**The PLAY is the Thing**

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Walking creekside in Forest Park on a recent chilly afternoon my friend and I witnessed an excited band of pint-sized scientists conducting a playful experiment. They were testing their hypothesis that a leaf would float. To their delight, not only did the leaf float, it rode the sidling current downstream, followed by the giggling club of future thinkers and creators oblivious to the cold.

Play is a crucial part of what makes humans so smart. It allows children to let loose their boundless energy and curiosity while developing not just their physical muscles, but their imagination muscles as well. Play is in fact so important to optimal child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child.

Despite the numerous lifelong benefits derived from play, time for free play in American society is markedly less for children today than when their grandparents were young. Our overscheduled and hurry-up lifestyle has combined with marathon hours of unregulated screen time and with diminishing access to safe places out of doors to decrease the average child’s opportunity for self-directed, unstructured play.

It is through play that children at a very early age engage and interact with the world around them. Some of the best learning experiences happen in a child’s independent research of the world at hand. Does the leaf float? Does the rock? Why does your stick float and mine sink? Where does the water come from anyway? What happens when we build a rock dam?

Play allows children to create and explore a world they crave to master. As the child interprets the world around her, creates new things with the materials available to her, and extracts new ideas from the recesses of her mind, she is learning to be an active, contributing participant of the world.

Through play, children conquer their fears and develop new competencies and confidence while through their imagination practicing adult roles. Undirected play allows children also to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, to develop resiliency, and to learn self-advocacy skills.

Perhaps above all, play is a simple joy that is a cherished part of childhood.

Unfortunately, there seems little room in today’s hurried and screen-saturated world for playful creativity, outdoor exploration, the passionate pursuit of interests, idle contentment, and, perhaps most importantly, boredom. Children aren’t allowed to be bored anymore; the resulting fuss is quieted or preempted by activating a screen. No better babysitter has there ever been.

Yet boredom is the furnace of creativity. Placating children with screens leads them not to ask questions, aloud or of themselves, and not asking questions leads to loss of engagement and curiosity and imagination. Children’s innate curiosity is intense. When all the creating and imagining has been done for a child, over time that curiosity may burn out like a smothered flame.

Kudos is due that parent escorting his merry horde of researchers into the woods on a crisp afternoon. I imagine his children are not overscheduled, overscreened, or overstressed. And they were happy.