

The Importance of Play for Adults

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Our society tends to dismiss play for adults. Play is perceived as unproductive, petty or even a guilty pleasure. The notion is that once we reach adulthood, it's time to get serious. And between personal and professional responsibilities, there's no time to play.

"The only kind [of play] we honor is competitive play," according to Bowen F. White, MD, a medical doctor and author of *Why Normal Isn't Healthy*.

But play is just as pivotal for adults as it is for kids.

"We don't lose the need for novelty and pleasure as we grow up," according to Scott G. Eberle, Ph.D, vice president for play studies at The Strong and editor of the *American Journal of Play*.

Play brings joy. And it's vital for problem solving, creativity and relationships.

In his book *Play*, author and psychiatrist Stuart Brown, MD, compares play to oxygen. He writes, "...it's all around us, yet goes mostly unnoticed or unappreciated until it is missing." This might seem surprising until you consider everything that constitutes play. Play is art, books, movies, music, comedy, flirting and daydreaming, writes Dr. Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play.

Brown has spent decades studying the power of play in everyone from prisoners to businesspeople to artists to Nobel Prize winners. He's reviewed over 6,000 "play histories," case studies that explore the role of play in each person's childhood and adulthood.

For instance, he found that lack of play was just as important as other factors in predicting criminal behavior among murderers in Texas prisons. He also found that playing together helped couples rekindle their relationship and explore other forms of emotional intimacy.

Play can even facilitate deep connections between strangers and cultivate healing. In addition to being a doctor and speaker, Dr. White is a clown. His alter ego, Dr. Jerko, is a proctologist with a large behind and a doctor's coat that says, "I'm interested in your stools." Over two decades ago, White began working with renowned physician Patch Adams.

Today, White continues to clown at children's hospitals and orphanages all over the world. He even clowns at corporate presentations and prisons. "Clowning isn't something we're doing with kids, we clown with everybody," he said.

He's clowned on the streets of Moscow. White doesn't speak Russian, but that didn't stop him from playing with people in Red Square. Within 45 minutes, he was juggling and joking with a crowd of 30.

In Colombia, White's wife and Patch Adams's son – also clowns – visited a bedridden father, at his daughter's request. Once there, they sat on either side of his bed. He didn't know English, and they didn't know Spanish. Still, they sang songs, laughed and played with a whoopee cushion. They also cried. The woman later told them that her father deeply appreciated the experience.

As White said, play can lead us to these sacred spaces and touch people in powerful ways.

What is Play?

"Defining play is difficult because it's a moving target," Eberle said. "[It's] a process, not a thing." He said that it begins in anticipation and hopefully ends in poise. "In between you find surprise, pleasure, understanding — as skill and empathy — and strength of mind, body, and spirit."

Brown called play a "state of being," "purposeless, fun and pleasurable." For the most part, the focus is on the actual experience, not on accomplishing a goal, he said.

Also, the activity is needless. As Brown said, for some people knitting is pure pleasure; for others, it's pure torture. For Brown, who's almost 80, play is tennis with friends and a walk with his dog.

How to Play

We don't need to play every second of the day to enjoy play's benefits. In his book, Brown calls play a catalyst. A little bit of play, he writes, can go a long way toward boosting our productivity and happiness. So how can you add play into your life? Here are a few tips from the experts:

Change how you think about play. Remember that play is important for all aspects of our lives, including creativity and relationships. Give yourself permission to play every day. For instance, play can mean talking to your dog. “[’d] ask my dog Charlie, regularly, his opinion of the presidential candidates. He respond[ed] with a lifted ear and an upturning vocalization that goes ‘haruum?’” Eberle said.

Play can be reading aloud to your partner, he said. “Some playful writers are made to be read aloud: Dylan Thomas, Art Buchwald, Carl Hiaasen, S.J. Perelman, Richard Feynman, Frank McCourt.”

Take a play history. In his book Brown includes a primer to help readers reconnect with play. He suggests readers mine their past for play memories. What did you do as a child that excited you? Did you engage in those activities alone or with others? Or both? How can you recreate that today?

Surround yourself with playful people. Both Brown and White stressed the importance of selecting friends who are playful – and of playing with your loved ones.

Play with little ones. Playing with kids helps us experience the magic of play through their perspective. White and Brown both talked about playing around with their grandkids.

Any time you think play is a waste, remember that it offers some serious benefits for both you and others. As Brown says in his book, “Play is the purest expression of love.”

Further Reading

- A list of [research on play](#)
- Stuart Brown’s [TED talk on play](#)
- Scott Eberle’s blog [“Play in Mind”](#)

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