

WHY DON'T WE PLAY MORE?



It's time to embrace our inner child and bring more playfulness into our lives! And in the process, give our health and relationships a boost

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Most of us spent many hours playing as children, whether it was daydreaming on our own, acting out scenes with toys, or chasing each other during breaks at school. We shrieked with laughter, covered our eyes and counted to ten, created entire imaginary worlds... and we often didn't need much instruction, or persuasion that play was a worthwhile and necessary activity.

But as we grow up, we place less and less importance on play. It starts to seem silly, a waste of precious time, or maybe even a little embarrassing.

However, in recent years, there seems to have been a shift in thinking, with adult play becoming more popular. The video game industry, which has adults in their 20s, 30s and 40s as its primary consumers, has grown. Role-playing games have also increased in popularity, and game conventions worldwide have reported



record attendance numbers. In 2007, Real Escape Game was developed in Japan by 35-year-old Takao Kato and since then 'escape rooms' - where teams of adults solve puzzles to escape a locked room within a time limit - have had increasing commercial success. In November 2019, there were estimated to be more than 50,000 escape rooms worldwide.

In a 2020 article for the British Psychological Society, researcher and board game designer Dave Neale wrote, "It has been claimed that we are in a golden age for board games. I would go further: we are in a golden age of play for adults."

What is 'adult play'?

Over the years, there have been many attempts to define what play is, but there are five characteristics that are widely agreed upon. Author and research professor Dr Peter Gray explained in 2013, "An activity

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HOW DOES PLAY PROMOTE LEARNING?

In 1964, Dr Marian Diamond, a pioneering scientist and educator who would go on to be considered one of the founders of modern neuroscience, and her colleagues, published an exciting paper about brain growth in rats. The scientists separated pairs of rat siblings shortly after birth, placing one in an exciting, toy-filled colony and the other in solitary confinement.

They discovered that the rats raised in a playful environment had thicker cerebral cortices than the others. Subsequent research confirmed it - the rats raised in stimulating environments had bigger brains, and were able to find their way through mazes more quickly. In other words, they were more intelligent. Ethical considerations prevent similar experiments on humans, but it seems likely that our brains respond to play in similar ways. Some circumstantial evidence suggests similar: Chinese and Japanese students are among the best achievers in the world, and they take regular breaks every 50 minutes.

can be characterised as play, or described as playful, to the degree that it contains the characteristics listed here: Play is activity that is self-chosen and self-directed; intrinsically motivated; guided by mental rules; imaginative; and conducted in an active, alert, but relatively non-stressed frame of mind.*

Dr Stuart Brown is an author, psychiatrist, doctor and founder of the National Institute for Play in the United States. He is reluctant to define play, comparing the idea to over-analysing a joke and taking the joy out of it. Instead, in his 2010 book *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, he asks the reader to »



IDEAS TO TRY

TRY A NEW SPORT

Give a new, fun, non-competitive sport a try. Pick something you would have enjoyed as a child, which is difficult to take too seriously, such as hula-hooping, rollerblading, rock-climbing, paddle-boarding, skipping with a rope or jumping over makeshift hurdles. Yoga is a form of exercise that encourages play, especially acro-yoga – a combination of yoga and acrobatics!

EXPERIMENT WITH A THEME

A themed night/day/hour could be a solo activity or something you do with your partner, family or group of friends. Choose a theme, such as a country or a time in history, and get into character. Pick the food you eat, the music you play, the clothes you wear, the activity you do, all according to the chosen theme.

DANCE

Make a playlist of your favourite songs to dance to. If you're unsure, you could search in places like Spotify or YouTube to find dancing playlists, or ask a friend. Clear some space, dim the lights, close the curtains or wear headphones if it'll help you to switch off the outside world. Then just let loose and go for it! Dance as if your life depends on it and, most importantly, enjoy yourself!

GET ARTY

Encourage your inner child by engaging in creative play that involves self-expression. This could be drawing, painting or colouring in – the end result is not what's important, but the process itself. Collaging can be a therapeutic activity. Use whatever you have around the house, get cutting and sticking, and have some fun! Or get out and about and take some photographs – you could even make a short film, or learn a new instrument.

WALK BAREFOOT OUTSIDE

As kids, we didn't think twice about running around without shoes. Barefoot walking has lots of proven mental and physical health benefits, and it encourages both mindfulness and playfulness. When we are in a state of play, we are fully existing in the present, rather than worrying about the past or the future. Of course, sometimes it's not safe or sanitary to do so. But if it is, throw off your shoes and embrace any urges for 'oohhs' and 'aahhs' as your toes sink into the feel of different textures and surfaces.

consider what the world would be like *without* play: "It's not just an absence of games or sports. Life without play is life without books, without movies, art, music, jokes, dramatic stories. Imagine a world with no flirting, no day-dreaming, no comedy, no irony." He goes on to compare play to oxygen, writing "...it's all around us, yet goes mostly unnoticed or unappreciated until it is missing."

