

Play Is the WAY

by Steve Gross and Rebecca Cornelli Sanderson

Historically, play has been viewed as a frivolous break from important endeavors like working and learning when, in fact, a child's ability to fully and freely engage in play is essential to their learning, productivity, and overall development. A natural drive to play is universal across all young mammals. Children from every society on earth spend time playing. Why? Because play is a crucial vehicle for exploring and learning, developing new skills, and connecting with others. From an infant's first smile to a preschooler's careful construction of a tower, children use play to engage with and learn about their world. Play has key neurological, cognitive, socio-emotional, and physiological benefits for children's health. Most importantly, play is the way in which children form loving, trusting relationships.

A New Play Paradigm

People often think of play in terms of specific 'play activities' such as tag, soccer, or playing in the sandbox. In contrast, they think of work in terms of activities like raking leaves, cooking, cleaning, or doing homework. It is our belief that any activity, as long as it is done with a playful approach, is play. In other words, it's not about *what* you do, it's about *how* you do it. Playfulness is the expression of our natural drive to freely and joyfully explore, engage, and connect with the surrounding world.



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The Life is good Playmakers (www.ligplaymakers.org) is an accredited 501(c)(3) public charity whose vision is a world where all children grow up feeling safe, loved, and joyful. In order to make this vision a reality, The Life is good Playmakers partner with frontline professionals — such as teachers, social workers, and Child Life Specialists — who dedicate their lives to helping children overcome poverty, violence, and illness. These Playmakers use the power of play to build healing, life-changing relationships with the children in their care. To contact us, please email info@ligplaymakers.org.



We have identified four basic elements to play: **Active Engagement, Internal Control, Social Connection, and Joyfulness.** When we are actively engaged, joyful, empowered, and connected to others, we are playing. What we happen to be doing at the time makes no difference.

Active Engagement: When we are enthusiastically immersed in an activity, we are in the moment, focused on the process and not the end result. Fully in the present, we are not worried about the past or the future, nor are we concerned with outside rewards or expectations. When children are actively engaged, they:

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- Play with passion and gusto.
- Are curious and inquisitive.
- Move freely and comfortably.
- Extend this passion and curiosity to many different kinds of activities.

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Active engagement is the key building block for *creativity*; when we are actively engaged, our minds are primed and ready for exploration and creation.

Internal Control: All young mammals, including children, cannot fully engage in play if their basic safety needs are not met. However, once children feel safe, they can develop a sense of freedom and empowerment, enabling them to gain control over their own involvement in an activity and to handle the ups and downs of their emotions. Developing a sense of control, children begin to believe that they can influence their world and meet challenges with success. When children are internally controlled in play, they:

- Have an “I can do it” attitude.
- Continue trying to meet a challenge even when they feel frustrated.
- Take initiative when playing with others.
- Can switch to different roles comfortably (e.g., from leader to follower).

By feeling safe, competent, and empowered, children develop the inner **peace** that enables them to meet life's challenges more effectively.

Joyfulness: When we are joyful, we feel a deep sense of love and an awareness of the goodness that is all around us. Joyfulness is not the absence of sadness. Instead, it is the inner sense of fulfillment that helps us work through adversity, and even tragedy. When children are joyful, they attend to the present moment and all that is good in it. Sometimes, joy is expressed with exuberance, through wide smiles, laughter, and silliness. At other times, joy is expressed more internally. Shown through quiet contentment or exuberance, joy is a celebration of the positive aspects of the moment, whether it is dancing to a favorite song, listening to the wind whip through the trees, or spending time with a loved one.

Social Connection: We know that human beings do not survive without connection to others. Feeling a sense of belonging is crucial to our overall well-being. Starting first with parents and caregivers,

infants immediately seek connection and develop strong bonds in order to feel loved and protected. It is these first, most basic connections that fuel children's independence in exploring the world around them, knowing that they have a safe base to which they can return. Social connection is a prerequisite for social competence, as it captures children's more basic drive to connect with others and their cultural world — a drive that is reinforced by caring, trusting, and safe relationships with others. This natural drive to connect with others leads children to join other children in play, attempt to help others, and try to play harmoniously. Just as the **love** between infants and their parents cements a child's ability to relate to others, social connection is the foundation upon which children build **loving** relationships with others.

