



children at play
NETWORK

A BERNHEIM INITIATIVE

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.

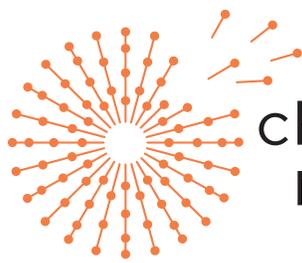
- Examples of rules in rough & tumble, constructive play & sociodramatic play.
- Play is nature’s way of teaching children to control their impulses and behave in accordance with shared conceptions of how to behave. The art of being human.

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/

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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