The Power of Play

by Hara Estroff Marano, published on July 01, 1999
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Most of us think of adult play as respite or indulgence, but having fun is no trivial pursuit. In fact, it's crucial to put mental creativity, health and happiness.

Say the words and they conjure the gentle tickle of waves against the shore, the harder kick of surf dashing against rocks, the slap of spray against heated skin. For most of us, the place where earth meets ocean is the very essence of play—antic, full of novelty and joyful abandon.

At the beach, we are all children. As we gambol in the shallow surf and toss in the deeper waves, we feel the freedom of helplessness and the satisfaction of improvising defenses. Unburdened by consciousness or self-consciousness, we are caught in the moment. Suffused with pleasure, we exult in the sheer lightness of being.

Yet, as welcome and wonderful as those feelings are, play's value among adults is too often vastly underrated. We would all agree that play lifts stress from us. It refreshes us and recharges us. It restores our optimism. It changes our perspective, stimulating creativity. It renews our ability to accomplish the work of the world. By anyone's reckoning, those are remarkably worthy achievements.

But there is also evidence that play does much more. It may in fact be the highest expression of our humanity, both imitating and advancing the evolutionary process. Play appears to allow our brains to exercise their very flexibility, to maintain and even perhaps renew the neural connections that embody our human potential to adapt, to meet any possible set of environmental conditions.

And it may be that playfulness is a force woven through our search for mates. Certainly, playful people are the most fun to be around. But the ability to play may be a strong and appealing signal of something more. Especially among males, playfulness can protect us. It may be a way to indicate to potential partners that a man is not a threat to himself, to his offspring—or to society at large.

It can truly be said that we are made for play; after all, humans are among the very few animals that play as adults. What the evidence adds up to is this: we are most human when we play—and just because we play.

Like art, play is that quintessential experience that is almost impossible to define—because it encompasses infinite variability—but which we all recognize when we see, or experience. So let us go back to the beach in an attempt to understand all that contributes to such a necessary, and exalted, psychological state.

The beach is, above all else, Somewhere Else, far enough away from home, office, and everyday routines in character and distance. That dislocation sets the stage for us to be attuned to the moment, to relax our focus on long-term goals.

Being at the beach invariably forces a measure of spontaneity. We bring few of our usual possessions and tools. We are forced to recline, stretch out, relax.

If the sand and the water offer their own endless cache of novelty, the sun draws our attention to them. And it cossets us, taking tension out of our bodies with its warmth. Then, too, there is the novelty of (relative) nudity. It renders us all childlike and opens us to the enjoyment of sensations. It renders us ready to play.

Despite our readiness to play, at the beach and other places, we Americans have a particularly deep ambivalence toward play. According to Cindy S. Aron, Ph.D., associate professor of history at the University of Virginia, Americans want to get out and play, and we do. But we have also created many ways that keep us connected to work. Partial evidence: the ubiquity of cell phones and laptop computers at the beach.

The concept of vacation—time specifically set aside from work for play—grew from the custom of a small elite in the early 19th century, observes Aron in *Working at Play* (Oxford, 1999). Fostered by the growth of the middle class, the creation of a highway system and the

changeover from an agricultural to urban society, it expanded to a mass phenomenon by World War II.

But at the same time, notes Aron, "Americans have struggled with the notion of taking time off." In fact, she says, we have "a love/hate battle" with our vacations, both wanting to take them and fearing the consequences. Our distrust of leisure is a legacy of our Puritan forebears, who knew that work, not play, was the key to their success and saw labor as a way of glorifying God. Play, according to this view, threatens to undermine both our success and salvation.

Freud, too, disregarded play as a powerful force. In his 1930 classic *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he declared that "the communal life of human beings had, therefore, a twofold foundation: the compulsion to work... and the power of love."

As a result, today we often use our leisure time not necessarily to play, but in performance of various sorts of work, whether it's time at the health spa or artists' retreats.

It isn't even clear whether we are playing more or less than we used to. If we're playing more, it doesn't feel like it. Just in the past 30 years, there has been a cultural shift reemphasizing work and getting ahead. "We still play, but much of it seems to lack a playful quality," observes anthropologist Garry Chick, Ph.D., of Penn State University. "Playfulness has been replaced by aggressiveness and the feeling that more needs to be crammed into less time."

