



REDEFINING PLAYFULNESS

*How it can revolutionize the health,
education and well-being of children*



VISIT : WWW.LIGPLAYMAKERS.ORG



AS ADULTS, WE OFTEN FORGET HOW IMPORTANT PLAY IS IN THE LIVES OF ALL HUMAN BEINGS - ESPECIALLY CHILDREN.

We take play for granted and our actions (or inactions) as a society indicate that we don't prioritize play in the lives of our children. In an effort to enhance the quality of education, schools have squeezed play off the agenda and replaced it with more worksheets, standardized test preparation and traditional teacher-driven, sedentary instruction. Our schools are becoming joyless, loveless places that are failing to leverage the inherent curiosity, passion and exuberance of our children. In a noble effort to bolster achievement and productivity, we've taken a tragic wrong turn in which "No Child Left Behind" has left many children uninspired and unfulfilled.

Schools are not the only places suffering from a lack of playfulness. Many of the systems of care designed to support the healthy development of our most vulnerable children (foster care programs, shelters, psychiatric hospitals and other child-focused social services agencies) are suffering from their own form of "PDD" (Playfulness Deficiency Disorder), leading to increased levels of staff burnout and poor, often tragic, outcomes for children. It is time for us to take a closer look at play and the concept of playfulness and determine how best to tap into our primal drive to joyfully explore, engage and connect with the world around us.

Historically, play has often been viewed as a frivolous break from important endeavors like working and learning. In fact, **a child's ability to fully and freely engage in play is essential to their learning, health, and overall development.**

A natural drive to play is universal across all young mammals. Children from every society on earth spend time playing. Why? Because play is a crucial vehicle for exploring and learning, developing new skills, and connecting with others. From an infant's first smile to a preschooler's careful construction of a tower, children use play to engage with and learn about their world. Play has key neurological, cognitive, socio-emotional, and physiological benefits for children's health. **Play is the way in which children form loving, trusting relationships. And the quality of a child's life (or anyone's life for that matter) is in direct proportion to the quality of their relationships.**





A NEW PLAY PARADIGM

People often think of play in terms of specific “play activities” such as a game of tag, soccer or building in a sandbox. In contrast, they think of work in terms of “work activities” such as raking leaves, cooking, cleaning, or doing homework. **It is our belief that any activity, as long as it is done with a playful approach, is play. In other words, it’s not about what you do, it’s about how you do it.** Further, what is play for one person may not be play for another. For example, if we see a young child on a baseball field we often assume that he or she is “playing baseball”. But what if that child is not feeling safe, engaged, joyful or connected during this experience? Wouldn’t it be more accurate to describe this as “working baseball” or, at a minimum, “doing baseball”?

Plato is credited with stating that “Life must be lived as play.” To live life as play, we must adopt a playful approach to our engagement with the world around us. But a playful approach, or playfulness, is much more than fun and humor. **Playfulness is the expression of our natural drive to freely and joyfully explore, engage, and connect with the surrounding world.**

Building on decades of academic research, clinical experience, psychological theory, and our own personal play histories, we identified four basic elements to play: Active Engagement, Internal Control, Social Connection, and Joyfulness. When we are actively engaged, joyful, empowered and connected to others, we are playing. What we happen to be doing at the time makes no difference.



ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT = Enthusiastic and complete immersion in an activity.

Renowned psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes “flow” as a deep, effortless involvement in an activity in which the person loses sense of self and time. When we are actively engaged, we are in the moment, focused on the process and not the end-result. Fully in the present, we are not worried about the past or the future, and not concerned with outside rewards or expectations. When children are actively engaged, they play with passion and gusto, are curious and inquisitive, move freely and comfortably, and extend this passion and curiosity to many different kinds of activities. Active engagement is the key building block for creativity - when we are actively engaged, our minds are primed and ready for exploration and creation.

INTERNAL CONTROL = Feelings of safety, worth, and competence that support our ability to engage and challenge ourselves.

Using rats as his subjects, Jaak Panksepp found that young rats stop playing the moment a threat is introduced in their environment. Even once the threat is removed, the rats do not return to their pre-threat levels of playfulness. All young mammals, including children, cannot fully engage in play if their basic safety needs are not met. However, once children feel safe, they can develop a sense of freedom and empowerment, enabling them to gain control over their own involvement in an activity and to handle the ups and downs of their emotions. Developing a sense of control, children begin to believe that they can influence their world and meet challenges with success. When children are internally controlled, they have an “I can do it attitude,” they continue trying to meet a challenge even when they feel frustrated, they take initiative when playing with others, and they can switch to different roles comfortably (e.g., from leader to follower). Through feeling safe, competent and empowered, children develop an inner peace that sustains them through life’s challenges.

JOYFULNESS = Feelings of love, fulfillment, and hope that can be expressed with contentment as well as exuberance.

