

Unschooling Life Podcast #8 - august 6th, 2014

## **Peter Gray on Play**

**Amy:** Today we hear again from Peter Gray, this time about the importance of play in a child's development, education and general wellbeing.

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**Amy:** I am Amy Childs and Welcome to the Unschooling Life Podcast.

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**Amy:** Peter Gray is a developmental psychologist, a researcher, and the author of *Free to Learn - Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life*.

In *Free to Learn*, Peter argues that children, if free to pursue their own interest through play, will not only learn all that they need to know, but will do so with energy and passion.

I asked him to share some of his thoughts with us today about play.

**Peter Gray:** The fundamental observation that got me interested in this was the realisation of two historical phenomena.

The first historic phenomena is that over the last 60 years in the United States, and in other developed countries, but most well documented in the United States, there's been a dramatic decline in children's opportunities to play freely, away from adults.

In the 1950s when I was a kid, children were outdoors playing most of the time that they weren't in school.

Houses were small, mothers refrain was "get out of the house".

Typically kids from the age of 4, 5 on, were out playing with other kids when they weren't in school.

Some of us had part time jobs, some of us had chores to do, but when we weren't in school, for the most time, we were playing.

The other thing is that, back in the 1950s, school wasn't nearly the big deal that it is today. The school year was 5 weeks shorter than it is today on average, so summer vacation was a month longer, and there was an extra week vacation during the winter..

The school day was 6 hours long, but very often, at least in elementary school, 2 of those hours were outside playing. It was half an hour recess in the morning, half hour recess in the afternoon, and a full hour at lunch.

And kids would be outdoors playing. Typically. My memory is that it was rare that it would be a teacher or any other adult out there watching. We would just be out there playing. Kids were trusted much more then than they are today.

And there was really almost no such a thing as homework in elementary school. There was some homework in secondary school, but not nearly as much as today. And out of school, you know, there was no such a thing as parents driving their kids to organised events.

Kids found other kids, they played pick-up games or whatever, they played in various ways, depending on where they lived, what their interests were.

They explored in the woods, or climbed trees, or went fishing, or built things.

So there was a lot of time and opportunity for children to explore their interests, to find what they like to do, to interact with other children, figure out how to solve their own problems, because there weren't adults around all the time solving their problems for them.

So that was the case in the 1950s.

Now, over time, ever since the 1950s, there has been a gradual decline in the degree to which children had been free to do that kind of thing.

Such that today, in many communities, children are not outdoors playing freely at all.

If you see children outdoors at all, they are likely to be wearing uniforms and following the directions of a coach and their parents will be sitting on the outlines cheering them on.

**Amy:** And how does Peter define play?

**Peter Gray:** Play is an activity that is directed and governed by the players themselves.

Play is an activity that you can freely join and freely leave.

You can quit whenever you want, if you are not having fun, you quit.

And that ability to quit is part of the essence of play, but that's not the case when you are involved in these adult directed formal activities.

**Amy:** And what is the cost of this decline in play?

**Peter Gray:** Over the same period that has been this change, this decline in children freedom to play, there is also been a continuous increase in all sorts of mental disorders in children.

For example, the rates of childhood depression and anxiety disorders are now 5 to 8 times what they were in the 1950s.

And it's not just that we are seeing disorders where we didn't look for them before.

These are bystander, clinical questionnaires that have been given in unchanged form to normative groups of school age children, and to college students also, over the years.

And based on those scores, and using the cutoffs that you would now use for suspected major depression or a clinically significant anxiety disorder, other mental disorders have also increased over this period of time.

Specially disorders that one would attribute to stress, to a feeling of constriction in your life, a feeling of being controlled by others, as opposed to being able to make your own decisions.

These are exactly the kinds of effects that you would expect to occur when children are no longer free to play on their own, and learn how to solve their own problems, and learn how to deal with emotions in their own ways.

Now this is a correlation, that doesn't automatically prove a cause and effect relationship. But what I've done in my book and in a couple of my academic articles, is to present all of the reasons that convince me that this is a cause and effect relationship.

When you deprive children of freedom to play and explore on their own, one of the effects is a large number of them become anxious and depressed.

Suicidal rates have increased over the same period of time, such as the suicidal rates for children under age 15 is now 4 times what it was in the 1950s.

So, one of the effects of play deprivation has been to make children unhappy. It's not just play deprivation, it's also the fact that school has become a much more stressful place than it used to be.

So, the combination of lack of freedom to play and explore on your own when you are not being constantly evaluated and judge by adults, but you are doing what you want to do, you are judging your own activities, and you are interacting with other kids, combined with being more and more in a school setting, where you are constantly being judged and evaluated, and ranked, and compared with other people.

That's a very stressful situation, that's stressful for anybody, but to do that to children it's really almost cruel.

And to do it to the degree that we do it, it's really quite cruel and many children really are suffering because of that.

There are even experiments with laboratory animals.

Experiments with rats, and older experiments with monkeys - people don't do these experiments with monkeys anymore, because it's regarded as cruel - where you raise the young animals in a way that they are deprived of play.

With rats there are ways of raising them, so they are not deprived of other social experiences, but are deprived of play.

When these young rats become young adults, if you then test them, they are really emotionally crippled compared to control rats who are allowed to play with other young rats as they are growing up.

Those who had been deprived to play, if you put them in a somewhat novel environment, freeze in the corner, they don't explore the environment as a normal rat would, they don't habituate to the fear.

