

July 2026 Overview: The Forgotten Gift: Why Play Matters for Children and Adults

by Steve Freier

When most people think of play, they picture children laughing on a playground, building forts, chasing butterflies, or inventing imaginary worlds. Play is often viewed as something that belongs exclusively to childhood—a pleasant diversion before the serious responsibilities of adulthood begin. Yet this perception overlooks a profound truth: play is not merely entertainment. It is an essential part of human growth, health, creativity, and emotional well-being throughout life.

In many ways, play is as necessary to the human spirit as food is to the body. For children, the importance of play is widely recognized by educators and developmental psychologists. Through play, children learn about the world and their place within it. They experiment, solve problems, and develop social skills. A child building a tower of blocks is not simply passing the time; they are learning about balance, cause and effect, patience, and persistence. A group of children engaged in make-believe games is practicing communication, negotiation, empathy, and cooperation.

Play also allows children to process their emotions. When a child reenacts experiences through dolls, action figures, or imaginary scenarios, they are often working through fears, questions, and challenges in a safe and manageable way. Play gives children a language beyond words. It enables them to express feelings they may not yet fully understand.

Physical play is equally important. Running, climbing, jumping, and exploring help develop strength, coordination, and confidence. Children who engage in active play tend to develop healthier bodies and stronger self-esteem. They learn what they are capable of accomplishing and gain a sense of mastery over their environment.

Unfortunately, modern childhood is increasingly structured. Organized activities, academic pressures, and screen time often leave little room for unstructured, imaginative play. Yet it is precisely this free play that nurtures creativity and independent thinking. When children are allowed to invent their own games, solve their own problems, and explore their own interests, they develop qualities that no classroom lesson can fully teach.

What is often forgotten, however, is that the need for play does not disappear when childhood ends. Adults may no longer build sandcastles or play hide-and-seek, but the human brain remains wired for playfulness throughout life. In fact, many of the qualities that contribute to a fulfilling adult life—creativity, adaptability, resilience, and innovation—are strengthened through playful experiences.

Consider how many of humanity's greatest discoveries have emerged from curiosity and experimentation. Scientists, inventors, artists, and entrepreneurs frequently describe their work as a form of play. They explore possibilities, test ideas, and engage with challenges in a spirit of discovery. Playfulness allows the mind to wander beyond conventional boundaries and imagine new solutions.

Play also serves as a powerful antidote to stress. Modern adults often live under constant pressure. Work responsibilities, financial concerns, family obligations, and an endless stream of information can create a state of chronic tension. Play provides a much-needed release. Whether it involves gardening, dancing, painting, hiking, playing music, participating in sports, or sharing games with friends, playful activities help reduce stress hormones and restore emotional balance.

One of the most remarkable aspects of play is its ability to bring people together. Children naturally form friendships through play, but adults benefit in much the same way. Shared laughter, games, hobbies, and recreational activities foster connection and strengthen relationships. Families who play together often communicate more openly and create lasting memories. Friendships are deepened when people share enjoyable experiences rather than focusing solely on responsibilities and obligations.

Play also keeps the mind active as we age. Research has shown that engaging in stimulating and enjoyable activities can help maintain cognitive function and emotional health. Crossword puzzles, card games, creative pursuits, and learning new skills all involve elements of play that challenge the brain and encourage lifelong learning.

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts of play is that it reconnects us with wonder. Children approach the world with curiosity and enthusiasm. A puddle becomes an adventure. A cardboard box becomes a castle. A simple question can lead to endless exploration. Adults often lose this sense of wonder as routines and responsibilities accumulate. Play invites us to rediscover it.

When adults give themselves permission to play, they often experience greater joy, spontaneity, and creativity. They become more flexible in their thinking and more resilient in the face of challenges. Play reminds us that life is not solely about productivity and achievement; it is also about experience, connection, and delight.

The great irony of modern life is that many people become so busy pursuing happiness that they forget to engage in one of its most reliable sources. Play is not a luxury. It is not a waste of time. It is a fundamental human need.

Whether we are six years old or sixty-six, play nourishes the mind, strengthens relationships, stimulates creativity, and enriches the spirit. It teaches children how to grow and helps adults remember how to live.

In a world that often values efficiency over enjoyment and productivity over presence, perhaps one of the wisest things we can do is reclaim the simple art of play. The benefits are timeless, and the invitation is always open. All we need to do is say yes.