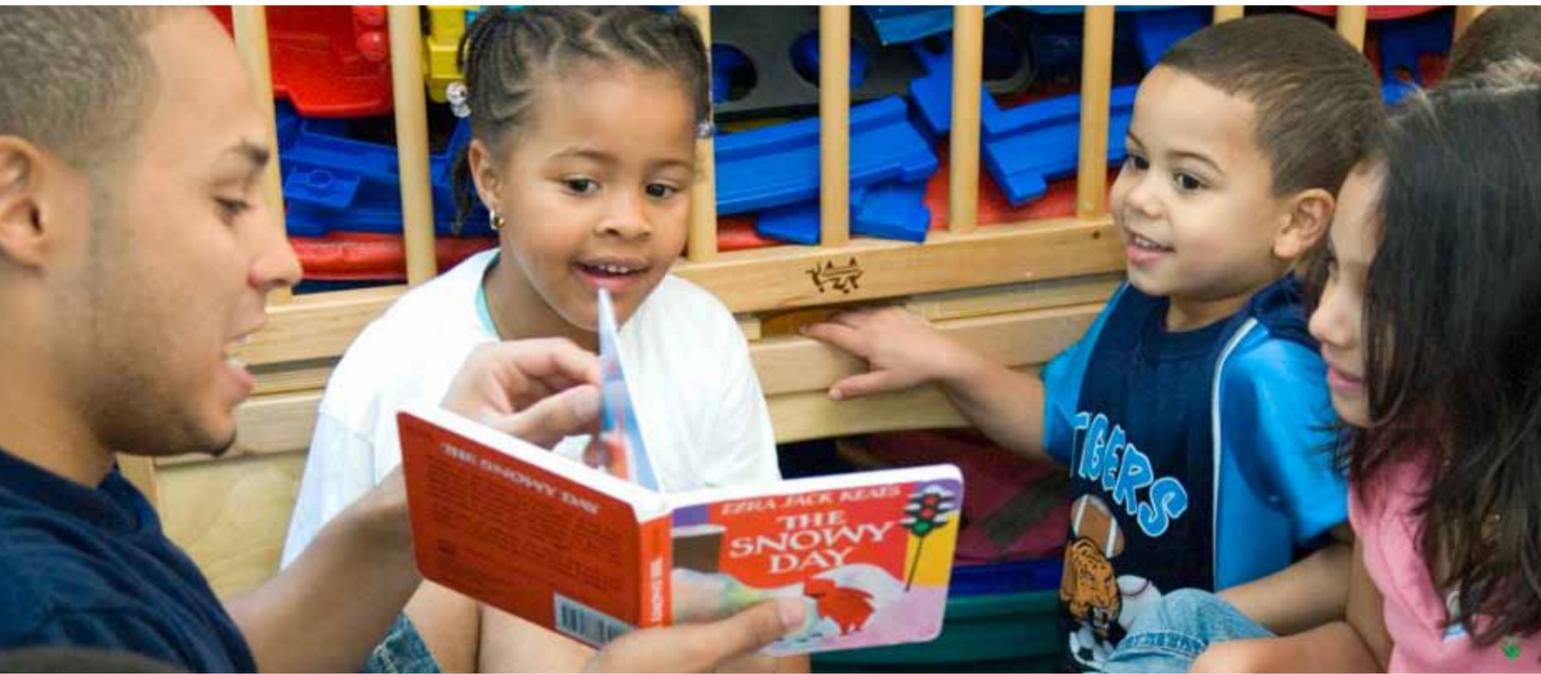
When we are joyful, we feel a deep sense of love and an awareness of the goodness that is all around us. Joyfulness is not the absence of sadness. Instead, it is the inner sense of fulfillment that helps us work through adversity, and even tragedy. When children are joyful, they attend to the present moment and all that is good in it. Sometimes, joy is expressed with exuberance, through wide smiles, laughter and silliness. At other times, joy is expressed more internally and is difficult to observe. Shown through quiet contentment or exuberance, joy is a celebration of the positive aspects of the moment, whether it is dancing to a favorite song, listening to the wind whip through the trees, or spending time with a loved one.

SOCIAL CONNECTION = The drive for cooperative interaction with others founded on a sense of community and belonging.

We know that human beings do not survive without connection to others. Feeling a sense of belonging is crucial to our overall well-being. Starting first with parents and caregivers, infants immediately seek connection and develop strong bonds in order to feel loved and protected. It is these first most basic connections that give children the independence to explore the world around them, knowing that they have a safe base to which they can return. Therefore a child can be socially connected even when playing alone. Secure that they are part of a community, they can choose moments of independent play and exploration. Social connection is a pre-requisite for social competence, as it captures children’s more basic drive to connect with others and their cultural world—a drive that is reinforced by caring, trusting, and safe relationships with others. This natural drive to connect with others leads children to join other children in play, attempt to help others, and try to play harmoniously. Just as the love between infants and their parents cements a child’s ability to relate to others, social connection is the foundation upon which children build loving relationships with others.



