The Power of Play
Learning What Comes Naturally

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Although under attack from some goal-oriented politicians and parents and often considered superfluous by school administrators and teachers, free play remains vital to human health and creativity. Contrary to the notion that play should serve utilitarian ends or consist primarily of organized sports, the author makes a case for self-initiated physical play free of educational toys, computer games, and television, especially early in childhood but also throughout young life. Combining ideas from Sigmund Freud and Jean Piaget, the author views play as one of three necessary elements of a full life, the others being work and love.

Most of us engaged in the study of play consider it a form of exercise for creative dispositions—for imagination, for curiosity, for fantasy. We believe it has a vital role in human development. Through play, children create new learning experiences, and these self-created experiences enable them to acquire social, emotional, and intellectual skills they could not acquire in any other way. Yet play has currently fallen into some disrepute. School administrators and teachers—frequently backed by goal-oriented politicians and parents—broadcast the not-so-subtle message that these days play seems superfluous, that at bottom play is for slackers, that if kids must play, they should at least learn something while they are doing it.

Since people nowadays tend to overlook the vital role of leisurely play in healthy development, it is in danger of becoming an unaffordable luxury. Parents fill kids' time with after-school tutoring and organized sports that cut into self-initiated play time. Teachers give kindergarten children tests and assign them homework. Ponderous educational toys abound for the toddler, and even infancy no longer has much time for free play. A research study published in the May 2007 *Pediatrics* found that three-month-old infants are now watching some two hours of television per day. Little wonder they grow into boys and girls who ride their bikes less often but watch television and play computer games more frequently.

Many consider Sigmund Freud a pioneer in understanding the importance of play for healthy development during the early years of life. And, indeed, he argued in *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* that play was therapeutic and enabled children to deal with their negative feelings in a way that did not alienate them from adults. But—perhaps because he saw it as remedial—Freud did not regard play as *critical* to healthy growth and development. When asked what he thought was necessary for a full and productive life, he supposedly replied, *Lieben und Arbeiten*, "loving and working." In contrast, although no one—so far as we know—ever asked famed Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget the same question, based on his *The Psychology of Intelligence* I'm sure he would have replied instead, *assimilation et accommodation*, which might be translated as "playing and working." Unlike Freud, Piaget was unconcerned with the affective side of life, with love. Rather, he primarily focused on the development of intelligence, on adaptive thought and action. But if we put the formulas of these two giants of psychology together, we have the trilogy of play, love, and work—three basic drives that power human thought and action, three drives essential to a full, happy, and productive life. And while play, love, and work may constitute separate and distinct dispositions, they function most effectively when they operate together.

Certainly we do not want to exclude one leg of the triad—play—as superfluous. Surely we need to provide children with the balance of these three or risk unwanted consequences if we fail to do so. For self-initiated play nourishes the child's curiosity, imagination, and creativity, and these abilities are like muscles—if you don't use them, you lose them. And since these skills develop with age, it's important to encourage them with age-appropriate challenges.

The Development of Play, Love, and Work

Play

The play drive first appears as infants try to adapt the physical world to their needs. At a few months, a baby transforms every object that can be grasped into one that can be sucked. By the time children become preschoolers, they begin to create playful associations between objects—which is what a four-year-old does, say, when holding up a potato chip and exclaiming, "Look Mummy, a butterfly!" For school-age children, play soon becomes more about making and breaking rules—in a game of hide-and-seek, the lead child decides on the physical limits and time frame of the game, then all the other players attempt to outwit the leader.

Love

Love is our need to express our desires, feelings, and emotions, and it takes time to sort it out. A baby cries to express everything from joy to unhappiness. Preschoolers center their love largely on themselves. Ask them what they pray for, for example, and young children will tell you toys or candy. At this age, they don't like to share, not because they are selfish in the way adults understand the word but because they feel the toy is still a part of them. Once they reach school age, children usually grow more social in their expressions of love and caring. If you ask them at that point what they pray for, they often come up with something like, say, the well-being of their family.

Work

In work we adapt our own behavior to the demands of our physical and social environment. Toddlers learning to eat with a spoon rather than with their fingers are learning the skill of fitting in with their environment, both physically and socially. They are learning to adapt. They are learning to work. A preschooler's rapid acquisition of language constitutes the most impressive marker of this social adaptation. At primary school, as children take turns and accept non-parental authority while they develop motor skills with such tools as paintbrushes, balls, and books, work assumes the form of learning social rules. To the casual observer, it may be difficult to distinguish here between work and play because the real difference lies more with the intent than the act: When we work, we adapt ourselves to our environment; when we play, we adapt our world to fit our imagination.

Play, Love, and Work in Action

Adults respond so negatively to play because they define it as simply having fun and, therefore, as a waste of time. But though play can be fun, as one of the three essential drives—love, play, work—it contributes to the best kind of learning. Play operates as more than a creative urge; it also functions as a fundamental mode of learning.

The teacher of a group of four-year-olds at the Children's School at Tufts University near Boston offers simple, straightforward testimony of how these drives can work together to create a positive learning experience. The kids, after the usual bombardment of romanticized images of the heart that typically accompanies Valentine's Day, became fascinated by the operations of this basic

human organ. Keying off their curiosity, the teacher had the children take her pulse and showed them pictures of a real heart. She even brought in a cow's heart for them to examine. Because they were the ones interested in the topic in the first place, the kids considered themselves to be playing with hearts. But such play left them open to "working" on their skills of measurement, vocabulary, and anatomy.

