The decline of play and the rise of psychopathology in children and adolescents, and The special value of age-mixed play. Both in *American Journal of Play*, 2011, Vol 3 #4. At [www.journalofplay.org/](http://www.journalofplay.org/)

Peter Gray. What exactly is play and why is it such a powerful vehicle for learning? *Topics in Language Disorders*, 37, 217-228. 2017.

Peter Gray. Evolutionary functions of play: Practice, resilience, innovation, and cooperation. In P. K. Smith & J. Roopnarine (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Play: Development and Disciplinary Perspectives*. In press, 2017.

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The Children at Play Network explores a constellation of strategies that support free play in outdoor environments. It is a project of Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest focused at the regional level. Please visit our website to learn more. We welcome interest, support, partnerships, and collaborations.

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