

## Dr. Gable's Book Review

**Dr. Stuart Brown's National Bestseller, "Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul"**



**What is play anyway?** Is it participating on the travel soccer team, is it wrestling with your little brother, is it skydiving? If your child loves travel soccer, then it is considered by Dr. Brown to be the best form of play. If they participate because there is an expectation or feel pressure to perform, then the play falls away. The tricky question becomes how to keep the true essence of play. Dr. Stuart Brown, MD, a pioneer of the study of play, founder of the National Institute of Play, author of the book *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* helps us answer these questions. Dr. Brown makes it clear that he believes there is **no ONE definition of play**, but there are properties of play that are important. Let's take a look to better understand its meaning.

Play must...

- 1) Be **purposeless** -done for its own sake
- 2) **Voluntary**
- 3) **Inherently attractive**- It's FUN!
- 4) **Free from time**- no one is watching the clock
- 5) Lead to a **diminished consciousness of self** – we stop worrying about if we look silly
- 6) Hold **improvisational potential**- not locked into a rigid path, open to serendipity or chance
- 7) Hold **desire for continuation**- we don't want to stop, and we want to do it again.

**Why is play important?** The easy answer is that play is important because it is fun, it makes us laugh and we enjoy it. Play also appears to foster optimism and creativity. Dr. Brown dives into research to support his belief that play is not only desired but necessary. He references a magnitude of studies that show play as being fundamentally important in establishing and organizing connections of newly acquired information in the brain. Also apparent in animal studies, is that higher amounts of play result in a larger prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex

is the area of our brain involved in planning complex cognitive behavior, personality expression, decision making, and moderating social behavior. Furthermore, larger amounts of active play result in a more sophisticated cerebellum (the part of your brain responsible for voluntary movement and coordination). These studies facilitate the conclusion that play is vitally important for the evolution of species and may play a big role in setting humans apart from other animals.

If you are my patient and have young children, you have likely heard my advice to let your children wrestle at home and to even set aside time to wrestle with them. It is Dr. Brown's insight into rough and tumble play that has led me to discuss this with my patients. Dr. Brown has found that this type of play is necessary for the development and maintenance of social awareness, cooperation, fairness and altruism. I often see examples of this in my own children. My fun loving 7-year-old son, Ryan, (who is the size of a 9 or 10-year-old) will wrestle with our 4-year-old nephew, Bennett, at family celebrations. During these times of play, I see Ryan self-handicapping for Bennett's benefit. It is endearing to watch him giggle and fall to the ground when Bennett goes for his knees, and likewise, to see our nephew cheer in victory, as Ryan hits the ground. I can see Ryan's strong sense of empathy reinforced through this "wrestling" match.



One of my favorite stories cited by Dr. Brown is of an interaction between a starving polar bear and a young husky. The polar bear comes upon the sled dog one tough winter day and it is apparent the polar bear has not eaten in some time. The owner thinks this is it for the playful young dog who is a little naïve to the polar bear's likely intentions. But as the polar bear approaches, it becomes clear that he wants to play! During this encounter, he and husky dance around each other in a playful "wrestle", the polar bear not once bearing his teeth or attacking the inferior husky. The polar bear returns to the camp for a number of days to have fun and play. Dr. Brown describes how the joy of play replaced the polar bears hunger and he became friend not foe.

**Where do we go from here? What is your play personality? What is your child's?** As parents we often feel consumed by responsibilities, we may forget the importance of play, worse we may forget even **how to play**. I can catch myself after a busy day at the office being too serious

with my children. On these days if I force myself to crack one joke or make one child giggle, the entire family dynamic of our evening can change. But, how do we play? How can we help ourselves remember what we are like as “players”? One way is to remember our play personalities. According to Brown there are 8 different play personalities. I found it fun to think about these in regard to myself, my spouse, my kids, my friends and the people I interact with most often. Most people encompass a combination of play personalities but usually 1 or 2 are their most dominant.

#1 The **Joker**- the most extreme player, silly, fun, nonsensical play, may be the class clown, enjoys practical jokes and even acting foolish.

#2 The **Kinesthete**- the play personality of movement. Athletes who love sport are the obvious choice, but this also includes those most alive when they are on the move, walking, running, swimming, hiking, dancing. The focus is not on winning but simply the joy of movement.

#3- The **Explorer**- this play personality loves to explore by physically going places, intellectual exploring (discovering new ideas or information), or relational exploring (meeting new people).

#4- The **Competitor**- enjoys the world of play through competitive games with the object of winning. Enjoys keeping score and typically likes to finish on top (March Madness, Fantasy football, racing a sibling to the car or to the remote control).

#5 The **Director**- Enjoys planning, organizing events, setting scenes. (A homemade movie, planning a party, organizing a trip for family or friends).

#6 The **Collector**- loves to assemble and maintain collections of objects or experiences (baseball cards, Star Wars figurines, trips to different countries).

#7 The **Artist/Creator**- Making things is a source of joy and play for this personality. Inventing, designing, decorating, constructing. Can be functional (building a toybox, droid), artistic (paint, draw, craft) or simply playful (building a fort).

#8 The **Storyteller**- Focus on imagination. Often describes those who love to read, write, draw cartoons, watch movies. (parents may create novel bedtime stories, become a commentator of a pick-up game with astounding plays).

\*\*If you still feeling stumped about how to return play to your own life and household, Dr. Brown suggests taking your play history. The book has a lot of prompts on how to do this.



Play is an essential part of all of us. It is what helps us thrive. I am finishing this article on an airplane after a trip to Florida with my husband and some friends. We could find each type of player in our group of eight and the weekend was filled entirely with play. It may not be exactly the same kind of play that took place when I was school aged but, the results were the same. The guys juggling a soccer ball on the beach past sunset, being unable to quit until they reached 40 nonstop touches; our swim out to the buoy just for the fun of it; collecting shells on the beach; my husband orchestrating every dinner plan flawlessly; our friend Dave, forever the joker, throwing one liners at unsuspecting “victims”, you are caught belly laughing, at the same time you are thinking, “OMG, I cannot believe he just said that”. These are true demonstrations of adult play and this precious time “invigorated our souls”.

I will leave you with this quote from the end of Dr. Brown’s book, which truly encompasses the reason play is so essential in our lives. “Play and love connect people at a different level. Play, especially with a child, helps open your heart...Play helps you regain the life of a child and better deal with the challenges we all face [as adults] ...Play is the purest expression of love. When enough people raise play to the status it deserves in our lives, we will find the world a better place”. I hope you are able to find play in your life today and every day.

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\*\* The opinions in this piece are solely of Dr. Gable and do not necessarily express the opinions of other providers or Pavilion Pediatrics as a whole.