Many of us can easily observe the benefits of integrating play, love, and work at home. During the first few years of their lives, young children are—in a quite literal sense—visiting a foreign country for the first time. Because kids do not think in adult concepts and categories, they often approach this "new land" from many different perspectives simultaneously. Metaphorically speaking, they observe water and sand, trees and woods, plants and animals, the moon, the sun, the stars, all of it, as if through the eyes of an artist, or a naturalist, or a writer, or a scientist. When we offer our children opportunities to explore this new and exciting world in their own time and at their own pace, we open them up to powerful learning experiences they could not encounter in any other way. Why intrude on a time when children are instinctively learning with such joy and enthusiasm? Why rush babies and preschoolers and school kids into adult-led learning experiences?

Facilitating the Growth of Play, Love, and Work

Children learn through play, but their capacity for learning is limited by their social situation, their emotional condition, and their physical and intellectual development. Yet we best ensure a child's healthy growth, whatever these conditions, by supporting and encouraging the child's own self-initiated learning activities.

No one teaches a baby to babble, for instance. Infants naturally make a wide variety of vowel and consonant sounds. By babbling, the infant creates all the sounds he or she will need to use a language. Without these self-created sounds, the child would never learn to speak, or would do so with great difficulty. So when the child begins to make recognizable sounds—and only *after* the child has initiated these sounds on his or her own—we can support and encourage the child's linguistic skills and help to hone the use of language that will shape the rest of the child's life.

We can similarly facilitate children's social development by entering into their self-initiated social interactions. At four or five months, the infant, say,

drops a rattle on the floor, and we respond by retrieving it. The baby repeats the process and we now have a game in which each player knows his or her role. This is a simple, very familiar example of how play, love, and work can operate together to foster development. The infant engages in play when he or she drops the rattle. The parent lovingly retrieves it, which encourages affection in return from the child. The child has learned how to work in engaging a caregiver in social interaction; the caregiver, in turn, teaches the child how to play by encouraging curiosity and exploration.

Because these initial interactions are so basic and essential, choosing the right toys becomes especially important for this age group. Three-dimensional objects offer more valuable learning experiences than one-dimensional objects. A set of wooden blocks is a good investment, for example, because children play with them in a variety of ways—babies may use them to discover size differences; tots to construct buildings. Puppets, dolls, and materials such as clay and paints allow kids to express themselves in their own ways. The same cannot quite be said for battery or wind-up toys. They may be attractive initially, but children soon lose interest because such toys do not encourage interaction and have little to offer once the novelty wears off. Something similar happens with most chip-embedded toys and computers for this age group. And for that reason, they have no real place in toddler life.

Preschoolers enjoy dramatic play, and we can encourage such play at home or at school by providing children with discarded adult clothing and household props to play house or adorn superheroes. By aiding their imaginative imitations of the adult world, we also help them learn to adopt roles and assume duties, to engage in subtle negotiations, to manifest their budding personalities—in short, to try out various roles and find those most suited to their individual temperament. And because children from toddlerhood who don't know one another communicate with those of the same age through self-initiated games, we can introduce social learning and cooperation by taking them to venues—play group or park—where they meet children in their age group. And there's no better way to encourage the interaction of play, love, and work than providing children from infancy with books. Books support healthy language learning and stimulate a child's imagination.

Once children reach school age, games with rules become a good option. These offer unique social and developmental experiences that often cannot be acquired in any other way. Children playing Monopoly learn to develop strategies *and* take risks, while, in card games, they acquire the ability to observe others and evaluate their intent. Even with something so basic as hide-and-seek,

children learn mutual respect as they make and break their own rules. Again, this kind of *social* learning cannot be found much in the play of computer games.

Certainly, with school-age children, we are able to become more active in stimulating curiosity, fantasy, and imagination. We can play word games with them, pose riddles, and help them appreciate the multiple possibilities of words in order to stimulate creative thinking. By watching movies and television programs with them, we can encourage them to talk about the story, the characters, the setting—anything to combat the spectator passivity. In the long run, of course, we can't ban all television and computer games—and both mediums can be educational—but we can limit the time children watch television and spend on the computer. And we can make sure they go outside to play.

These days the real risk is that children are left with little time to indulge their natural predisposition for fantasy, imagination, and creativity. A child's world needs to be kept simple. It should provide a supportive climate in which a kid feels free to ask questions and to express his or her interests. If left to their own devices, children spend a lot of time exploring the natural world. School-age children are collectors and classifiers, and observation and classification are the initial stage of any science. Providing them time to explore the natural world at their own pace offers the opportunity for an invaluable, solid foundation for learning of all kinds. The richness, fullness, and mysteries of nature put many television and computer programs to shame. Adults who disdain play as a waste of time should understand that by encouraging their youngsters' predispositions for fantasy, imagination, and creativity, they are indeed providing the mental tools required in the long term for success in areas such as math and science.

Jean Piaget once wrote, "Play is the answer to the question: how does anything new come about?" When we provide opportunities for—and allow time for—children's self-initiated play, we are ensuring the full development of their curiosity, their imagination, and their creativity. We are striking the right balance between love, work, and play.

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