

## CHAPTER 7

# PLAY

### Embrace the Wisdom of Your Inner Child

A LITTLE NONSENSE NOW AND THEN,  
IS CHERISHED BY THE WISEST MEN.

—*Roald Dahl*

At the end of the classic musical *Mary Poppins* the gruff and joyless Mr. Banks arrives home, having been “sacked, discharged, flung into the street.” Yet he seems absolutely and uncharacteristically delighted—so delighted that one of the servants concludes he’s “gone off his crumpet” and even his son observes, “It doesn’t sound like Father.” Indeed, his father is almost a new person as he presents his children with their mended kite and launches into the song “Let’s Go Fly a Kite.” Freed from the dreary tedium of his job at the bank, Banks’s inner child suddenly comes alive. The effect of his good cheer is magnificent, lifting the spirits of the whole house and infusing the previously melancholic Banks family with joy, camaraderie, and delight. Yes, it is a fictional story, but it illustrates the powerful effects of restoring play to our daily lives.

The majority of us were not formally taught how to play when we were children; we picked it up naturally and instinctively. Picture a newborn baby’s pure joy as a mother plays peekaboo. Think of a group of children unleashing their imaginations playing make-believe games together. Imagine a child in a state of what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls *flow* as he constructs his own minikingdom out of a bunch of old cardboard boxes.<sup>1</sup> But then as we get older

something happens. We are introduced to the idea that play is trivial. Play is a waste of time. Play is unnecessary. Play is childish. Unfortunately, many of these negative messages come from the very place where imaginative play should be most encouraged, not stifled.

The word *school* is derived from the Greek word *scholē*, meaning “leisure.” Yet our modern school system, born in the Industrial Revolution, has removed the leisure—and much of the pleasure—out of learning. Sir Ken Robinson, who has made the study of creativity in schools his life’s work, has observed that instead of fueling creativity through play, schools can actually kill it: “We have sold ourselves into a fast-food model of education, and it’s impoverishing our spirit and our energies as much as fast food is depleting our physical bodies.... Imagination is the source of every form of human achievement. And it’s the one thing that I believe we are systematically jeopardizing in the way we educate our children and ourselves.”<sup>2</sup> In this he is correct.

This idea that play is trivial stays with us as we reach adulthood and only becomes more ingrained as we enter the workplace. Sadly, not only do far too few companies and organizations foster play; many unintentionally undermine it. True, some companies and executives give lip service to the value of play in sparking creativity, yet most still fail to create the kind of playful culture that sparks true exploration.

None of this should surprise us. Modern corporations were born out of the Industrial Revolution, when their entire reason for being was to achieve efficiency in the mass production of goods. Furthermore, these early managers looked to the military—a rather less-than-playful entity—for their inspiration (indeed, the language of the military is still strong in corporations today; we still often talk of employees being on the *front lines*, and the word *company* itself is a term for a military unit). While the industrial era is long behind us, those mores, structures, and systems continue to pervade most modern organizations.

Play, which I would define as anything we do simply for the joy of doing rather than as a means to an end—whether it’s flying a kite

or listening to music or throwing around a baseball—might seem like a nonessential activity. Often it is treated that way. But in fact play is essential in many ways. Stuart Brown, the founder of the National Institute for Play, has studied what are called the play histories of some six thousand individuals and has concluded that play has the power to significantly improve everything from personal health to relationships to education to organizations' ability to innovate. "Play," he says, "leads to brain plasticity, adaptability, and creativity." As he succinctly puts it, "Nothing fires up the brain like play."<sup>3</sup>

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**Nonessentialist**

Thinks play is trivial

Thinks play is an unproductive waste of time

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**Essentialist**

Knows play is essential

Knows play sparks exploration

## A Mind Invited to Play

The value of play in our lives can't be overstated. Studies from the animal kingdom reveal that play is so crucial to the development of key cognitive skills it may even play a role in a species' survival. Bob Fagan, a researcher who has spent fifteen years studying the behavior of grizzly bears, discovered bears who played the most tended to survive the longest. When asked why, he said, "In a world continuously presenting unique challenges and ambiguity, play prepares these bears for a changing planet."<sup>4</sup>

Jaak Panksepp concluded something similar in *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions*, where he wrote, "One thing is certain, during play, animals are especially prone to behave in flexible and creative ways."<sup>5</sup>

Yet of all animal species, Stuart Brown writes, humans are the biggest players of all. We are built to play and built through play. When we play, we are engaged in the purest expression of our humanity, the truest expression of our individuality. Is it any wonder that often the times we feel most alive, those that make up our best memories, are moments of play?

