

Douglas R. Anderson and Melinda Wenner consider the place of play in the modern world.

- 1 On August 1, 1966, the day psychiatrist Stuart Brown started his assistant professorship in Houston, 25-year-old Charles Whitman climbed to the top of the University of Texas Tower and shot 46 people. Whitman, a former U.S. soldier, was the last person anyone expected to go on a killing spree. When Brown interviewed 26 convicted Texas murderers for a small pilot study, he discovered that most of the killers, including Whitman, shared two things in common: they were from abusive families, and more interestingly, they never played as children. 5

- 2 Since then, Brown's data suggests that a lack of opportunities for unstructured, imaginative play can keep children from growing into well-adjusted adults. 'Free play', as scientists call it, is critical for coping with stress and building cognitive skills such as problem solving. In fact, play appears to help children become socially adept. Such social skills are honed by interacting with their peers where they learn what is acceptable and what is not. After all, they cannot always demand to be the hero or the princess or soon they will have no playmates. As a result, they develop negotiating abilities and persistence. Because play is intrinsically enjoyable, children are also less likely to give up easily in the face of frustration. 10

- 3 Play of course is not simply important for the growth and development of children. As a way of engaging the world, play has far greater fruits in the way it enriches lives and deepens one's search for identity. In short, play helps make us more interesting people than we otherwise might be. Play is also personal. It is a part of who we are and perhaps more importantly, who we are becoming. But we must be careful as we begin to think about a concept like 'play'. Play is not an isolated and fixed 'thing'. Instead, it is a modifying feature of other activities. For example, I can engage in a tennis game playfully or not; I can compete without playing and I can play without competing. It is not *simply* physical play, but having a *spirit* of playfulness. Play thus enhances our ordinary life experience and we come to know ourselves better through playful activities. 15
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- 4 In communities of play, we also come to learn more about other folks. This was at least one of the motivating factors for the modern Olympics and for international play in general. In a more personal way, we know that learning to play liberates us individually—it *feels* freeing and that very feeling itself engenders further freedom. Playing is also a source of joy—a highly underrated human feeling in our contemporary setting. We have all encountered persons with a *joie de vivre* whose enthusiasm and enjoyment of life infects a team or a group of friends at play. We value this trait simply for its presence as well as for its social value for those influenced by it. Through play, we learn that we can grow, that we can recreate ourselves and we can do things we did not dream possible. 25
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- 5 Artistic creativity is expressed in play and this play impulse marks moments of genius. Such freedom opens us to our possibilities and is, in this way, life transforming. Take the artist Rembrandt's development of *chiaroscuro* in painting—using light and shadows as a creative means of defining his images. In physical movement, we might consider the revolutionary Fosbury flop¹ in the high jump, or dancer Martha Graham's revision of balletic movements as play-driven transformations. Such cases are exemplary of how the infusion of play or playfulness in every human life allows for the exploration of possibilities. This is precisely what makes the human animal remarkable. In the language of the nineteenth century, 'man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and he is only wholly Man when he is playing'. Not only does playing give us the greatest experiential pleasure, it brings together our body, spirit and mind. 35
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- 6 Given this, a culture that fails to teach playing—one that enables the death of play—is a culture we should value less. Such a culture, sadly, is the one we are currently inhabiting and generating. In the past, few children grew up without ample frolicking time, but today, free play may be losing its standing as a staple of youth. We, as a culture, are allowing both playfulness and physical play to die, condemning it by calling it 'non-serious', mere 'entertainment', 'non-

¹ Fosbury flop is a technique in which the high jump athlete arches over the bar to lower his centre of gravity.

academic', and 'unteachable', all on the basis of outmoded philosophies of experience and education. Concerned about getting their children into the right colleges, parents are sacrificing playtime for more structured activities. As early as preschool, youngsters' after-school hours are now being filled with music lessons and sports—reducing time for the type of imaginative activities that foster creativity and cooperation. In fact, even when these activities are marketed as play, playfulness is not always championed. Moments of play are simply termed 'mere play'. Our coaches laud a 'work ethic' but almost universally ignore a 'play ethic'. Professional sports, college athletics and even games in the school yard have become, as we say, 'all business'. While some may argue that this is the rational necessity of our cultural outlook, it distances us from the very playful experiences that initially began to set us free.

- 7 We are also killing play at every level through marketing, through social pressure, and through excessive media attention. Even where genuine play is lauded as in some Nike and Gatorade ads, the effect is to suggest that some commodity will make us better players when in fact the issue is one of our fundamental attitude and orientation toward the world. If play has not died for us, I think it is fair to say that its death is fully in process in our culture.
- 8 If we want our society and our children in particular to develop into inquisitive and creative individuals, then play has to be reframed and not seen as an opposite to work but a complement. We must begin to reconceive and reinvigorate our culture by creating a variety of ways to bring play back to life. We need to see our modern prejudices for what they are and re-envision what the teaching of play can be, even if it means being radical and flexible in our endeavours. For if we were to relinquish this responsibility, it is not likely to be taken up by others.

Adapted from "The Death of Play in U.S. Culture" by Douglas R. Anderson and "The Serious Need for Play" by Melinda Wenner