

The Benefits of Play for Adults

How Play Can Improve Your Health, Work, and Family Relationships



Play is not just essential for kids; it can be an important source of relaxation and stimulation for adults as well. Playing with your romantic partner, co-workers, pets, friends, and children is a sure (and fun) way to fuel your imagination, creativity, problem-solving abilities, and improve your mental health. And actively playing with your kids will not only improve your own mood and well-being, it will make your kids smarter, better adjusted, and less stressed.

Why should adults make time for play?

In our hectic, modern lives, many of us focus so heavily on work and family commitments that we never seem to have time for pure fun. Somewhere between childhood and adulthood, we've stopped playing. When we do carve out some leisure time, we're more likely to zone out in front of the TV or computer than engage in fun, rejuvenating play like we did as children. But just because we're adults, that doesn't mean we have to take ourselves so seriously and make life all about work. We all need to play.

Adult play is a time to forget about work and commitments, and to be social in an unstructured, creative way. The focus of play is on the actual experience, not on accomplishing any goal. There doesn't need to be any point to the activity beyond having fun and enjoying yourself. Play could be simply goofing off with friends, sharing jokes with a coworker, throwing a Frisbee on the beach, dressing up at Halloween with your kids, building a snowman in the yard, playing fetch with a dog, a game of charades at a party, or going for a bike ride with your spouse with no destination in mind. By giving yourself permission to play with the joyful abandon of childhood, you can reap the myriad of health benefits throughout life.

Some of the reasons we play:

- to learn
- to create
- to feel challenged
- to lose ourselves in a pleasurable activity
- to calm and focus ourselves
- competitively to win
- cooperatively
- for the fun and joy of it

The benefits of play

While play is crucial for a child's development, it is also beneficial for people of all ages. Play can add joy to life, relieve stress, supercharge learning, and connect you to others and the world around you. Play can also make work more productive and pleasurable.

You can play on your own or with a pet, but for even greater benefits, play should involve at least one other person, away from the sensory-overload of electronic gadgets.

Play can:

- **Relieve stress.** Play is fun and can trigger the release of endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals. Endorphins promote an overall sense of well-being and can even temporarily relieve pain.
- **Improve brain function.** Playing chess, completing puzzles, or pursuing other fun activities that challenge the brain can help prevent memory problems and improve brain function. The social interaction of playing with family and friends can also help ward off stress and depression.

- **Stimulate the mind and boost creativity.** Young children often learn best when they are playing—and that principle applies to adults, as well. You'll learn a new task better when it's fun and you're in a relaxed and playful mood. Play can also stimulate your imagination, helping you adapt and problem solve.
- **Improve relationships and your connection to others.** Sharing laughter and fun can foster empathy, compassion, trust, and intimacy with others. Play doesn't have to be a specific activity; it can also be a state of mind. Developing a playful nature can help you loosen up in stressful situations, break the ice with strangers, make new friends, and form new business relationships.
- **Keep you feeling young and energetic.** In the words of George Bernard Shaw, "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing." Playing can boost your energy and vitality and even improve your resistance to disease, helping you feel your best.

Play and relationships

Play is one of the most effective tools for keeping relationships fresh and exciting. Playing together for the fun of it brings joy, vitality, and resilience to relationships. Play can also heal resentments, disagreements, and hurts. Through regular play, we learn to trust one another and feel safe. Trust enables us to work together, open ourselves to intimacy, and try new things. By making a conscious effort to incorporate more humor and play into your daily interactions, you can improve the quality of your love relationships—as well as your connections with co-workers, family members, and friends.

- **Play helps develop and improve social skills.** Social skills are learned in the give and take of play. During childhood play, kids learn about verbal communication, body language, boundaries, cooperation, and teamwork. As adults, you continue to refine these skills through play and playful communication.
- **Play teaches cooperation with others.** Play is a powerful catalyst for positive socialization. Through play, children learn how to "play nicely" with others—to work together, follow mutually agreed upon rules, and socialize in groups. As adults, you can continue to use play to break down barriers and improve your relationships with others.
- **Play can heal emotional wounds.** As adults, when you play together, you are engaging in exactly the same patterns of

behavior that positively shapes the brains of children. These same playful behaviors that predict emotional health in children can also lead to positive changes in adults. If an emotionally-insecure individual plays with a secure partner, for example, it can help replace negative beliefs and behaviors with positive assumptions and actions.

Fixing relationship problems with play

Play and laughter perform [an essential role in building strong, healthy relationships](#) by bringing people closer together, creating a positive bond, and resolving conflict and disagreements. In new relationships, play and humor can be an effective tool not just for attracting the other person but also for overcoming any awkwardness or embarrassment that arises during the dating and getting-to-know-you process. In longer-term relationships, play can keep things exciting, fresh, and vibrant, and deepen intimacy. It can also help you overcome differences and the tiny aggravations than can build up over time.

