

“Kidstuff”

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It was a hot summer day and we were playing for keeps. My brother and I were surveying the world from twenty feet above the ground in our special lookout tree. We were vigilant as we waited for “Senor Monster” to spring up from behind the water tower across town. As members of the spy team, it was our duty to notify our special forces on the ground – the other kids at day care – of any suspicious activity. Suddenly, we heard a voice. It was our mothers. It was time to go home and time for the wonderful world of mystery, magic and make-believe to end. Playtime was over.

And now, even though it’s ten years later, this statement is still true. Unfortunately, for too many of us playtime is over, for America no longer knows how to play. And this is true for the little kids and the “big kids” – the children and the adults. Author Matt Schudel agrees. In his article entitled *The Kidnapping of Play*, he states that Americans have lost sight of what play really means: Imagination, creativity and a sense of playfulness. And in its place, we’ve either put pretend play or no play at all.

So, let’s take a look at these two worlds and examine, first, the programmed play world of children, and, second, the prohibited play world of adults.

Now, today’s kids aren’t allowed to play – they’re instructed; they’re organized and compartmentalized. You can forget about going outside to play. Instead, schedule a play date. Even though Dutch historian Johan Huizinga believes that “supervised play” isn’t really play at all, more and more this is exactly what kids are getting. We have clubs and classes, leagues and teams, soccer, T-ball, gymnastics. One Los Angeles community even offers finger painting lessons.

Hello! Don’t you just do finger painting?

Real play is freedom from constraints. “Lucy-goosey, pie-in-the-sky” freedom to create a world that has its own characters, its own language. Now earlier you may have thought that “Senor Monster” sounded pretty dumb. As a matter of fact, now that I am so much older, he sounds pretty dumb to me, too. But at that time, to my brother and to me “Senor Monster” was real, and more importantly he was ours – our own creation.

Today, American has three percent of the world’s children and sixty percent of the world’s toys. Toys that often do everything for us, except inspire us to create. Ironically, Doctor Tricia Greenhaugh believes that it is not toys, but the absence of toys that inspires real play. Now, I’m not saying that adult guidance isn’t critical in

the development of a child, but when fostering free play isn't a priority, we end up trading our imaginations for somebody else's.

Now programmed play is definitely part of the adult world as well, but I think that there's an even larger problem facing the "big kids," and that's that play is often not allowed. And that's our second world, the prohibited play world of adults.

While many adults know how to "play it cool," play it safe, play the stock market and play doctor, few know how to extend the play in the child's world to the playfulness that is critical in the adults. It's an inline, online, bottom-line world out there, so in this zone, play is often prohibited. The book, *The Playful Self*, states that evidently modern society sees the words work and play as being diametrically opposed. Work and play seem to have the compatibility factor of a surveillance camera and Winona Ryder.

Author Rebecca Abrams states that ever since Freud preached the notion that all play ended at childhood, we have been led to believe that adults who are genuinely playful are off-task, unproductive daydreamers who need to "get focused." Well, maybe Freud should have played a little more with his friends and a little less with his mother.

Play, in the adult world, isn't so much an activity as it is a mindset: playfulness. And it is neither childish, nor trivial, but according to Abrams a fundamental social good that stimulates mental health, creativity and happiness. Brian Sutton Smith, the dean of Play Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, agrees and he reminds us that the opposite of play isn't work, it's depression.

Now, I'm not saying that our lives should be one continuous game of Silly String or Hacky Sack, but it does seem as though our definition of play has been obscured, that we've turned it into something else.

The video games have become a multimillion dollar industry, and one of the hottest current sellers is *Grand Theft Auto*, where you can score big points for killing a prostitute. Road kill offers you bonus points for nailing a doe and her fawn. Hey, kill a prostitute, kill animals – wait, wasn't that Jeffrey Dahmer?

Don't get me wrong. Just because you play video games doesn't automatically qualify you for the next episode of *CSI*, but it does seem as though our definition of play has been distorted. *Sports Illustrated* writer Rick Riley believes that fans who, and I quote, "Tear the hell out of a city, not because their sports team loses, but because their sports team wins, are, in their own minds, only playing." Turning over cars, looting stores, burning things is "playing around." Riley believes that this play gone bad is an American mindset, and that whatever happens, when people let off a little steam, should be understood and, worse, tolerated.

Didn't the guys who brutalized Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming say that in the beginning they were only playing?

Nearly ten years ago, author William Oscar Johnson published a report stating that repressed natural play in children often materializes later in life, in sometimes disastrous forms. He called this, "unspent war-like energy," and said that when we don't learn how to play, or when we don't learn the rules of play, we end up associating mayhem, violence and unruly behavior as normal adult "play."

So, isn't it time that we turned play around?

First of all, let's remember what play was meant to be and where it comes from. It comes from a creative mind and spirit that allows the little kids and the "big kids" to bring good-hearted fun into their daily world. To loosely paraphrase philosopher Descartes, "I play, therefore I am."

Second of all, let's go. Get up and create, imagine, explore, think outside of the box, or the book or the room or the directions or the board meeting, and don't think that playing isn't serious work. Philosopher Nietzsche once said, "There is nothing as serious as a child at play." So, focus on your fun.

And there are benefits, the book, *Building Blocks*, states that there is a direct correlation between the seriousness that children show while playing and the work ethic that adults show later in life while working. Director Steven Spielberg says that many of the great ideas he has put on film were creations that he dreamed about while playing as a child. Even Senator John McCain, a prisoner of war during Vietnam, said that he was able to endure torture and isolation because he was able to play "make believe" in his head to create a world of beauty, bounty and harmony that made his real world survivable.

Third, let go, loosen up, take a chance and laugh. Take a chance and even love.

In her poem, Diane Loomans writes,

*If I had my child to raise again,
I would build esteem first, and the house later.
I would finger paint more,
And point the finger less.
I would do less correcting,
And more connecting.
And I would stop playing serious,
And seriously play.*

So, regardless of your age, remember that some of life's greatest lessons are learned on that playground, or in that tree, or in the boxes that the swing set came in. You see, in the end, it's all kidstuff. And from now on, let's play, for keeps.