

# What Kids Learn When They're 'Just' Playing

We're heading into two weeks (or possibly ... two months? two years?) of the kids at home. It's called Christmas break, as if it's a break from learning.

But that's just our Puritan Work Ethic talking—the idea that if something is fun, it is a pause from our *real* job, which is to always be hard at work on something tough, unpleasant or boring.

We sure are hard on ourselves. And our kids.

So, try this little thought experiment: Think back on the time you spent “just playing” as a child. Did you get anything out of it?

Psychologists and pediatricians say it is in free play—play that isn't for a coach or a trophy, play where kids come up with something to do and then do it, without an adult helping or directing them—that they learn:

- Cooperation
- Creativity
- Communication
- Leadership
- Empathy
- How to “read” someone
- How to get buy-in
- Frustration tolerance

- Self-control
- Focus
- And ... fun.

In fact, play is SO fun that kids will work on those critically important skills (the self-control, focus, etc.), just so they can HAVE fun. Building those skills is a means to an end.

It seems as if Mother Nature installed the “play drive” for the same reason she installed that other drive—the drive to reproduce. BOTH are critical for the species to continue.

(In fact, play makes you into the kind of person someone would want to reproduce WITH.)

Without play?

Well ... left turn here: Think of Yellowstone National Park for a sec. About 100 years ago, park rangers killed off all of Yellowstone’s gray wolves because they were preying on the cattle allowed to graze there.

But without the wolves, the elk and deer populations exploded, and the entire ecosystem collapsed. Plants and animals, even bugs were dying off. Scientists finally figured out that gray wolves are a “keystone species.” Without them, the whole system falls apart.

*Play is the keystone species of childhood.* Without enough of it kids get anxious, out of shape, depressed, lonely, bored, desperate and dumb. Or at least, less clever. In play, minds have to be always-on, nimble. Think of how much planning, adapting and self-control goes into a simple game of hide-and-go-seek. It’s like a master class in strategic thinking.

So, play is not the opposite of learning. It is learning all the stuff you NEED to SUCCEED.

Christmas break is a break from schoolwork that is a glorious chance for kids to catch up on these “other” lessons, even when it looks like they are bickering. That’s part of the process.

An unpleasant part, yes.

So, grab an eggnog and go to another room (maybe another house? Or state?) so the kids can play without you.

Just leave some cardboard boxes, the bigger the better. Consider it homework.

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