

## Play, Creativity, and Lifelong Learning

### WHY PLAY MATTERS FOR BOTH KIDS AND ADULTS



Play is simultaneously a source of relaxation and stimulation for the brain and body. A sure (and fun) way to develop your imagination, creativity, problem-solving abilities, and mental health is to play with your romantic partner, officemates, children, grandchildren, and friends.

More Help: [Benefits of Laughter](#) [Playfulness in Relationships](#)

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### Play: It's not just for kids

Play is often described as a time when we feel most alive, yet we often take it for granted and may completely forget about it. But play isn't a luxury - it's a necessity. Play is as important to our physical and mental health as getting enough sleep, eating well, and exercising. Play teaches us how to manage and transform our "negative" emotions and experiences. It supercharges learning, helps us relieve stress, and connects us to others and the world around us. Play can also make work more productive and pleasurable.

"What do most Nobel Laureates, innovative entrepreneurs, artists and performers, well-adjusted children, happy couples and families, and the most successfully adapted mammals have in common? They play enthusiastically throughout their lives."

~ Stuart Brown, Institute of Play

Despite the power of play, somewhere between childhood and adulthood, many of us stop playing. We exchange play for work and responsibilities. When we do have some leisure time, we're more likely to zone out in front of the TV or computer than to engage in creative, brain-stimulating play. By giving ourselves permission to play with the joyful abandon of childhood, we can continue to reap its benefits throughout life.

#### Some of the reasons we play:

- to learn
  - to create
  - to feel challenged
  - to pass time
  - to calm and focus ourselves
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- as spectators watching others
  - competitively to win
  - cooperatively

- for the fun of it
- for the joy of it

## The lifelong benefits of play

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### **Play connects us to others**

Sharing joy, laughter, and fun with others promotes bonding and strengthens a sense of community. We develop empathy, compassion, trust, and the capacity for intimacy through regular play.

### **Play fosters creativity, flexibility, and learning**

Play is a doorway to learning. Play stimulates our imaginations, helping us adapt and solve problems. Play arouses curiosity, which leads to discovery and creativity. The components of play - curiosity, discovery, novelty, risk-taking, trial and error, pretense, games, social etiquette, and other increasingly complex adaptive activities - are the same as the components of learning.

### **Play is an antidote to loneliness, isolation, anxiety, and depression**

When we play vigorously, we trigger a mix of endorphins that lift our spirits and distractions that distance us from pain, fear, and other burdens. And when we play with other people, whether they're friends or strangers, we are reminded that we are not alone in this world. We can connect to others in delightful and meaningful ways that banish loneliness.

### **Play teaches us perseverance**

The rewards of learning or mastering a new game teach us that perseverance is worthwhile. Perseverance is a trait necessary to healthy adulthood, and it is learned largely through play. Perseverance and violence are rarely found together.

### **Play makes us happy**

Beyond all these excellent reasons for playing, there is simply the sheer joy of it. Play is a state of being that is happy and joyous. Jumping into and out of the world of play on a daily basis can preserve and nourish our own hearts, and the hearts of our communities.

## Play and relationships

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Play is one of the most effective tools for keeping relationships fresh and exciting. Playing together for the fun of it brings joy, vitality, and resilience to relationships. Play can also heal resentments, disagreements, and hurts. Through regular play, we learn to trust one another and feel safe. Trust enables us to work together, open ourselves to intimacy, and try new things. By making a conscious effort to incorporate more humor and play into your daily interactions, you can improve the quality of your love relationships- as well as your connections with co-workers, family members, and friends.

### **Play helps us develop and improve our social skills**

Social skills are learned in the give and take of play. Verbal communication and body language, safety and danger, freedom and boundaries, cooperation and teamwork: all are discovered and practiced repeatedly during infant and childhood play. We continue to refine these skills in adulthood through play and playful communication.

### **Play teaches us how to cooperate with others**

Play is a powerful catalyst for positive socialization. Through play, children learn how to "play nicely" with others - to work together, follow mutually agreed upon rules, and socialize in groups. As adults, play continues to confer these benefits. Evidence even shows that play may be an antidote to violence. In fact, those who avoid or have never learned to play may become lost in the world of fear, rage, and obsessive worry.

### **Mutual play can heal emotional wounds**

When adults play together, they are engaging in exactly the same patterns of behavior that positively shape the brain in children. These same playful behaviors that predict emotional health in children also lead to positive change in adults. Studies show that an emotionally-insecure individual can replace negative beliefs and behaviors with positive assumptions and actions by living with a secure partner. Close, positive, and emotionally-fulfilling relationships heal and create emotional resiliency. Play provides a safe and joyous context for the development of such relationships.

