

10 Reasons Play Can Make You Healthy, Happy, and More Productive

Recess helps kids do better in school

By *Nancy Shute*

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Play is not trivial; it's a basic biological drive as critical to our health as sleep or food. That's the word from Stuart Brown, author of the new book *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (Avery, \$24.95). Here are 10 ways that play makes life better:

Play has been scientifically proved to be good for the brain. All animals play, even though playing is not immediately productive and is sometimes dangerous. Yet grizzly bears that play the most survive longest. Rats that socialize more with other rats develop bigger, more complex brains. And play stimulates nerve growth in the portions of the brain that process emotions and executive function.

Play teaches us to use our imaginations. Imagination is perhaps the most powerful human ability, letting us create simulated realities we can explore without abandoning the real world. Children start to tackle imaginative play around age 2, when they tend to begin telling silly stories. As kids grow older, the line between pretend and real becomes more solid, but imaginative play continues to nourish the spirit.

Rough-and-tumble play teaches us how to cooperate and play fair. Research in humans and animals has shown that roughhousing is necessary for the development of social awareness, cooperation, fairness, and altruism. This is particularly true for preschoolers; what looks like anarchy on the playground is an experiment in the give-and-take necessary for the mastery of social skills. One researcher found that early forms of play, such as chasing, relate to social problem-solving skills that children develop later on. And if young rats are denied rough-and-tumble play, they develop serious social problems in adulthood and aren't able to mate.

Play helps us learn to be friends. When children are 4 to 6 years old, they start "mutual play"; listening to other kids' points of view and incorporating them into imaginative games. This mutual play is the basic state of friendship that sustains us throughout our lives.

Sometimes the best way to learn a complicated subject is to play with it. That's why kids often learn computer systems faster than adults; they aren't afraid to just try stuff out and see what works. Kids don't fear doing something wrong. If they do, they learn from it and do it differently the next time.

Kids do better academically when they have recess. Middle schoolers who are more physically fit do better on academic tests, and grade schoolers who have more than 15 minutes of recess a day show better behavior in class than children who have less or no recess. Animals remember things better and longer when those things are learned through play, perhaps because of the total involvement and focus that play requires.

Physical play delays mental decline in old age. Research on this is still in the early stages, but older people who get regular exercise are less likely to suffer cognitive decline. Doing crossword puzzles, brain teasers, and other thinking games seems to help, too.

A little play can help solve big problems. Play is nature's great tool for creating new neural networks and for reconciling cognitive difficulties. When we play, dilemmas and challenges naturally filter through the unconscious mind and work themselves out. Even a few hours spent doing something you love can make you new again.

Playing at work is not just useful; it's essential. When the going gets tough, the tough go play. Firefighters and police officers use joking around and dark humor to cope with the dangers of their work. Most of us don't face the risk of dying on the job, but there is always the danger of looking bad, costing the company money, or being laid off. Play gives people the emotional distance to rally. In his book, Brown recounts a story about a CEO he knows who gathered employees to talk about a recent bad quarter. The CEO took the blame for the company's performance, then told the employees that under every seat was a toy dart gun with foam darts and that they were all invited to take a shot at him. The CEO then went on to explain how they were going to turn things around. The foam darts told everyone that the situation was not so dire: It was OK to have some setbacks, admit failures, take the hit, and figure out ways to fix the problems.

When we get play right, all areas of our lives go better. One of the hardest things to teach kids is how to make it past difficulty or boredom to find the fun. Making all of life an act of play occurs when we recognize and accept that there may be some discomfort in play and that every experience has both pleasure and pain. Advanced play, the black belt of play, comes when we realize this and act on it. Then, our work is our play and our play is our work, and we have a hard time telling the difference between them.

To learn more about the benefits of play, you can check out this Q&A with *Play* author Stuart Brown.