

WHAT REALLY IS PLAY, AND HOW DOES IT PROMOTE CHILDREN'S SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT? Peter Gray, Boston College.
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A. Reasons Why This is Such a Crucial Issue Today.

The decline of play in recent decades coupled with the rise in anxiety and depression and decline in internal locus of control and creativity.

B. The Paradoxes of Play. Serious yet not; imaginative & spontaneous, yet bound by rules; not real, yet is about the real world; childish, but foundation for greatest adult accomplishments.

C. Universal varieties of play [Note relation to what children everywhere must learn].

- Physical play: locomotor, chasing, rough & tumble.
- Linguistic play.
- Constructive play.
- Fantasy play; sociodramatic play.
- Formal games with rules.
- Social play. This cuts across all the others.

D. Defining characteristics of play

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

- Play is how children learn to initiate and direct their own activities.
- In social play children learn to negotiate and to attend to others' needs.
- Difference between pickup games (which are play) and adult-directed sports (which are not).

2. Play is intrinsically motivated.

- Play is how children find and pursue their passions.
- Play may have goals, but the goals are subordinate to the means. e.g. in constructive play...
- Lepper & Greene experiment: How rewards can undermine play.

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.

4. Play is imaginative.

- Play is in some way mentally removed from the real world.
- Most obvious in sociodramatic play; but also true for R&T, constructive, & games w rules.
- Imagination is crucial for 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.

E. The power of play lies in its triviality.

- The sense in which play is frivolous or trivial. How the 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.

F. What and How Children Learn Through Play: A Review

1. Play and physical development

2. Play and intellectual development

-Evidence that a playful state of mind promotes creative, insightful thinking.

3. Play and social/moral development

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

4. 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.

Some References

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For essays on these topics, see Peter Gray's blog at psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn.

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See also, the Let Grow Foundation, <https://letgrow.org>