



# The Healthy Benefits of Play

by KENDA RIGGS

**“We are designed to be lifelong players, built to benefit from play at any age.”**  
~ Dr. Stuart Brown

Summer break is over, and you are back to work for another year of teaching. What did you do over the summer to rejuvenate your mind, body, and soul? As you reflect on your summer, I invite you to think about some of the things you did that you enjoyed. If it feels like summer slipped by, what may have gotten in the way of you taking time to pause to incorporate some time for play, that important time for you?

Research tells us that adults often forget to play. With adulthood, there is a natural expectation that life becomes more serious with a focus on education and career goals, while moving forward in life with other responsibilities of home and family. The transition into a professional adult identity is not always a balanced one. Particularly for teachers, many often stay in work mode not only during the day, but during evenings and weekends too, and lose their sense of identity outside of their working self. Even though there is emphasis on work-life balance, many teachers have gotten so caught up in the cycle of work-life that many have forgotten to play.

Teachers go to work and then come home to work, whether that is checking and responding to emails and phone calls, organizing lesson plans, attending meetings, online workshops, research, or completing evaluations. Teachers will often say that they just don't have time to play. Play is often viewed to be a guilty pleasure that distracts from the serious tasks. However, the impacts of work overload on the physical and mental health of teachers takes a toll on the well-being of teachers. One of the solutions to feel better is to incorporate more play time into your day, even when you don't feel that you have the time. The overall health benefits will be profound.

## What Is Play and Why Is It Important?

Dr. Stuart Brown, Founder of the National Institute for Play, defines play as being “a process you feel”; a state of being that is purposeless, fun, and pleasurable. He describes play as being essential to human growth and development, learning, and cultivating relationships *throughout the lifespan*, which is essentially the gateway to feeling vitality. Play can be structured activities whereby games or events are planned with other people with similar interests, or play can be unstructured

spending time with others or time by yourself.

Play is important for many reasons. Play is fun time, and helps to regulate emotions, promotes creative thinking, and develops problem-solving capability which protects the adult brain by improving cognitive flexibility and memory. Play helps to build relationships by encouraging open communication. It can bring healthy energy and elevate your spirit while helping you to relax. Play can foster positivity, discharge stress, and even boosts your immune system. Play can improve your overall productivity and quality of sleep.

Play is essential for good health, just like food, water, and sleep are critical for your well-being. There is significant research regarding the neuroscience behind brain development indicating that when the brain is deprived of play during childhood or adulthood, it impacts the brain's growth and development. Play often brings laughter which helps to relieve stress and inflammation with the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter that has a role in experiencing pleasure. Dopamine is known as the ‘feel-good’ hormone that helps you to experience happiness. With feelings of positivity and happiness, play boosts productivity at work and quality of work increases. Without play, or with prolonged play deprivation, burnout and compassion fatigue become more probable for teachers.

## Play and Mindfulness

When thinking of play, many envision physical activity. But play can also be relaxing, mindful activities as well. Mindfulness means your mind is paying full attention to what is going on in the present moment. It is the ability to be fully aware of where you are and what you are doing, and not being overly reactive or overwhelmed by what is going on around you. The research on mindfulness shows that benefits include improvements to self-awareness, mental concentration, and emotion regulation. There are many mindful play activities which include: painting; photography; berry picking; fishing; exploring a new trail; puzzles; knitting; coloring mandalas; reading a good book or magazine; walking your pet; enjoying an evening campfire.

Even the popular toy Lego has introduced mindfulness for adults with a focus on relaxation while

creatively building, and they recently launched a botanical garden and flower bouquet collections as part of their newest builds. Given the importance of play and mindfulness, the goal is to offer another play medium for adults, with a focus on relaxation, being in the present moment, and enjoying the mindful benefits of play!

### Play and Nature

Richard Louv, Author and Co-founder of the Children and Nature Network, describes the concept Nature Deficit-Disorder (NDD), which is not a medical diagnosis, but "...the human cost of alienation from nature, diminished use of senses, attention difficulties, high rates of physical and emotional illnesses including Vitamin D deficiency". He explains that spending less time outdoors is taking its toll on the overall physical and mental health and well-being of adults and children. With the digital world in which we live, adults are spending increased amounts of energy blocking out many of the human senses to focus on electronic screens, which is ultimately leaving people feeling less alive. People do better overall physically and emotionally when experiencing the great outdoors, benefiting from the positive feelings, stress reduction, and energy restoration from being in nature.

Playing outside in nature is an important component to experience the best health benefits. Nature can also promote play and mindfulness, as this involves using all your senses to live in the moment and observe what is going on around you without passing any judgement. The next time you are outside, pause and notice the activation of your five senses. What do you truly see around you? It may be a leaf blowing on the tree, a ladybug crawling on your deck post, or a cloud floating in the sky. What do you hear? Try to really listen to the sounds around you. Do you hear the leaves rustling? Do you hear a brook flowing? Or a songbird chirping? What do you taste? Slowly sip a warm or cold drink outside and enjoy the warmth or coolness, the flavor, and the feelings of the liquid gently going through your body. What are you touching? Are you sitting on a chair or a swing, or the grass? Notice your surroundings. What do you smell? Breathe deeply to let the fresh air absorb into your lungs. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Breathe in the freshness of the air and the nature scents around you.

There are direct benefits of playing in the fresh air and sun, while using protective sunscreen. Sunshine gives our bodies Vitamin D, which strengthens our immune system and helps protect against illness. Research has shown that just one hour of natural light per day significantly improves the quality of

sleep. Just being outside in the sunshine helps to reduce stress levels. What did you do to get outside and enjoy the sun and fresh air this summer? How can you bring more play and nature into your life each day throughout this upcoming year?

### When Was the Last Time That You Truly Played?

When was the last time you allowed yourself to be truly creative and have fun? Not only to laugh, but to laugh out loud from the soul, and to feel and experience the joy of happiness? Teachers may stop playing because they are distracted by always having something else to do such as work tasks, parenting responsibilities, house chores, and family duties. Sometimes teachers even plan to take a vacation or time off for fun, and end up checking emails or answering calls, and ultimately working on their 'time off'. It is truly hard to experience the full benefits of play if you continue to work during these times.

Think about some of your favorite ways to play. Do you have a hobby? Play sports? A favorite activity? Do you like to collect things? What do you do to have fun to rejuvenate yourself?

Here are some adult play ideas to consider, with many of the activities requiring just small amounts of your time such as: swimming; bowling; mini golf; charades; jumping rope; board or card games; dancing to music; baking a new recipe; crafts such as rug hooking or cross-stitch; sport activities like golfing, softball, basketball, or tennis; playing an instrument; riding a bike; gardening; flying a kite; blowing bubbles; playing horseshoes; frisbee; sliding or snowshoeing; home karaoke...or any other play activity that you enjoy doing.

### Play Is for Everyone

As you begin the school year, I encourage you to explore integrating play into your days as you navigate your own work-life balance. Remember that play is not a waste of time or an activity for children. Play is for all ages, and the power of play is just as magical for adults as it is for children. Dr. Brown highlights that play "...energizes us and enlivens us, eases our burdens, renews our natural sense of optimism, and opens us up to new possibilities". It is ultimately an investment in you and your overall physical and mental well-being. A healthy balance of play leads to healthy teachers. As Albert Einstein stated, "Play is the highest form of research". So go ahead and play!

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**"We don't stop playing because we grow old...we grow old because we stop playing."  
~ George Bernard Shaw**