

The Health Benefits of **PLAY TIME!**

Dr. Joseph Mercola

EVERYONE BENEFITS FROM PLAY TIME

Humans, like most other animals, have a natural play instinct, and this instinct has important benefits. It allows us to fine-tune our motor skills, develop social skills and emotional resilience, and learn our limitations. It is essential for normal, healthy brain development.

The brains of play-deprived rats are underdeveloped in the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for impulse control and decision making. They also have disorganized neuronal growth and irregular neuronal cells.

The replacement of physical play with technological gadgetry has many experts worried, as research shows that interactive, vigorous playing makes people smarter, braver and kinder.

To qualify as play, the behavior must be done for no apparent reason, be repetitive, sometimes in an exaggerated way, be spontaneous, and be done when relaxed and not stressed.

Far from being a total waste of time, play has the ability to bridge the gap between wildly differing species. It has a language of its own, and allows us to communicate on a deep, nonverbal level with a whole range of life. In animals, play even boosts their chances of survival.

If you're like most, you're probably not in the habit of scheduling play time. If you have kids, they're probably not spending much time playing outdoors with their friends as we did a generation or two ago. As noted in the documentary, "The Power of Play," children now play outdoors half as much as their parents did.



SMARTER, BRAVER & KINDER

This documentary features Dr. Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play, a non-profit corporation "committed to bringing the unrealized knowledge, practices and benefits of play into public life."

As noted by Brown, play is hardwired into most animals. When dogs play, for example, you'll see a lot of play bows, paw slapping, tail wagging and so on. All of these are part of dogs' play language.

Importantly, animals will instinctively keep the play going without one taking over and dominating the other. There's a distinct give and take in the interaction. It's also infectious—it draws other participants in and encourages social interactions.

THE RISKY PLAY PARADOX

A remarkable and paradoxical scientific finding is that engaging in risk during childhood is a crucial factor to prevent injuries. As noted by Mariana Brussoni, a developmental psychologist at UBC/BC Children's Hospital, by engaging in risky play, children learn how their bodies work; they discover what they're comfortable with and what they're not, and they learn their own limits and how the real world works.

In short, "they're learning crucial risk-management skills," Brussoni says. Far from keeping your kids safe, discouraging them from outdoor play can actually backfire, as play-deprived children fail to gain this fundamental knowledge, which places them at greater risk for serious injury and phobias.

What is your play time? ■

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