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Playfulness is the expression of our natural drive to freely and joyfully explore, engage, and connect with the surrounding world.

Not all play is created equal. Just as we need to eat a balanced diet, with many different food groups represented, we need play that has all four basic nutrients: active engagement, social connection, joyfulness, and internal control.

Play that provides children with opportunities for engagement, empowerment, connection, and joy has the potential to serve as a transformational experience, changing the way a child's brain, body, and spirit develop. When children are fully and freely engaged in play, they learn new things, develop key social and emotional skills, feel part of a community and take on new challenges. Engaged in transformative play, children build healing relationships with the key people in their lives and are able to build resilience in the face of life's greatest challenges.

Play Under Threat

If play is so essential to our overall well-being, why is it being overlooked in our schools, community centers, and neighborhoods? Due to a heavy focus on traditional academic instruction, the over-scheduling of extracurricular activities, the lack of safe, adult-supervised spaces to play, and the ubiquity of multi-media entertainment, opportunities for transformative play are diminishing. This issue is not unique to America. In a recent study, 2,400 mothers of young children across five continents reported that a decrease in

free play time was whittling away their children's experience of childhood.

Denying children access to transformative play experiences does them a great disservice. This is particularly true for children who have been exposed to trauma. Unfortunately, we know that fear destroys playfulness. Millions of our nation's children have experienced profound trauma, such as community violence, abuse, neglect, natural disasters, and extreme poverty. Trauma can cripple the development of young children, lead to negative long-term health consequences, and shorten life expectancy. Long-term stress such as community violence, conflict at home, and inadequate resources can undo a child's sense of safety in the same way that natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes) and man-made disasters (e.g., war) can. And children need to feel safe to play.

Fortunately, children have an incredible ability to bounce back when they receive the support they need from the adults around them. Empowering, joyful play with sensitive, caring adults can help to restore what trauma violently strips from a child. If schools, hospitals, and social service agencies put playful engagement on the back burner, children, particularly those suffering from the impact of poverty and trauma, will miss out on essential opportunities to engage in transformative play and build the resilience they need to meet life's challenges.

Transforming Health, Education, and Well-Being

A new understanding of play's essential role in the health, education, and well-being of children is needed among all whose work supports children's development. Further, this understanding must lead to new practices that integrate transformative play into child care and early education programs. All of us involved in children's welfare have an opportunity — and a responsibility — to create more joyful, loving, empowering, and inspiring systems of care and education, especially for our most vulnerable children. As we look to the future, we envision a world where thousands of adults embody and apply a playful approach to their work with children so that all involved — adults and children — lead healthier, more joyful lives. Playfulness and play will no longer be taken for granted, and schools and other systems of care will be inspiring places where children can develop their best selves and reach their full potential.



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What Does a Playful Classroom Look Like?

A classroom that **engages children** lets children help guide the curriculum or programming. Classroom themes are built on children's interests. The classroom has time and space for dance, music, gross-motor play, child-led storytelling, and open-ended process-oriented art.



A classroom that **empowers** children collaboratively develops clear and explicit rules for keeping everyone safe. Children have autonomy and choice and determine their own level of participation in any given activity. They are encouraged to express their opinions and ideas, and their voices are heard. No matter what their age, they can affect change in the school community.

Children are empowered to resolve conflicts with peers, try new

things, and meet challenges.

A classroom that **connects** children emphasizes the importance of relationships between teachers and children, as well as between peers. Children feel a strong sense of belonging in the classroom and participate in group projects where they learn and solve problems together. There are many opportunities to share feelings and



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experiences. The classroom operates as a tight-knit community in which children feel supported and nurtured.

A **joyful** classroom is one that is full of smiles, laughter, and humor. Children and teachers sing together, dance together, and cheer for one another. The classroom has many opportunities for celebration, whether to honor accomplishments or commemorate an important event. Teachers and children engage in child-like wonder, recognize all that is good in the present, and give thanks.