How do we play?

In his TED Talk, *Play is more than just fun*, Dr Brown outlines the five play archetypes that he has observed during his years of research:

Rough-and-Tumble Play

Such as tug-of-war, scavenger hunts or dodge ball. Through this form of play, we develop emotional regulation as well as cognitive, emotional and physical mastery.

Ritual Play

Activities or sports with set rules and structures. It's through these activities that people come together for a common purpose or goal.

Imaginative Play

Colouring, storytelling, crafting or even improvisation classes or stand-up comedy. Imaginative play is about living out fantasies and honouring our instinctual creative nature.

Body Play

Dr Brown describes body play as "a spontaneous desire to get ourselves out of gravity." It includes activities like hiking, yoga, snorkelling or even just dancing around your home.

Object Play

This describes anything involving manipulation of objects, building or designing, such as playing with Lego, building fortresses or snowball fights.

The benefits of adult play

Playing is widely credited as a vital part of children's development, important for their general health and wellbeing. But we don't always realise how much these benefits continue into adulthood. Here are just some of the reasons play is good for us, at any age:

Reduces stress

The more stressful our lives become, the more crucial it is to make time for play. It can release endorphins – the body's natural chemicals – that relieve pain, boost wellbeing, promote happiness and relieve stress.

Stimulates creativity and general brain function

Play has been shown to improve memory, stimulate the growth of the cerebral cortex and even trigger the secretion of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a substance essential for the growth of brain cells. Playing also increases our imagination, which helps us to create new things, learn new skills, and problem solve. Just as young children learn best when playing, adults do too.

Improves social skills and connection to others

Playing with others tends to be fun. It can also increase our levels of empathy, trust, compassion and intimacy. It doesn't have to be a specific activity – adopting a playful state of mind could help us to cooperate, break the ice with strangers, or maintain existing relationships.

Increases productivity and reduces burnout at work

Google is well known for its inclusion of play in the workplace. Plenty of wall space to doodle on, and even staff play areas, help Google staff to be more productive. Regularly playing can help relieve the stress of deadlines and other work-related activities that cause tension.

Helps to keep us young

Play can boost energy levels and even improve our resistance to disease. As the playwright George Bernard Shaw once said, "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing."

Why don't adults play?

The right to play for children is specifically protected by the UN Convention on

“THERE ARE STEPS WE CAN TAKE TO CREATE MORE PLAY TIME”

the Rights of the Child, but there's not an equivalent for adults. Although the mainstream popularity of intentional adult play seems to be increasing, it can still be seen as a luxury that many people feel they don't have the time, money or even right to partake in.

Also, as we gain more responsibilities and life begins to feel more serious, we tend to become more self-conscious or afraid of embarrassing ourselves.

At the 2008 Serious Play conference, designer Tim Brown spoke about the powerful relationship between creative thinking and play. He began his talk by doing an exercise that Bob McKim, a creativity researcher, used to do with his students. He asked them to draw the person who sat next to them, in just 30 seconds. There was a lot of laughter as Brown's audience showed each other their drawings, as well as a lot of 'I'm sorry', which Brown said happens every time this experiment is done with adults.

With children, on the other hand, it's a different story: "If you try the same exercise with kids, they have no embarrassment at all," Brown explains. "But as they learn to become adults, they become much more sensitive to the opinions of others, and they lose that freedom... And in studies of kids playing, it's been shown time after time that kids who feel secure, who are in a kind of trusted environment – they're the ones that feel most free to play."

The same goes for adults. If somebody is experiencing difficult living circumstances, then taking time out to play could well feel impossible. Dr Stuart Brown spoke on the *On Being* podcast in 2014, and described how play "emerges innately and spontaneously if the individual... is safe and well fed."

Encouragingly, there are organisations such as Clowns Without Borders who bring their playful performances and activities to places around the world where day-to-day life is a tremendous struggle, such as refugee camps and crisis zones.

How can we insert more playfulness into our lives?

For most of us, there are simple steps we can take to create more play time:

Give yourself permission

Remember that play is important for our health and wellbeing. Allow yourself to do it, in some way, every day.

It's all about perception

You might need to change how you think about play. Play could be something like talking to your dog while cooking as if you're presenting a cookery show, or making up a silly song while you shower each morning.

Learn about your own play history

*In his book *Play*, Dr Brown suggests that readers "mine [their past] for play memories." Think about what you did for fun as a child, consider whether you did it alone or with others. How can you re-create something similar today?*

Play with your loved ones

Insert playfulness into your interactions with your friends and family, and in romantic relationships, and see how it changes how you feel about each other and your time together. If you have kids in your life, follow their lead! As Dr Brown writes, "Play is the purest expression of love."

Let play refresh your life

We all deserve to forget about our work, responsibilities and troubles for some time each day. Play can help us to do that. Follow your instincts and your curiosities, and let play insert a fresh sense of energy and wonder into your life. ■