Scholars themselves debate the state of our leisure time. Many believe that the amount of free time we have to use for play has decreased since about 1970, after having increased steadily since the Industrial Revolution. The increase accompanied a transition from an industrial economy marked by hourly wages to a service economy characterized by salaries. But the globalization of business competition and a general cultural rejection of the ideals of the 1960s in favor of a new materialism have actually eroded our free time since then. Other experts believe we have as much free time today as in 1970—but feel so harried by globalization and intimidated by the speed of things that it seems as if we have less.

But the big question is why we bother to play at all. It is a tenet of evolutionary psychology that useless behaviors—and worse, deleterious ones, which play can seem to be since it erodes energy, wastes time that could be spent searching for food, and opens players to both injury and predation—pretty quickly get selected out of behavioral repertoires. Yet in the animal kingdom, play increases, rather than decreases, with increasing complexity of the brain.

If Garry Chick is right, we play because it protects us. Chick, who has studied games and sports in a number of cultures, contends that the standard explanations for why we play just don't wash. For example, the belief that play affords practice for skills needed later in life is true—for some animals, and then just for juveniles. "Some animals appear to play at things they will be doing their adult lives," he observes. "Predatory animals play at predation, those that are preyed upon play at escape. Social animals beat each other up to establish rank and hierarchy."

Of course, all animals play at sex. "It's essential, something you have to do," Chick notes. "Animals play at mounting. Humans play doctor."

But the difficulty is explaining why adults engage in play, activity distinguished by having no goals at all. "Adults really don't have more to learn," says Chick. Which is why in most mammalian species, the adults leave playing to the young.

Chick proposes that just as humans have selectively bred the wolf into the dog specifically for playfulness, so we have bred playfulness into our own selves by sexual selection. Males, he argues, can be dangerous. They rape and they kill, especially when one deposes another in a social group. Chick points to evidence that stepfathers are much more likely to kill their stepchildren than fathers are to kill their natural offspring.

But one sign that males may not be dangerous either to females or to their children is their willingness to play with them. "So it is possible that females seek out mates who are playful, both for their own protection and for that of their offspring." Men, for their part, are not immune to the pleasures of playfulness in selecting a

mate either. Playfulness is an indicator of youthfulness in women.

If playfulness is an innate biological quality of higher animals, it is also in part a learned behavior. Chick's studies of preschoolers and their parents demonstrate that younger parents have more playful children than older parents, presumably because they are played with more. And second-borns are more playful than first-borns, because they go through childhood with a near-peer to play with.

Through play, contends psychiatrist Lenore Terr, M.D., clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of California at San Francisco, "we get control over the world. We get to manipulate symbols, control the outcome of events." Terr's own now-classic work with children traumatized by physical and sexual abuse demonstrates how clearly play is necessary to mental health.

In the aftermath of trauma children lose their flexibility. They play, but their play is obsessive; they stay stuck, repeating the traumatic episode endlessly. "Post-traumatic play demonstrates that if we don't find a way out of difficult situations, we will play much of our lives over and over again."

Play is an opening to our very being, Terr observes in *Beyond Love and Work: Why Adults Need to Play* (Scribner, 1999). It permits us emotional discharge, but in a way that carries little risk. In fact, she says, play is not just an activity—it's a state of mind, and "all the mental activity of play comes at you sideways." Therein lies its value: the mental activity is never the direct goal. Terr uses play therapy as a way to allow children—and adults, who often remain frozen in patterns of play originating in fearful experiences in childhood—to create new endings for their experience.

Perhaps for that reason, adults who play appear to live longer than those who don't. Terr cites as evidence the most recent findings of the long-standing Terman study. Begun by Stanford University psychologist Lewis Terman in the 1920s to examine the lives of gifted children, the study has allowed other researchers to track the consequences of high intelligence and other psychological factors to health and longevity. In the Terman group, those still surviving are those who have played the most throughout their lives, Terr told *Psychology Today*.