Play at work



Many dot com companies have long recognized the link between productivity and a fun work environment. Some encourage play and creativity by offering art or yoga classes, throwing regular parties, providing games such as Foosball or ping pong, or encouraging recess-like breaks during the workday for employees to play and let off steam. These companies know that more play at work results in more

productivity, higher job satisfaction, greater workplace morale, and a decrease in staff turnover and absenteeism.

If you're fortunate enough to work for such a company, embrace the culture; if your company lacks the play ethic, you can still inject your own sense of play into breaks and lunch hours. Keep a camera or sketch pad on hand and take creative breaks where you can. Joke with coworkers during coffee breaks, relieve stress at lunch by shooting hoops, playing cards, or completing word puzzles together. It can strengthen the bond you have with your coworkers as well as help improve your job performance. For people with mundane jobs, maintaining a sense of play can make a real difference to the work day by helping to relieve monotony.

Using play to boost productivity and innovation

Success at work doesn't depend on the amount of time you work; it depends upon the quality of your work. And the quality of your work is highly dependent on your well-being.

Taking the time to replenish yourself through play is one of the best things you can do for your career. When the project you're working on hits a serious glitch, taking some time out to play and have a few laughs does a lot more than take your mind off the problem. When you play, you engage the creative side of your brain and silence your "inner editor," that psychological barrier that censors your thoughts and ideas. This can often help you see the problem in a new light and generate fresh, creative solutions.

Playing at work:

- keeps you functional when under stress
- refreshes your mind and body
- encourages teamwork
- helps you see problems in new ways
- triggers creativity and innovation
- increases energy and prevents burnout

Tips for managers and employers

It's tempting to think that the best way to cope with an ever-increasing workload is to have your employees work longer and harder. However, without some recreation time, it's more likely the work will suffer and your workers become chronically overwhelmed and burned out. Encouraging play, on the other hand, creates a more lighthearted work atmosphere that in turn encourages employees to

take more creative risks.

- Provide opportunities for social interaction among employees. Throw parties, put a basketball hoop in the parking lot, arrange a miniature golf tournament, stage an office treasure hunt.
- Encourage creative thinking or just lighten the mood of meetings by keeping tactile puzzles on the conference room table.
- Encourage workers to take regular breaks from their desks, and spend a few minutes engaged in a fun activity, such as a word or number game.

How to incorporate more play into your life

Incorporating more fun and play into your daily life can improve the quality of your relationships, as well as your mood and outlook. Even in the most difficult of times, taking time away from your troubles to play or laugh can go a long way toward making you feel better. It's true what they say: [laughter really is the best medicine](#). Laughter makes you feel good. And the good feeling that you get when you laugh and have fun remains with you even after the laughter subsides. Play and laughter help you keep a positive, optimistic outlook through difficult situations, disappointments, and loss.

Develop your playful side

It's never too late to develop your playful, humorous side. If you find yourself limiting your playfulness, it's possible that you're self-conscious and concerned about how you'll look and sound to others when you attempt to be lighthearted. Fearing rejection or ridicule when attempting to be playful is an understandable fear, but it's important to point out that as a child, you were naturally playful; you didn't worry about the reactions of other people. You can reclaim your inner child by setting aside *regular, quality playtime*. The more you play, joke, and laugh—the easier it becomes.

Try to clear your schedule for an afternoon or evening, for example, and then turn off your phone, TV, computer, and other devices. Give yourself permission to do whatever you want for the time you've allotted. Be spontaneous, set aside your inhibitions and try something fun, something you haven't done since you were a kid, perhaps. And enjoy the change of pace.

Creating opportunities to play

- Host a regular game night with friends.

- Arrange nights out with work colleagues bowling, playing pool or miniature golf, or singing karaoke.
- Schedule time at the beach or in a park to throw a Frisbee or fly a kite with friends.
- Play with a pet. Young dogs, especially, make very willing playmates. If you don't have your own, borrow one from your local animal shelter.
- Surround yourself with playful people. They'll help loosen you up and are more likely to support your efforts to play and have fun.
- Joke with strangers at a bus stop or in a checkout line. It'll make the time pass quicker and you may even spark up new friendships.
- Visit a magic store and learn some tricks. Or invest in art supplies, construction toys, or science kits and create something new.
- Play with children. Goofing around with kids helps you experience the joy of play from their perspective. If you don't have young children, arrange a play date with your grandkids, nephews, nieces, or other young relatives.

Importance of playing with your children

Rolling on the floor with your baby or getting down on your knees to play with a young child is vitally important—both to your child's development and to your own health.

