

What's Up With Play For Adults?

By Sheila Collins, PhD. LMSW-ACP

"I'm going outside to play," my 5-year-old granddaughter, Tori, says matter-of-factly to me this afternoon. Play is just something you do. It's not the only thing you do, (there's morning chores, and practicing the piano,) but just plain "playing" is pretty high on the list of things to do.

I've been watching my grandchildren lately, observing what kind of playing they do. Sometimes when Tori goes outside to play she waters the plants with a tiny toy watering can, because it's fun, (and it probably helps the plants a bit too). Sometimes she swings in the hammock or finds a toy that she played with when she was much younger, visiting that time and place again.

Ethan, age 11 and Will, age 9 seem to gravitate to the basketball hoop in the driveway. In fact, Will was four when the family bought this house, and he knew it was the right house as soon as he saw the basketball hoop in the driveway. The opportunity to play is central to one's life as a four year old.

Happy Skill

Emerson said, "It's a happy skill to know how to play." So, do we lose the skill as we get older or just get rusty, like when you haven't ridden a bicycle for a long time. You feel shaky, and almost a little scared when you try to go back to it. The word "plegan" which is the root for play means to risk, chance or expose oneself to hazard. There is a strong element of risk or challenge in much that we call "play". Riding a bicycle for ten miles on a bike trail is more fun, and riskier than staying in one's driveway. One of the surest ways to take the fun out of life is to stop taking chances, to stop welcoming challenge.

The Challenge of Play

As I have been inviting and leading adults in InterPlay Playshops I have developed a new appreciation for how challenging it is for adults to allow themselves to play. There are all the rules you have to break in order to participate. "No play till your work is done." (So, that's like never.) No action that might be seen as "silly" or like you aren't "acting your age". (Grown-ups don't play?) And adults seem to think they have to have a high level of skill in order to play. Comparing ourselves to the professionals and the experts, we watch on TV, we stop participating ourselves. (I can't sing. I can't dance. I don't know what to say.) Children aren't concerned, as they shoot baskets in the driveway, that they aren't as good as Michael Jordan. In fact, for a brief moment in time, they are Michael Jordan!

Play As Fantasy

An element of play is fantasy, pretending, acting "as if". I am reminded of the advice frequently given by Milton Erickson, the famous hypnotherapist, "You can pretend anything and master it!" In fact, imagining and pretending may be the best way to

become what you envision. Practice is the most time honored way to develop skills. We say in InterPlay – “To change your life, change your practice.”

In the Moment

Even though we say we want it, change is scary. Cynthia Winton-Henry, one of the co-founders of InterPlay describes that system of “making stuff up on the spot”;

“The bottom line is that InterPlay is profound because it is scary. It’s scary because it is right here, right now, concrete. Doable. It can change you...and fast. I think bodies know that and have to put on the breaks unless there is a lot of community support, affirmation, and underlying strength or spiritual urgency. “

So what is the advantage of practicing “making stuff up in the moment? Phil Porter, the other co-founder of InterPlay expresses the practical advantage of practicing not rehearsing things ahead of time.

“There is no way that we can prepare ourselves in advance for everything that is going to happen to us. To trust that we will know what to do because we have practiced responding in the moment, is a huge resource.”

Play and Care

Some adults never had the opportunity to play as children. It’s hard to go back to something you never learned how to do in the first place. In some families, where adults are impaired by illness or addictions, the children take care of the adults. The situation requires that children not show their needs to be taken care of, or their need to play. And care and play are related, according to Gwen Gordon,

“Play and care are the order and chaos of a creative cosmos, but through the human the cosmos can play with and care for itself like never before.....Care and play in balance generate ingenious inventions that add to the life and beauty of the world. Out of balance, they wreak havoc.”

In the too serious world of commerce and competition, violence and war are rampant. Adults behave like mistreated children, aggressive and withdrawn. And play is seen as frivolous. As Pat Kane, author of The Play Ethic states, “The trivialization of play was the work ethic’s most lasting, and most regrettable achievement.” He describes play as the great philosophers saw it, “the experience of being an active, creative and fully autonomous person.”

Play as Health

Play, when balanced by care, is health. Healthy children enjoy playing well with others. And everything can be included in the play. Relationships are created, bonds are forged, community is achieved. Adults, when they play together, recapture the playfulness of their youth while bringing the skills and knowledge of years of experience. And if experiences of play were sparse in one’s youth, it’s best to refer to the message on a button a friend gave me, “it’s never to late too have a happy childhood!”

Play Through The Tough Stuff

A common misconception adults have about play is that you have to feel good or “happy” to play. This denies the transformational aspect of play. Play as a way to let go of or move stuff out of our bodies, is an effective way to let go of the pain that creates suffering.

As I watch my grandchildren at play in the swimming pool, I am aware that their mother is in a hospital nearly 1000 miles away undergoing a bone marrow transplant. And they are aware of this too. They take turns sleeping with a stuffed animal that a friend gave their mother to help her through her chemotherapy. They wait for her call every evening, and save things to send to her from the Sunday church service.

But right now, in the swimming pool they demonstrate their skills in going underwater to have a “tea party”, and practice catching a spongy ball. They are “playing on behalf of her,” in order to be able to tell her about it when she calls.

So the stuff of play is the stuff of life; the good, the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, Gwen Gordon, author of an upcoming book on play;

“Play is the movement of Love. And Love’s what moves the Universe... Wiggle your grief, your pain, your depression. Give it breath, find its’ edges, exaggerate it, paint it, sing it, put a clown nose on it.”

Play Heals

As the children make drawings to send to their mother and write thank you notes to her bone marrow donor, I am reminded of how the creativity of play heals. Winton-Henry describes the power of play to heal;

“What you focus on you create. Focus on healing and you wind up focusing on suffering. Focus on creating and you wind up focusing on the life force inside. This has the power to transform us or let us go.”

Living The Play Ethic In Community

And what happens when the play involves people’s stories and songs and dances and when groups of people adopt a play ethic, engage in the spiritual practice of play, move together with ease and grace rather than domination and force?

- What if, when adults got together to work or play, we didn’t criticize each other constantly, but encouraged and affirmed one another?
- What if, instead of driving to achieve more and burning each other out in the process, we went for ease and grace in our organizational life?
- What if, instead of working harder, we played more in body-wise organizations that go the speed of the bodies in them, encouraging self-care and enjoyment?
- What if, rather than just moving to the next assignment, we took the time to celebrate each accomplishment, both individually and collectively?

As the sage Krishnamurti remarked, “War is but a spectacular expression of our everyday behavior.” Through an ethic of play, we can practice a creative alternative, and change the world one body, and one small group, at a time.

Perhaps Rainer Maria Rilke gives us a hint of how this might look;

“Again and again some people in the crowd wake up.
They have no ground in the crowd,
And they emerge according to much broader laws.
They carry strange customs with them
And demand room for bold gestures.
The future speaks ruthlessly through them.”