

## **WHAT EXACTLY IS PLAY, AND WHY IS IT SUCH A POWERFUL VEHICLE FOR LEARNING?** Peter Gray, Boston College

### **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.

-Ultimate freedom is freedom to quit.

-Why social play is the most democratic of all activities.

-Difference between pickup games (which are play) and adult-directed sports (which are not).

#### 2. Play is motivated by means more than ends.

-In play we value our actions more than the results of our actions.

-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. The art of being human.

#### 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.

## **Suggested Readings**

### **Book**

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.

### **Academic articles and chapters** by Peter Gray on these topics:

-Play as the foundation for hunter-gatherer social existence. *American Journal of Play*, 1, 476-522. 2009.

-The decline of play and the rise of psychopathology in childhood and adolescence. *American Journal of Play*, 3, 443-463. 2011.

-The special value of age-mixed play. *American Journal of Play*, 3, 500-522. 2011.

-Children's natural ways of learning still work—even for the three Rs. In D. C. Geary & D. B. Berch (eds), *Evolutionary perspectives on child development and education* (pp 63-93). Springer. 2016.

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

-Evolutionary functions of play: Practice, resilience, innovation, and cooperation. In P. K. Smith & J. Roopnarine (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Play: Developmental and Disciplinary Perspectives*. 2018.

For essays on these topics, see Peter Gray's blog at [psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn](http://psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn).

Also see Let Grow, <https://letgrow.org> and follow me on Facebook: [facebook.com/peter.gray.3572](https://facebook.com/peter.gray.3572)