**Regulating Your Nervous System with Play**

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Do you have a childhood memory associated with play? Maybe staying out until it got dark, your tiny body filled with so much joy you thought you might burst, skin flushed from being out in the sun, legs sore from running. Or crunching snow between your hands as you rolled perfect balls to assemble in the shape of a snowman? Maybe that’s just me and my stereotypically 90’s Canadian childhood, but I bet if you thought about it, you could identify some core memories around play.

With my experience in early childhood education, specifically with kids who had learning or behavioral challenges that needed extra support, in nearly every prep session we had, there was some supplemental teaching material on the importance of play-based learning. While it may have seemed like we were just glorified babysitters, it became increasingly clear how much we were teaching these kids through group games, building block towers and climbing on equipment at the playground. We were providing the safe container of play for them to move through what was happening in the brain, body and nervous system.

This play-based learning doesn’t stop once we reach adulthood. In fact, adults also learn through play, positive experiences, and fun. Through play, we learn in a lower stake environment things like social skills, social emotional patterns, and fine motor development. Boil that down and it means what we play, we practice and what we practice, we get good at and are more easily able to bring what we’ve practiced into our real lives.

When teaching movement to both adults and kids, we try to drill home the importance of the time being a “play zone.” In this zone, trying new things and creativity is encouraged. End results aren’t important because during it we gathered important information, developed new patterns and practices that we can implement into our daily movement activities.

Play, in addition to teaching both kids and adults alike life lessons, also gives us a valuable tool to work with the nervous system.

In our current society, it’s commonplace for someone’s nervous system to become overwhelmed. With the advancement of technology, play now often includes screens, bright lights, sounds and stimulation. The way lives are lived, our nervous system is under constant stimulation. We come home from our vocation to relaxing activities that usually include spending time watching television, then immediately hop into bed and scroll on our lit-up phones. Rarely are we allowing for the nervous system to experience play in our day-to-day. Play is a hybrid state where we’re activated (like the activation involved in fight/flight) but it’s also about connection and safety.

If we examine the polyvagal ladder inside the polyvagal theory of the nervous system, staying in a stressful sympathetic nervous system state can facilitate things like burnout, chronic pain, and illness. With play, we get healthy activation allowing the vagus nerve to be stimulated in a way that allows the nervous system to better move from state to state without being overwhelmed. It’s in this healthy activation that we’re able to cultivate a deeper resilience for life in general.

I invite you to think about the last time you played as an adult - it might not be riding your bike or building a snowman like when you were a child, but something that brought the same feelings into your body as you get when you recall that childhood memory? When was it?

If you can’t remember the last time, what can you do to start inviting more play into your life? I invite you to consider three activities that bring you great joy and pick one to prioritize in the coming weeks to give your nervous system the break it needs.