

Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul

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From a leading expert, a groundbreaking book on the science of play, and its essential role in fueling our intelligence and happiness throughout our lives.

We've all seen the happiness in the face of a child while playing in the school yard. Or the blissful abandon of a golden retriever racing with glee across a lawn. This is the joy of play. By definition, play is purposeless and all-consuming. And, most important, it's fun.

As we become adults, taking time to play feels like a guilty pleasure—a distraction from "real" work and life. But as Dr. Stuart Brown illustrates, play is anything but trivial. It is a biological drive as integral to our health as sleep or nutrition. In fact, our ability to play throughout life is the single most important factor in determining our success and happiness.

Dr. Brown has spent his career studying animal behavior and conducting more than six thousand "play histories" of humans from all walks of life—from serial murderers to Nobel Prize winners. Backed by the latest research, *Play* explains why play is essential to our social skills, adaptability, intelligence, creativity, ability to problem solve, and more. Play is hardwired into our brains—it is the mechanism by which we become resilient, smart, and adaptable people.

Beyond play's role in our personal fulfillment, its benefits have profound implications for child development and the way we parent, education and social policy, business innovation, productivity, and even the future of our society. From new research suggesting the direct role of three-dimensional-object play in shaping our brains to animal studies showing the startling effects of the lack of play, Brown provides a sweeping look at the latest breakthroughs in our understanding of the importance of this behavior. A fascinating blend of cutting-edge neuroscience, biology, psychology, social science, and inspiring human stories of the transformative power of play, this book proves why play just might be the most important work we can ever do.

An Interview with Dr. Stuart Brown, MD

Q: How do you know play is important to both adults and children?

Dr. Brown: In my career I have reviewed more than 6000 life histories, looking specifically at a person's play experiences over his or her life. In studying these histories it has become vividly apparent that play is enormously significant for both children and adults. I began thinking about the role of play in our lives while conducting a detailed study of homicidal males in Texas. What I discovered was severe play deprivation in the lives of these murderers. When I later studied highly creative and successful individuals, there was a stark contrast. Highly successful people have a rich play life. It is also established that play

affects mental and physical health for both adults and children. A severely play deprived child demonstrates multiple dysfunctional symptoms-- the evidence continues to accumulate that the learning of emotional control, social competency, personal resiliency and continuing curiosity plus other life benefits accrue largely through rich developmentally appropriate play experiences. Likewise, an adult who has "lost" what was a playful youth and doesn't play will demonstrate social, emotional and cognitive narrowing, be less able to handle stress, and often experience a smoldering depression. From an evolutionary point of view, research suggests that play is a biological necessity. There is evidence that suggests the forces that initiate play lie in the ancient survival centers of the brain--the brain stem--where other anciently preserved survival capacities also reside. In other words, play is a basic biological necessity that has survived through the evolution of the brain. And necessity=importance. But one of the strongest arguments for the importance of play is how strongly we identify ourselves through our play behavior. Just look at the eloquent memories of 9-11 victims the New York Times published. The headlines--the summation of a life---were lines like "A Spitball-Shooting Executive," a "Lover of Laughter." Play is who we are.

Q: What are the areas of our culture most in need of "play hygiene?"

Dr. Brown: Most adults have "forgotten" what it was like to engage in free play when they were kids. And truthfully, they may have not had much experience with free play when they were young. Beginning in preschool, the natural mayhem that 3-5 year olds engage in (normal rough and tumble play) is usually suppressed by a well meaning preschool teacher and parents who prefer quiet and order to the seeming chaos that is typical of free childhood play. We need adequate play hygiene in preschools so that both parents and preschool teachers recognize the difference between dangerous out of control boundary-less anarchy, and normal play-- diving, screaming, chasing, even some punching. When there are smiles and continuing friendships, rambunctious play is healthy. The awareness on the part of parents and teachers of the value of free child-organized--meaning lightly supervised--play for elementary school children at recess is another area where greater insight about play hygiene is needed. Play should also be used with teachers in their classroom, and by parents when they help their child with homework. Learning should not be drudgery. Play promotes true intellectual curiosity. It has been shown to increase lifetime performance, just as adequate recess time leads to increased long term academic accomplishments. Also, parents need to control their anxieties about maximizing every minute of their child or young adult's time to increase their competitiveness and performance so that their college resumes will be strong. With every moment scripted by adult ambitions for them, kids cannot become naturally attuned to their innate talents.

Q: How can a review of one's own life history of their play help?

Dr. Brown: If adults can begin to reminisce about their happiest and most memorable moments, they can capture the emotion and visual memories of those moments and begin to connect again to what truly excites them in life. Generally, a person's purest emotional profile--temperament, talents, passions-- is reflected in positive play experiences from childhood. If you can understand your own emotional profile when it was in its purest form,

you can begin to apply it to your adult life. Going through this process may encourage someone to give serious consideration to shifting to another job that may bring them more joy, or to infuse their current life with those elements that once brought them enlivenment but may have been left behind as they conformed to cultural stereotypes of success.

Q: If you could only cite one discovery you have made about play that continues to excite you what would it be?

Dr. Brown: It is that we, as homo sapiens, are fundamentally equipped for and need to play actively throughout our lifespan by nature's design. While most social mammals have a life cycle that involves dominance and submissiveness (as in Chimpanzee troops or wolf packs) with play diminishing significantly as adulthood arrives, we retain the biology associated with youthfulness despite still dying of old age! By this I mean that our overall long period of childhood dependency, which is dominated by the need for play, does not end with our reaching adulthood. Our adult biology remains unique among all creatures, and our capacity for flexibility, novelty and exploration persists. If we suppress this natural design, the consequences are dire. The play-less adult becomes stereotyped, inflexible, humorless, lives without irony, loses the capacity for optimism, and generally is quicker to react to stress with violence or depression than the adult whose play life persists. In a world of major continuous change (and we are certainly facing big changes economically now) playful humans who can roll with the punches and innovate through their play-inspired imaginations will better survive. Our playful natures have arrived at this place through the trial and error of millions of years of evolution, and we need to honor our design to play.

Q: Who is your favorite player? Why?

Dr. Brown: The exuberance that is my grandson Leo makes him my current #1 play companion. His innate humor, constant curiosity, ability to make life a playground is so contagious and pure that he sweeps me away. He takes me out of a sense of time, brings me joy, engages me fully, and does so in a climate of love. But I guess I can also muse that my favorite player is God, who somehow put this marvelous divinely superfluous process into the cosmos for us to embrace.

Stuart Brown, M.D. is a medical doctor, psychiatrist, clinical researcher, and the founder of the National Institute for Play. He speaks regularly to Fortune 500 companies and groups across the country on the significance of play in our lives. The producer of a three-part PBS series, *The Promise of Play*, he has also appeared on NPR and was featured in a front-page story in *The New York Times Magazine*. He lives in Carmel Valley, California. Christopher Vaughan has been a journalist for more than twenty years. He cowrote the national bestseller *The Promise of Sleep*.

Other Books

Imagination in Inquiry, *Imagination in Inquiry* investigates the nature, kinds, component elements, functions, scope, and uses of the imagination that are at work in inquiry. It develops a homeostatic model and discusses its applications in various branches of philosophy, from the philosophy of science and the philosophy of technology to ethics and aesthetics.

Stuart Brown, Christopher Vaughan . In Perceptual Imagination and Perceptual Memory, edited by Fiona Macpherson and Fabian Dorsch, 161-85. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. ---. ... Play: How It Shapes the Brain , Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul ."