

# Time to Explore and Discover

## *I love Summer in Australia...*

It spells out holidays, long days, bare feet, the sound of cicadas, time to explore and time to just be.

It is the long hot aussie summers that holds a precious part of my play memory for it was the backdrop for most of my most memorable play opportunities as a child. Why?

Quite simply it was a time where days were spent in social play, free largely from adult constraints and expectations. I didn't 'roam free' in the purest sense and will not glorify that as the ideal. My backyard and that of my surrounding neighbours proved wild enough for me. The ability to climb fences and trees and 'raid' the cubbies of other children risky enough to satisfy my taste for adventure.

When we consider the nature of play, it is at it's purest, most uninhibited form when unstructured and spontaneous. Play away from watchful eyes of parents and other adults allows for a child to escape into their world free from judgement, advice or instruction by adults.

I wonder how many children today will look back and relish their memories of summers like myself and that of my peers do?

Dr Peter Gray, a leading American psychologist believes that a decline in children's opportunities to play over the last 20 years, particularly social play, has been accompanied by an equally dramatic increase in childhood mental disorders particularly anxiety and depression.

Gray believes that this deterioration is consistent with the changing social dynamics where neighbourhoods are less cohesive and parents time poor. A community where children are seen as learning more from adults than through their own innate ability to discover and explore with their peers.

Increasingly adult intervention in 'creating' opportunities for children to play and of adults 'risk managing' these opportunities and solving problems as they arise for children, is damaging not just children's health and wellbeing, but also will result in impacting negatively on the long term capacity of the global community to function effectively.

The most fundamental social skill we need to develop for healthy meaningful relationships and communities is the ability to seek different perspectives and understand the feelings of others. Our ability to navigate

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through the complexity of relationships is integral for our health and wellbeing. Through social play with other children these skills can be developed and practiced from an early age.

We are effectively stripping our children of their capacity to reach their full potential through our intensive and intrusive intervention in their play. Our interventions are creating hothouses for dependence, narcissism and a lack of empathy and creativity.

The process of social play allows children time to role play different perspectives, mediate conflict, solve problems, relinquish control, take control, experience democracy and dictatorships and explore and regulate their emotions. In addition, through social play, children become experienced in the verbal and non-verbal cues of other children similarly engaged in the play process.

These cannot be taught by an adult in isolation. They must be experienced, practiced and lived.

Without the development of these skills we are unable as adults to negotiate the risky and often complex relationships in our personal and professional lives.

An important challenge for educators and parents today is to recognise that social play does not require adult intervention.

The adult fear of "what will happen?" if children are left to play without adult intrusion and the associated community expectations that every child is "supervised" and conflict is "mediated" so that every child is "included" and every child is "safe" remains the most significant challenge for educators today.

Yet the implications for this 'risk aversion' poses the most serious threat to the future capacity of

the citizens in the global community.

Tim Gill in his book "No Fear" (2007) argues that the opportunity for children to assess and deal with risks in play provides them with important real life experience in managing risk in the real world. In fact there is increasing concern that the removal of 'risk' taking opportunities is potentially hazardous and has long term implications for healthy development as the skills to assess and navigate risk, both physical and emotional, in the real world remain undeveloped in the adult.

What would a world be like...

*where there was no capacity by individuals to know how to negotiate conflict?*

*where following rules in order to work effectively in a team was not recognised as important?*

*where individuals did not understand or have the capacity to assess risk?*

*where everyone looked to another person to have their needs met or problems solved?*

I do not have a simple answer as to how we as educators navigate this. It is a work in progress. The problem crept up on us and it will need collective willpower, advocacy and education to resolve it.

I do however, believe we can collectively commit to educating families about the value of social play, to maximising the opportunities provided for social play in our services, and to step back as much as possible and allow children time to explore and discover life through their play on their own terms and in their own way.

We must become observers not interventionists in children's play.

Childhood is not a climate controlled hothouse but a wild beautiful expanse of possibilities, opportunities and experiences to be discovered and explored by each individual on their own terms and in their own unique and delightfully diverse way.

Enjoy your summer!

**Robyn**

*About Peter Gray, Ph.D., research professor at Boston College, is author of Free to Learn (Basic Books, 2013) and Psychology (Worth Publishers, a college textbook now in its 7th edition). He has conducted and published research in comparative, evolutionary, developmental, and educational psychology. His current research and writing focus primarily on children's natural ways of learning and the life-long value of play.*

