

The transforming power of play

"Play is fun, but it is anything but trivial. It is a basic biological drive as integral to our health as sleep and nutrition." – Stuart Brown

Around the world, more than 200 million children under the age of 5 are failing reaching their full developmental potential due to extreme poverty. Without access to sufficient nourishment for healthy development, children born into poverty often fall ill and do not survive their early childhood. Those who do make it are likely to remain developmentally "behind" throughout their life, making it nearly impossible for them to ever escape the vicious cycle of poverty.

In the 1980s, a group of health workers in Jamaica were troubled by the climbing numbers of poor children in their communities who were growing up malnourished and developmentally stunted. Over the years, the health-workers saw these children fall ill and perform poorly in school. Later in life they witnessed them fail to graduate from school, struggle to find employment as adults, and have difficulty providing for their own families.

Working with a group of researchers, the health-workers set out to change this cycle by embarking on an unconventional intervention strategy. They identified a group of 130 babies born into poor families who were physically stunted due to malnutrition.

These babies were smaller and weaker than they should be for their age.

Once a week for one hour, a health-worker would visit mother and baby in their home and together, they would play. They rolled balls back and forth. They stacked boxes up and knocked them down. They sang songs and clapped their hands. The health-workers counseled the mothers on the importance of play for their baby's healthy development and encouraged them to continue to play with their babies throughout the week. This was the only "treatment" the health-workers administered. Just play. They continued their weekly play hour with the mothers and toddlers for two years.

Without any further intervention, the children we revisited by the same diligent team a full two decades later to see if their work had made any long term impact. Although the team were expecting some modest changes they were astounded by the results. When the children reached adulthood, they were much more likely to go to university and find employment. In fact, when compared with their peers who did not receive the “play intervention,” the health-workers found this group to have significantly higher earnings.

Jamaica Play Intervention 20 Year Follow-up Findings

- + 42% higher earnings**
- + Higher IQs**
- + Higher levels of education attainment**
- + Lower rates of crime**
- + Higher psychosocial skills**

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Numerous studies, in addition to this one, have highlighted the amazing power of play. But what exactly is it we’re talking about when we talk about play? Play is any activity that is freely chosen and self-directed. It can be imaginative and creative, self-disciplined and rule based. This may be play that we all know like running, jumping, and climbing, playing with toys, and sports but it also includes a host of activities we don’t always recognize as play, which we’ll discuss more in the next chapter.

In play, children are driven to interact with their environment in ways that challenge and stretch them to grow and understand their world step-by-step. It is nearly impossible to count all the ways children benefit from play:

Cognitive

- + Play contributes to healthy brain development.^{5,6}
- + Play enhances children's learning readiness, learning behaviors, and problem-solving skills.⁷
- + Play encourage children's ability to be creative and innovative.⁸
- + Play boosts children's ability to concentrate and pay attention.⁹
- + Play supports language development and literacy skills.¹⁰



A randomized control trial found children who played for just 70 minutes per day to show improved cognitive performance and brain function compared to less active children.¹¹

Physical

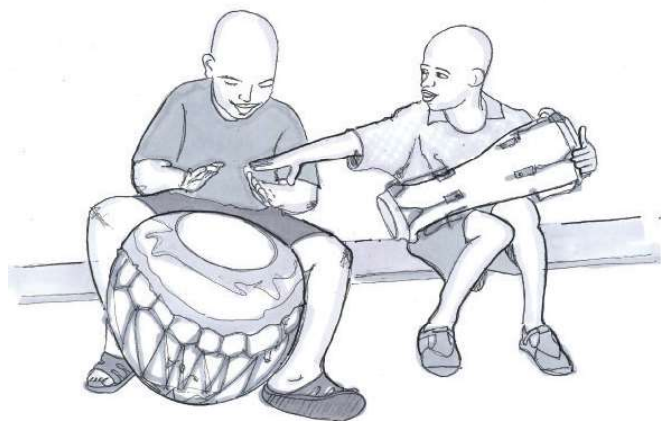
- + Play enhances physical health by building active, healthy bodies.¹²
- + Those with adequate access to play as children are healthier adults than those less access to play.³
- + For physically weak or stunted young children, play has been shown to help them catch up developmentally.³



A 2013 study of 12,000 students found that Children who are physically fit absorb and retain new information are more effective than children who are out of shape.¹³

Emotional and social

- + Play helps children connect and communicate with each other. Through play they learn how to share, negotiate and resolve conflicts, and to advocacy for themselves.¹⁴
- + Children who do not have adequate access to play often exhibit violent behaviors as adults.²



"In play...children bring the realities of their world into a fictional context, where it is safe to confront them, to experience them, and to practice ways of dealing with them."¹⁵ - Peter Gray, Evolutionary Psychologist