Play, argues Brian Sutton-Smith, Ph.D., is more than an attitude. And more than an action. While it encompasses development, it's not about that—it's about pure unalloyed enjoyment. Professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, Sutton-Smith is still the ranking dean of play studies. He considers play an alternative cultural form, like art and music.

"They don't have much to do with immediate working life," says Sutton-Smith, "but that doesn't mean they're a waste of time." He calls play—are you ready?—an autonomous intrinsically motivated activity. We do it spontaneously, just because it's fun.

Like art and music, play has a verbal and body language all its own. Even studies of children at play show that language use is different during play than during normal conversation. For one thing, it takes place mainly in the past tense. A typical exchange between playmates might go: "And then let's say that we went to your place and your mother wouldn't let us in so we had to go home and my mother was out and so we had to make this meal that we are making now. OK? Is that OK?... OK. And what else did we do?" "We did a poop. Ha-ha!"

Play is also stylized, with regulated ways of behaving. Games have rules. Still, people are very active within its frame. In other words, when you're chased, you run. "Play is always a fantasy, but once you get into the frame it is quite real, and everything you do is real. You put acres and acres of real movement and real action and real belief in it," says Sutton-Smith. So you scream with fear when you're being chased.

Sutton-Smith is betting that neuroimaging studies of the brain will eventually reveal a ludic center in the brain. And he locates it somewhere in the frontal lobes. What play does, he says, is simulate and make more flexible fear responses that are reflexes in the more primitive organism or in more primitive parts of the brain. "What we have in play is a simulation of an anxiety attack," he says.

With one all-important difference. It's anxiety—complete with uncertainty—but without the adrenaline and endocrine response. Studies in dogs show that "they're rushing around as if they're in extremity, but adrenaline is not being pumped into the system. Play looks like an emergency but isn't. It's a simulated emergency. The frontal lobes win out over the reflexive phenomena in the back of the brain."

In the simulated explosions and aggressions of play, we get to explore and experiment with feelings. It is one of the few times we are in charge of circumstances. We have much more autonomy that usual, and exchange habit and boredom for novelty and the exercise of our own competencies. And that creates excitement.

Somewhere down the line, some creature was untethered from strict necessity and afforded the luxury of an excess action, and then repeated making the move that wasn't strictly necessary. "That animal was in some way turned into a more surviving animal as a result," says Sutton-Smith.

We play because it reflects the brains we have and the cultures we live in. By and large, he points out, "the connections in the brain fade away unless used. We know that early stimulation of children leads to higher cognitive scores. Playful stimulation probably hits all kinds of synaptic possibilities. It is all make-believe and all over the map. The potentiality of the synapses and the potentiality of playfulness are a beautiful marriage."

When adults play, notes Sutton-Smith, citing a series of Dutch studies of video-game playing, their memory is better. They are cognitively more capable. And they are happier.

The same is true for kids. In one study, Austrian children were offered a cache of toys—once they got their work done. As a result, the children were more eager to go to school. The teachers liked being in the classrooms teaching and being with the kids more, and the parents liked the school more. And pointing to a homegrown study at Temple University, children arriving in grade one with a reading background were compared with kids having a more old-fashioned play background. The children who got the reading instruction performed better during the first grade but not by the end of the year. And, Sutton-Smith reports, "they were much more depressed. The opposite of play is not work. It's depression."

Although we all need to play, we don't all play the same way. We differ significantly in play style, Penn State's Garry Chick has found. In studies of tic-tac-toe players, Chick observed differences along several dimensions. First there were those he calls high-velocity players; for them, the fewer strokes the better. Low-velocity players, on the other hand, were engaged in the play of play; they simply enjoyed making the moves. Players also differ by strategy. Some people play to win. Others play not to lose; for them, a draw is as pleasurable as a win.

Some of us like to play in ways that test physical skill. Some prefer games of pure strategy, like chess. Others of us opt for word games and puzzles at any chance we get. Some of us—the very lucky ones?—get to play in our work. Scientists and writers, for example, regularly play with ideas.

How we play is related, in myriad ways, to our core sense of self. Play is an exercise in self-definition; it reveals what we choose to do, not what we have to do. We not only play because we are. We play the way we are. And the ways we could be. Play is our free connection to pure possibility.

It is a day at the beach.

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