Play expands our minds in ways that allow us to explore: to germinate new ideas or see old ideas in a new light. It makes us more inquisitive, more attuned to novelty, more engaged. Play is fundamental to living the way of the Essentialist because it fuels exploration in at least three specific ways.

First, play broadens the range of options available to us. It helps us to see possibilities we otherwise wouldn't have seen and make connections we would otherwise not have made. It opens our minds and broadens our perspective. It helps us challenge old assumptions and makes us more receptive to untested ideas. It gives us permission to expand our own stream of consciousness and come up with new stories. Or as Albert Einstein once said: "When I examine myself and my methods of thought, I come to the conclusion that

the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than my talent for absorbing positive knowledge.”<sup>6</sup>

Second, play is an antidote to stress, and this is key because stress, in addition to being an enemy of productivity, can actually shut down the creative, inquisitive, exploratory parts of our brain. You know how it feels: you’re stressed about work and suddenly everything starts going wrong. You can’t find your keys, you bump into things more easily, you forget the critical report on the kitchen table. Recent findings suggest this is because stress increases the activity in the part of the brain that monitors emotions (the amygdala), while reducing the activity in the part responsible for cognitive function (the hippocampus)<sup>7</sup>—the result being, simply, that we really can’t think clearly.

I have seen play reverse these effects in my own children. When they are stressed and things feel out of control, I have them draw. When they do, the change is almost immediate. The stress melts away and their ability to explore is regained.

Third, as Edward M. Hallowell, a psychiatrist who specializes in brain science, explains, play has a positive effect on the executive function of the brain. “The brain’s executive functions,” he writes, “include planning, prioritizing, scheduling, anticipating, delegating, deciding, analyzing—in short, most of the skills any executive must master in order to excel in business.”<sup>8</sup>

Play stimulates the parts of the brain involved in both careful, logical reasoning *and* carefree, unbound exploration. Given that, it should hardly be surprising that key breakthroughs in thinking have taken place in times of play. Hallowell writes: “Columbus was at play when it dawned on him that the world was round. Newton was at play in his mind when he saw the apple tree and suddenly conceived of the force of gravity. Watson and Crick were playing with possible shapes of the DNA molecule when they stumbled upon the double helix. Shakespeare played with iambic pentameter his whole life. Mozart barely lived a waking moment when he was not at play. Einstein’s thought experiments are brilliant examples of the mind invited to play.”<sup>9</sup>

## Of Work and Play

Some innovative companies are finally waking up to the essential value of play. The CEO of Twitter, Dick Costolo, promotes play through comedy; he instigated an improv class at the company. As a former stand-up comedian, he knows that improv forces people to stretch their minds and think more flexibly, unconventionally, and creatively.

Other companies promote playfulness through their physical environments. IDEO conducts meetings inside a Microbus. In the halls of Google you're likely to stumble upon (in one example of many) a large dinosaur covered in pink flamingos. At Pixar studios, artists' "offices" may be decorated like anything from an old-time western saloon to a wooden hut (the one that most amazed me when I visited was the one lined floor to ceiling with thousands of *Star Wars* figurines).

A successful woman I once knew at a publishing company kept an Easy Button™ from Staples on her desk. Any time anyone left her office, they would enjoy the childish thrill of slamming their palm down on the big red button—causing a recorded voice to loudly announce to the entire office, "That was easy!" And another woman down the hall at that same company had a framed poster in her office of a children's book illustration to remind her of the joy of childhood reading.

Desk toys, dinosaurs covered with flamingos, and offices full of action figures may seem like trivial diversions to some, but the very point is that they can be the exact opposite. These efforts *challenge* the Nonessentialist logic that play is trivial. Instead, they celebrate play as a vital driver of creativity and exploration.

**Play doesn't just help us to explore what is essential. It *is* essential in and of itself.**

So how can we all introduce more play into our workplaces and our lives? In his book, Brown includes a primer to help readers reconnect with play. He suggests that readers mine their past for play memories. What did you do as a child that excited you? How can you re-create that today?