Play is essential for developing social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills in children. In fact, far from being a waste of time or just a fun distraction, play is a time when your child is often learning the most. Whether it's an infant playing "peek-a-boo," a toddler playing make-believe, or an older child playing a board game, play develops social skills, stimulates a child's imagination and makes kids better adjusted, smarter, and less stressed.

As well as aiding your child's development, play can also bring you closer together and strengthen the parent-child bond that will last a lifetime.

How to play with your child

While children need time to play alone and with other children, playing with their parents is also important. Here are some helpful tips to encourage play:

- Establish regular play times. It may be for twenty minutes before dinner every night or every Saturday morning, for example. Remember, this time spent playing together is benefiting both of

you.

- Give your child your undivided attention. Turn off the TV and your cell phone and make the time to play with your child without distraction. Having your undivided attention makes your child feel special.
- Get down to your child's level. That may mean getting down on your knees or sitting on the floor. Match your child's intensity during play—if your child is loud and energetic, be loud and energetic, too.
- Embrace repetition. It may be boring to you, but it's not to your child. Children learn through repetition. Let your child play the same game over and over. Your child will move on when he or she is ready.
- Let your children take the lead. Become part of their game rather than trying to dictate the play. In pretend play, let your child call the shots, make the rules, and determine the pace of play. Ask questions and follow along—you'll likely get drawn into imaginative new worlds that are fun for you, too.
- Don't force play or try to prolong a game. The best way to teach a new skill is to show children how something works, then step back and give them a chance to try. When your child is tired of an activity, it's time to move on to something new.
- Make play age-appropriate and consider safety. If a game is too hard or too easy, it loses its sense of pleasure and fun. Help your child find age-appropriate activities and understand any safety rules for play. Nothing ruins a fun game faster than a child getting hurt.

Game ideas for playing with children

- Play outdoors. Throw balls. Push kids on swings. Make mud pies. Go on a hike around the neighborhood. Take a nature walk in your backyard. Encourage your children to be active outdoors. Help them develop motor coordination and learn good sportsmanship.
- Play games: card games, board games, silly and wacky kids' games. Praise them. Encourage them. Laugh with them.
- Get involved in a craft project together. Build a jigsaw puzzle as a family. Bake cookies. Paint a picture.
- Listen to music together. Sing along. Play rhythm instruments along with music. Get out the guitar or keyboard and make music.
- Read a book together. Ask questions. Ask them to change the story or make up a new one.
- Watch a movie together. Find out what they liked, how they felt. Discover the child's interests. Comment on and discuss any bothersome content, either words or actions.

- Play kid games like Follow the Leader, Guess What I Am? or Hide and Seek.
- Establish a family game night. Pick a night and gather your family to play games and bond through friendly competition. Make sure the games are appropriate for the youngest player. Teach your child how to take turns and be a good loser as well as a good winner.

Source: Child Development Institute

More help for play and laughter

- [Fixing Relationship Problems with Humor](#): Using Laughter and Play to Build and Maintain Successful Relationships
- [Laughter is the Best Medicine](#): Improving Communication Skills in Business and Relationships
- [The Health Benefits of Pets](#): How Caring for Animals can Make You Happier and Healthier
- [Improving Emotional Health](#): Strategies and Tips for Good Mental Health

Resources and references

The benefits of play

[10 Reasons Play Can Make You Healthy, Happy, and More Productive](#) – Top ten list of the many ways play contributes to mental and physical health. (U.S. News & World Report)

[Play Science: The Patterns of Play](#) – Learn about the different ways human beings play, the roles these different patterns of play serve, and how we benefit from them. (National Institute for Play)

[The Value of Play I: The Definition of Play Provides Clues to Its Purposes](#) – Psychologist Peter Gray discusses the purpose and benefits of play. (Psychology Today)

[The Value of Play II: How Play Promotes Reasoning in Children and Adults](#) – Learn how playfulness can improve reasoning and problem-solving skills. (Psychology Today)

[Leisure Play Is Important for Human Collaboration](#) – Article describes how play teaches human beings to cooperate and curbs tendencies towards aggression and dominance. (PsychCentral)

Kids and play

[Play](#) – Information about why play matters and what you as a parent can do to encourage your child to play. (ParentingCounts.org)

[Playing with Your Child](#) – Tips on games to play with your children. (Child Development Institute)

[Children Learn Through Play](#) (PDF) – Information sheet about how children learn as they play and what games are appropriate for different ages. (UC Davis)

Games to play

[The Great Game List](#) – Contains a myriad of fun activities and games with some advertising. (Fun-Attic)

[Pointless Games™](#) – “All you have to do to win is play,” a collection of games and activities by Bernie DeKoven. (DeepFun.com)

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Website link to this article and imbedded links:

<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/emotional-health/benefits-of-play-for-adults.htm>