## Playing at work: The key to productivity and innovation

Many people are working longer and harder, thinking that this will solve the problem of an ever-increasing workload. But they are still falling behind, becoming chronically overwhelmed, and burning out.

Work is where we spend much of our time. That is why it is especially important for us to play during work. Without some recreation, our work suffers. Success at work doesn't depend on the amount of time you work. It depends upon the quality of your work. And the quality of your work is highly dependent on your well-being.

Taking the time to replenish yourself through play is one of the best things you can do for your career. When the project you're working on hits a serious glitch (as often happens), heading out to the basketball court with your colleagues to shoot some hoops and have a few laughs does a lot more than take your mind off the problem. If basketball isn't your cup of tea, having a model airplane contest, telling stories, or flying kites in the parking lot will also allow your relationship to the problem to shift and enable you to approach it from a new perspective.

### Playing at work:

- keeps you functional when under stress
- refreshes your mind and body
- encourages teamwork
- helps you see problems in new ways
- triggers creativity and innovation
- increases energy and prevents burnout

## Play, creativity, and flow

Psychiatrist and writer Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has studied play extensively. He describes play as a flow state that requires just the right balance of challenge and opportunity. If the game is too hard or too easy, it loses its sense of pleasure and fun. Maintaining a flow state in games with others requires all participants, regardless of age or ability, to feel challenged but not overwhelmed.

Feelings We Experience in the Flow State	
<b>Involvement</b>	Complete focus and concentration, either due to innate curiosity or as the result of training.
<b>Delight</b>	A sense of bliss and positive detachment from everyday reality.
<b>Clarity</b>	Great inner clarity and a built-in understanding about the state of affairs.
<b>Confidence</b>	An innate sense that the activity is doable and that your skills are adequate to the task. Additionally, you don't feel anxious or bored.
<b>Serenity</b>	A sense of peace and an absence of worries about self.
<b>Timeliness</b>	Thorough focus on the present and a lack of attention to the passing of time.
<b>Motivation</b>	Intrinsic understanding about what needs to be done and a desire to keep the moment of play moving.

## Learning how to play again

Bernie DeKoven, one of the originators of the New Games movement, has devoted his life to developing games that bring people together emotionally in the context of playing for fun. See the Resources section below for links to some of his favorite games. For those who have forgotten how to play and don't know how to get started again, Bernie offers the following advice:

"You don't have to have rules or goals or a board or even anything to play with except each other. But whatever it is that you're playing, there are two things you have to take seriously: being together, and the sheer fun of it all. No game is more important than the experience of being together, being joined, being equal - governed by the same rules, playing for the same purpose. And no purpose is more uniting and freeing than the purpose of being fun with each other."

## Winning and losing

Bernie makes important points about winning and losing:

- **It's OK for you to lose.** This may be hard to remember at the time, but getting beaten fair and square by your own grandkid is one of life's great events
- **Nobody has to lose.** For some reason, both adults and children tend to take games more seriously than anyone needs to. That's why it is not unusual for a trivial game to end up as a contest of wills and for children to wind up in tears because they've "lost."
- **Competition separates, rather than unites.** Despite your best efforts to keep the competition friendly and fun, the very existence of winners and losers shifts the focus of the game away from fun and playfulness. It separates rather than unites, alienates rather than embraces.
- **Yes, the competitive separation can be overcome.** Whenever it happens that opponents embrace each other, it is a victory and a triumph of the human spirit. But it is a rare occurrence.

### Suggestions for playing games where no one has to lose:

- Instead of stopping a game when someone wins, just continue playing until everyone wins. There's the first winner, then the second winner, and then the third.
- When playing a two-person game, like checkers or ping-pong, try playing with three players, and rotate turns.
- If there are only two of you, in checkers, for example, just trade sides every third or fifth turn so that you have to play the other person's position.

## Related articles for play, creativity, and lifelong learning

Related Helpguide Articles

Resources and References



**[Lifelong Games: Play, Creativity, and Lifelong Learning](#)** – Learn games that can be played by all ages and are especially fun when played between kids and parents and grandparents.



**[Laughter is the Best Medicine](#)** - Nothing works faster or more dependably to bring your mind and body back into balance than a good laugh.



**[Playful Communication in Relationships](#)** - By incorporating humor and laughter into your daily interactions, you can strengthen your relationships.



**[The Therapeutic Benefits of Pets](#)** – Caring for a pet is a responsibility, but it can also make you happier and healthier, both mentally and physically.



**[Improving Emotional Health](#)** – Strong emotional health is tied to your physical health and lifestyle. Learn how to boost your overall physical and mental well-being.

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