

Why Adults Should Play More

Emma Hiwaizi

explores some of the benefits of play and shares some of her favourite games



The importance of play for children is widely recognised. Play nurtures children's imagination and in turn their problem-solving skills, play provides a safe place for exploring some of the more challenging aspects of our existence, and ultimately play is fun and it gives children a chance to connect with one another and with Nature. But how many of you agree that as adults we should sing, dance, play and laugh more?

Children are natural players. They live in the moment and are inherently curious about the world and the people around them. From simple games of peekaboo to playing with their toes, even babies love to play! However, as we grow up many of us lose touch with our spontaneous, playful inner child, and studies have shown that adults laugh a lot less often than children.

There are many reasons why I think play is fundamentally important for our wellbeing. Here are four:

Play enhances creativity/problem-solving

There is a wonderful anecdote in the book *Play* where Stuart Brown shares some research done by a couple who studied Alaskan grizzly bears for over 15 years and found that bears who spent more time playing lived longer. One of the hallmarks of play appears to be its purposelessness, and yet the data from the bear study seems to contradict this.

The researchers suggest that "play allows 'pretend' rehearsal for the challenges and ambiguities of life, a rehearsal in which life and death are not at stake". Brown cites various studies that suggest that when we play we create new neural networks that allow the brain to grow and develop. Clearly this is crucial for young children, but our adult brains also benefit. Not only does play support our problem-solving skills and creativity, but Brown argues that there is evidence to suggest that when we play we feel more optimistic. Conversely, he argues, lack of play can cause us to become depressed.

Play improves our health and helps us feel more connected to one another

When we play we often laugh more. The benefits of laughter are well documented and include raising levels of oxygen in the body and boosting endorphins and in turn the immune system, reducing feelings of stress and anxiety and helping us to feel more connected to one another. A recent study conducted by the Open University on couples in long-term relationships found that the number one thing people appreciated in their partners was their sense of humour/ability to make them laugh. So laughter is fundamental – it provides the glue in many of our significant relationships.

Another way of looking at this is to think of the heart connection we experience when we laugh with others. In Laughter Yoga we can achieve this connection with perfect strangers, and I don't think it is a coincidence that Laughter Yoga was created by a cardiologist, who talks about the ultimate aim of laughter being a connection at a heart level without judgement. Certainly laughter is universal and is understood all over the world.

Play helps us live in the moment

When we laugh and play, we are absorbed by the game and living in the moment. I challenge you to be able to laugh and think about your 'to do' list at the same time. Play is a wonderful form of meditation.

Play helps us to live life more joyfully

There are four elements to joy: laughter, play, singing, and dancing. When I run a Laughter Yoga session I try to ensure I incorporate all four elements. But I think their value extends far beyond Laughter Yoga.

As a parent I have sometimes fallen into the trap of anticipating my children's every need whilst ignoring my own. I'm not saying I didn't have fun caring for my beautiful children, because I did, and I believe that each caring act I performed for my children was also caring for my inner child. >

> Acts of service are good for us. But so is fun! As parents we are role models, and it is good for our children to see that we know how to have fun; that we know what gives us pleasure, excites us and energises us. So I urge all of you, unless you are already maxed out on pleasure, to incorporate more play, laughter, singing and dancing in your daily life. Not only will it be more fun, but also the evidence suggests that you will probably enjoy better health and live longer!



Games & Parties

For my 43rd birthday I held a themed children's party. We had jelly and balloons and played party games such as Pass the Parcel, Charades, Musical Statues and the guessing game below. It was such fun! My eldest daughter (just back from university) did the music for the games. One of the best moments was when the phone rang and we all heard her say: "I'm sorry, but she can't come to the phone because she's playing Pass the Parcel!"

Although the elements for the guessing game have been around for a while, this is the version I created for my birthday party:

Invite your guests to write down three short, interesting/funny/random anecdotes about themselves on one side of a piece of paper. Make sure they don't put their name on it. Only one of the anecdotes must be true, and the two others completely made up. Once everyone has done this, fold and shuffle the pieces of paper and hand one to each member of the group. Each person then takes a turn reading out the three anecdotes. The group then discusses them. (One person may need to manage the game and move things on if you don't want to spend a lot of time on this.) The group then has to guess who is the author and which is the truthful anecdote – cue bluffing opportunity for one member of the group! Only once all the pages have been read out do the authors reveal their true identities. This is a great game with people you have just met as it is a humorous icebreaker, but it is also a way of learning new things about people you may have known for years.

Some of our favourite games

Scrabble.

Guaranteed to cause arguments about what words you can use, so agree a reference source before you start! The aim is to create high-scoring words from a palette of seven letters. Highly educational and competitive. For 2 players and up.

The Werewolves of Millers Hollow. This is a spooky game where the players (village inhabitants) are randomly divided into Werewolves and ordinary villagers (and no one knows who is who). The villagers have to work out who the Werewolves are before they are all murdered. Great for dinner parties. For 8 players and up.

The Name-guessing Game. You will need a hat full of names of well-known people. One team member takes a name out of the hat and then, without referring to any part of the individual's name, has to describe the personality to their team-mate, who has one minute to guess who it is.

Boggle. An anagram-themed game where individuals race against the clock to create as many words as possible from a random selection of 16 letters. For 2 players and up.

Pictionary. A classic guessing game that tests your artistic and creative skills. One of my personal favourites. For 4 players and up.

Ideas for play

Dressing up. You can create a dressing-up box with charity-shop finds/specialist dressing-up clothes/wigs/hats/false eyelashes, etc. Invite your friends round and play dress up.

Hide 'n' Seek. When was the last time you played? Go on!

Follow My Leader. I have had lots of fun with this on the dance floor... Take turns initiating funky dance moves.

Have a go on the swings. Best are the giant ones hanging from trees in the woods, but any will do!

Reference

1. *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* by Stuart Brown, J.P. Tarcher/ Penguin Putnam ●

*Illustrations by Abigail Nottingham
www.abigail-illustration.co.uk*

Emma Hiwaizi is a founder and former co-editor of JUNO. She lives in Brighton and divides her time between being a mum, teaching Laughter Yoga and doing freelance editorial work. She is currently nurturing a couple of book ideas. www.brightonlaughterclub.org