

PARENTS LEAGUE OF NEW YORK

# Review 2012

Essential Articles on Parenting and Education

# Play for the Ages

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*When we stop playing, we stop developing, and when that happens, the laws of entropy take over—things fall apart. Ultimately we...stop fully interacting with the world, more plant than animal. When we stop playing, we start dying.*

— STUART BROWN, M.D.

The most delightful memories of our childhoods often revolve around play: inventing games with friends, running to playgrounds after school, or begging our parents to let us stay out a little bit longer as the evening light fades.

In those memories we are free of deadlines, demands and expectations. Childhood was a time when we could let go, do what we want and live, simply, in the moment.

## Forgetting How to Play

The artist Howard Ikemoto tells this story:

When my daughter was about seven years old, she asked me one day what I did at work. I told her I worked at the college—that my job was to teach people how to draw. She stared at me, incredulous, and said, “You mean they forget?”

We do forget. But how is it that we forget such natural joys? How is it that we abandon play, and more to the point, how is

it that we allow ourselves to abandon it? We all know that the pressures of growing up and the demands of adulthood squeeze out our inclination for adventure and exploration. We begin to see hobbies, such as sketching, not only as distracting and frivolous, but worse: as a guilty pleasure.

As Stuart Brown, who is trained in general and internal medicine, psychiatry and clinical research, makes very clear in his

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book, *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination and Invigorates the Soul*, we lose our sense of play at great peril. Brown has spent his career

studying animal behavior and explored over 6,000 “play histories” from an enormously diverse cross section of our society. He has determined that the role of play in one’s life impacts brain development and social integration in dramatic ways, and this impact continues throughout life.

## Children Need Unstructured Play

There cannot be a parent today who has not read the research relating to the detrimental effects of over-scheduling our children. We now know that children who have limited time for unstructured play tend to experience greater anxiety, stress, hyperactivity and poor social skills. Nevertheless, educators in schools across the country, and particularly here in New York City, are witnessing an increase in the number of children who have no time to themselves. “Tiger Mom” Amy Chua is just plain wrong on this account. Play is absolutely critical to the development of the young child. It is that simple.

Why is it so hard to remember that this valuable lesson holds great meaning for all of us, not only for our young children? Dr. Brown

would argue that we denigrate the power of play every time we make a comment such as, “She’s not doing anything serious, she’s just playing.”

## Stay Outside and Play a Bit Longer

I urge our readers to do some of their own research on this important topic. Perhaps we all need to take stock of our natural love of play. After all, our children are watching, and even though they may rarely, if ever, acknowledge it, their habits and values are shaped by our own.

Play’s potential for opening our hearts and minds to life’s deeper meanings may not always be obvious, but every time I am in the park with my grandchildren, playing with abandon, I am reminded of how absurd it is for us to forget its importance. How grand the pleasure when I hear our five-year-old granddaughter Frankie say, “Mamu, I hope we don’t have to go home for a long, long time!” I agree with her and promise myself to seek joy each and every day through playful abandon. Whose brain couldn’t use a little boost? Maybe if we remember to stay outside and play a bit longer, the demands of adulthood—like those recently filed tax returns—will get a little easier.

## References

Stuart Brown, M.D., with Christopher Vaughan. *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination and Invigorates the Soul*, New York: Avery, 2009.

Amy Chua. *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, New York: Penguin Press, 2011.

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