If you place them with another... with an unfamiliar, other rat, they alternate between freezing in fear, and lashing out with inappropriate and ineffective aggression.

So, this is quite analogous to the kinds of effects that we see in children today. Of course, this is an extreme with the rats. They've been totally deprived of play, our children are not totally deprived of it, but they are partially deprived of it. So it's not surprising that we see effects in similar directions.

**Amy:** And what do children learn by playing?

**Peter Gray:** One of the things that children do when they are playing is that they are learning how to deal with strong emotions.

Children, when they are free to play, and nobody prevents them, play in risky ways. They climb the trees high, so high that they feel a little bit of fear. They skateboard down banisters, dive off cliffs, they do all these things that make the parents very nervous if parents are watching. But the parents shouldn't be watching. Because the children are deliberately, if you will, they are not necessarily consciously, but in what is instrumentally a very deliberate way, putting themselves into fear inducing situations.

And why do they do this? From evolutionary perspective, they are doing it because they are learning how to manage fear.

They are learning how to be in a fearful situation and overcome it.

I can do this. I can feel this fear and I can manage it. I can feel this fear, and I can still control my mind and my body, and I can manage it.

I don't panic, when I am up high in the tree, or I am diving off a cliff, or I am swinging high in the swings, or sliding down a very steep slide, if I am a little child.

Children are pretty good, they are very good really, at knowing what they can do, and kind of testing the limits of what they can do.

And when parents don't prevent them, they rarely, rarely do anything that is truly dangerous.

They do things that might look dangerous, but they have a good sense of what they are capable of doing and what they are not capable of doing.

The other thing that they are learning in play is how to not be self centred.

How to pay attention to other peoples needs.

Children come into the world wanting to play with other kids.

Certainly by the time they are 4, 5, 6 years old, they want to play with other kids.

This desire to play with other kids is what leads them to learn how to be attuned to other kids needs.

When children are playing with other kids, and there are no adults there to solve their problems, children have to pay attention.

They have to learn to adapt. They have to compromise with the other kids who are playing. Otherwise the other kids would quit, the other kids would just leave them.

You know, if you and I are children, and we get together to play something, the first thing we have to do is we have to decide what we want to play.

Well, I want to play this, but you want to play that...

Well, neither of us are going to get our way entirely. But we still want to play together.

So, we figure out something we both want to play.

This is the essence of human relationship. We have to kind compromise, we have to negotiate a little bit.

As we're playing, maybe I kind of want to do it my way, or maybe I am being too rough, or maybe I am not being... I am not attune to your facial expressions that show that you are not really having fun with the way I am playing.

Well, I got to be attune to that. I've got learn to pay attention to that, because if you are unhappy in the play, you are going to quite.

And I know that, I know that intuitively, so I have to pay attention.

Or if I don't pay attention, and you do quit, then that's a powerful lesson to me, because I want to play with you, but you've quit, you've left.

So, the next time we play together, or the next time I play together with anybody, I am going to be more inclined to pay attention to their needs, to their subtle expressions of whether they are having fun or not.

You know, that's the most important thing that children learn in social play, is how to meet your own needs, while also helping the others meet their needs.

We are social animals, and we need to be able to get along with other people.

We can't have a happy marriage, we can't have good friends, we can't have good work relationships, if we don't know how to interact with other people in such a way that they find us a pleasure to be with, as oppose to a pain to be with.

That's the most important thing that children learn in play.

And they are also learning intellectual skills in play.

Play is always a creative activity.

Play always involves initiative, always involves imagination, and higher order thinking always involves imagination.

When children are playing make-beliefs, let's pretend this, and they are sort of carrying out logically, let's assume... let's pretend, I am superman, you know, what does superman do...

So, I have to behave consistently with my knowledge of superman.

That means that I am thinking hypothetically, I am thinking "I am not really superman, but I am... for this game I am superman."

I am thinking hypothetically about what it is that I have to do.

We are playing a game in which we imagine that there are witches behind... dangerous witches behind the bushes.

Then we have to behave in such a way that we are assuming that's true and we have to take into that account in the way that we behave.

That's exactly what scientist do when they develop hypothesis.

That's exactly what an architect does when she designs a house.

You have to imagine something that isn't there, that you can't really see, that isn't tangible present, and then think logically about it.

And children are always practicing that when they are playing in imaginative ways.

In addition to that, children are finding their interests in play.

The essence of play is that it is fun. So, you do things that are fun.

So, for one kid building things is fun.

For another kid, imagining, you know, developing far out imaginative play scenes, what's called social-dramatic play, is fun.

For another kid playing with dolls, and making doll clothes, and all of that is fun.

People find what they enjoy doing and they develop real skills at it, in that kind of play.

One of the things that I found in my study of the graduates of the Sudbury School, and we found the same thing in the recent study of the grown unschoolers, is that many of these people go on to careers in which they are doing the very same thing, but now for money, as a professional, that they enjoyed doing in play.

So, a child who loved to build things is now an inventor who is creating things.

A woman who, as a girl loved to play with little boats in the pond, is now a captain of a cruiseship.

So, I can go on with lists, and lists with such people, but people discover what they love to do and then they figure out how to make a living of it.

How wonderful that is, when you can make a living doing the very thing that you are passionate about and love to do.

**Amy:** So, there you have it, the secret to living the good life, the answer is PLAY!

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*Music plays: "Free to be You and Me"*

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**Amy:** The Unschooling Life Podcast is brought to you by Amy Childs and [unschoolingsupport.com](http://unschoolingsupport.com)