Not all play is created equal. Some play is more conducive to strengthening and healing children. Just as we need to eat a balanced diet, with many different food groups represented, we need play that has all four basic nutrients: active engagement, social connection, joyfulness, and internal control. **Play that provides children with opportunities for engagement, empowerment, connection, and joy has the potential to serve as a transformational experience, changing the way a child’s brain, body and spirit develop.** When children are fully and freely engaged in play, they learn new things, develop key social and emotional skills, feel part of a community and take on new challenges. Engaged in transformative play, children build healing relationships with the key people in their lives. This type of play enables children to build resilience in the face of life’s greatest challenges.



PLAY UNDER THREAT

If play is so essential to our overall well-being, why is it being overlooked in our schools, community centers, and neighborhoods? Due to a heavy focus on traditional academic instruction, the overscheduling of extracurricular activities, the lack of safe, adult-supervised spaces to play, and the ubiquity of multimedia entertainment, opportunities for transformative play are continually diminishing. This issue is not unique to America. In a 2009 study, Singer, Singer, D'Agostino and DeLong state that 2,400 mothers of young children across five continents reported that a decrease in free play time was whittling away their children's experience of childhood.

Denying children access to transformative play experiences does them a great disservice. This is particularly true for children who have been exposed to trauma. Unfortunately, we know that fear destroys playfulness. According to a 1998 study conducted by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, millions of our nation's children have experienced profound trauma, such as community violence, abuse, neglect, natural disasters, and extreme poverty. Trauma can cripple the development of young children, lead to negative long-term health consequences, and shorten life expectancy. Long-term stress such as community violence, conflict at home, and inadequate resources can undo a child's sense of safety in the same way that natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes) and manmade disasters (e.g., war) can. And children need to feel safe to play.

Fortunately, children have an incredible ability to bounce back when they receive the support they need from the adults around them. **Empowering, joyful play with sensitive, caring adults can help to restore what trauma violently strips from a child.** If schools, hospitals, and social service agencies put playful engagement on the back burner, children, particularly those suffering from the impact of poverty and trauma, will miss out on essential opportunities to engage in transformative play and build the resilience they need to meet life's challenges.



TRANSFORMING HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELL-BEING

A new understanding of play's essential role in the health, education and well-being of children is needed among all whose work supports children's development. Further, this understanding must lead to new practices that integrate transformative play into child care and early education. This work is already underway through the efforts of the Life is good Playmakers, whose methods offer a model for strengthening children through play. **The Playmakers work directly with the caregivers and frontline staff who are dedicated to teaching, protecting and nurturing our children.** Through training, support, consultation, and partnership, the Playmakers help caregivers and educators to reconceive their approach to care and education, creating more joyful, engaged, socially-connected environments and relationships that strengthen children's healthy development. While this approach benefits all children, it has been shown to have a measurably positive impact on the psychosocial development of children who have been exposed to early childhood trauma — a population that grows by an alarming five million new children each year. (For further reading regarding childhood trauma and development, see our study, "Life is good Playmakers on the Gulf Coast").

In addition to improving individual classrooms and centers, the Life is good Playmakers are undertaking broader initiatives and collaborations that point the way to more systemic change. One initiative involves partnering with an entire urban school district to transform classroom environments and the existing academic curriculum through integrated, cooperative play activities designed to build social and emotional competencies and foster safe, caring, learning communities. Another initiative involves helping a state agency transform its extended day treatment facilities state-wide. Through structured group play, children in these facilities experience joy, connection and opportunities to take powerful actions for themselves that help them replace feelings of fear and helplessness experienced in the wake of trauma with feelings of safety and competence. In yet another initiative, the Life is good Playmakers have collaborated with the Latino Health Institute, revamping care at facilities for unaccompanied minors across the nation to help the organization shift from a detention center model to a model that provides support, connection, and healing.

The work of the Life is good Playmakers in these larger endeavors and in hundreds of Head Starts, community centers, public schools and other organizations, provides a workable approach to transforming systems that suffer from what we have deemed a serious Playfulness Deficiency Disorder. This PDD has a profound negative impact on the health, education and well-being of our children. All involved in children's welfare have an opportunity — and

a responsibility — to create more joyful, loving, empowering and inspiring systems of care and education, especially for our most vulnerable children. **As we look to the future, we envision a world where thousands of adults embody and apply a playful approach to their work with children so that all involved — adults and children — lead healthier, more joyful lives.** Playfulness and play will no longer be taken for granted, and schools and other systems of care will become inspiring places where children can develop their best selves and reach their full potential.





LIFE CAN HURT. PLAY CAN HEAL.

CONTACT INFO

Email : info@ligplaymakers.org

Phone: 617.266.4569

Web: www.ligplaymakers.org

All photos courtesy of Aimee Corrigan