

### ***A Review of “Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul” by Stuart Brown with Christopher Vaughan (2009). The Penguin Group: New York.***

*Reviewed by Dr. Terry Long, Northwest Missouri State University*

Book reviews often consist of a chapter by chapter summary and critique of the information presented within the book. After reading through “Play” for the first time, I decided to take a different approach. The authors, who are both extremely well respected authorities in the realm of play related theory and research, bombard the reader with various informative and enlightening discussions from both a practical and a research perspective. For a therapeutic recreation professional, this dialog encourages a fresh perspective on many of the fundamental concepts and philosophies that represent who we are and what we do. These discussions are invigorating and, for me personally, a reminder of the core beliefs and values that drive my work.

As I worked my way through the chapters, I realized my framework for interpreting the provided information was shifting back and forth. Even though I started out with the primary goal of determining the books relevance to therapeutic recreation, I quickly began to find relevance from various “personal” perspectives. I could see applicability as a student, an educator, a parent, a researcher, and even an individual trying to make the most of my own life. Now, this is a bit of a paradox, because it could be argued that these roles are all relevant to our profession, but they are also only directly accessible, from an experiential perspective, to the person who lives them. After pondering this broad applicability, I decided that each of these perspectives should be addressed, as failing to do so would undermine the true value of the presented material. Thus, each of the following sections is meant to provide insight into how the book might be useful from various perspectives; however, each perspective also appears to be relevant to practice and research within the therapeutic recreation profession as well.

#### ***For the Parent and Child***

Obviously, a book on play should be relevant to parents and the children they are responsible for raising, as well as anyone else who touches the daily lives of these kids. This particular book definitely lives up to this expectation. A significant amount of discussion is provided in an effort to make the point that play is a critical part of human development and that a lack of play can threaten one’s well being. The authors draw from a mix of both animal and human play research to provide a convincing argument that play provides us the ability to “become smarter, to learn more about the world than genes alone could ever teach, to adapt to a changing world”.

They also provide a moving discussion on how the child of today is dealing with an environment that stifles free play. For example, the academic world has become dominated by a “rote, skills-as-drills” approach to learning that targets improved test scores. Furthermore, this is often done at the expense of “non-essential” programs like music and art, which are inherently characterized by creativity and personal expression. Likewise, overly structured and pressure driven sport and recreation environments threaten the provision of free play experiences for today’s kids.

Finally, a very informative discussion of how various types of play contribute to child development. As an example, the importance of rough and tumble play as a means of learning about the normal give and take necessary for social mastery is discussed, as well as the potential consequences of depriving youngsters of this rambunctious experience (e.g., poor problem solving and decision making, poor control of violent impulses later in life). If nothing else, these discussions remind us that the potential dangers of play (e.g., a blackened eye or broken window) are well worth the lessons learned in the long run. The following quote from the authors illustrates this point.

We may think we are helping to prepare our kids for the future when we organize all their time, when we continually ferry them from one adult-organized, adult-regulated activity to another. And, of course, to some degree these activities do promote culturally approved behavior as well as reinforce our role as “good” parents. But in fact we may be taking from them the time they need to discover for themselves their most vital talents and knowledge. We may be depriving them of access to their inner motivation for an activity that will later blossom into a motive force for life. . . . Part of being a good parent is learning to accept the limitations of our ability to make our kids safe, successful and happy. We should strive for these things, but eventually they will grow and learn to be on their own (we all hope). All parents need to foster that internally driven, self directed play that will allow children to become secure and self-confident on their own (p. 105, 108)

### ***For the Adult***

The authors also provide a very informative discussion on how play continues to serve us as adults. Included is an interesting dialog on how the extended adolescent period of humans allows for continued play and, therefore, development opportunities. College is an example of this extended opportunity, with as much being gained outside the classroom as inside. Unfortunately, society tends to discourage free play in adults, as play is considered by many the opposite of work and work tends to be the primary focus of many adults. The authors argue that play is not separate from work, but that play is essential for finding satisfaction in work. This play element manifests through opportunities for creativity, innovation, mastery, and the ability to find play-related motives within our work.

There is also a discussion of the tendency to “lose” play as adults, as we become absorbed in grown up responsibilities. The lack of understanding within our society regarding the human need for play ultimately encourages individuals to abandon the things that provide enjoyment, as we are guilted into avoiding playful behavior in pursuit of achievement, success, notoriety, and money. Work begins to dominate our conscious thought and identity, and becomes a burden rather than a source for satisfaction, ultimately leading us to question our own choices and purpose. The book ultimately ends with a list of suggestions for reengaging playfulness, and the presentation of several case examples helps illustrate how play contributes to our enjoyment of life as adults and how we can break away from play deprivation as adults.

### ***For the Therapist***

The therapeutic implications regarding the content of this book are multifaceted. There is significant applicability, in particular to therapeutic recreation practice, as is illustrated in much of the above information regarding children, parents, and adults. To elaborate on these assertions, several points are made here. First off, the authors provide a general description of play that is, for the most part, consistent with therapeutic recreation literature, with emphasis being placed on freedom, choice, intrinsic motivation, and mastery. The authors remind us of the value of free, or unstructured play, where children and adults determine their own path, make their own decisions, and are given the opportunity to succeed, fail, or just experience. As therapeutic recreation professionals, we should regularly remind ourselves of this philosophy, and educate others about the benefits of true play opportunities within the therapeutic environment.

Furthermore, this book provides various suggestions, either directly or indirectly, for maximizing opportunities for beneficial play within the therapeutic environment. Various sections of the book could be used directly with clients as a form of bibliotherapy, allowing them to contemplate the role of play in their own lives. Specific activities for exploring these concepts are also mentioned throughout the book. Potential pitfalls of play (i.e., harmful play) are discussed, as well as distinguishing between true play and self destructive behaviors disguised as play. While this book is not intended to provide direct guidance or protocols for therapeutic intervention, any professionals exploring its contents will undoubtedly find the presented information to be useful in various ways.

### ***For the Researcher***

One of the most enlightening realizations that I had from reviewing this text is that our approach to research, as a profession, is too narrow. Rarely is the abundance of play-related research presented by the authors utilized in the professional writing or research of our profession. It may be that we are so fixated on documenting outcomes within a convoluted and multidimensional practice environment that we often ignore existing or potential research that draws more direct connections between the core elements of our practice (i.e., play and leisure) and desirable outcomes. Ironically, we may be able to find a more “playful” opportunity in our research if we would think more broadly about how it pertains to our profession.

As an example, the authors point out that those who participate in cognitive play activities such as puzzles, reading, or engaging in mentally challenging work have been found to have much lower chances (63% lower) of developing Alzheimer’s disease. Extensive discussion is provided regarding such existing observations that would no doubt help provide a more comprehensive understanding of how therapeutic recreation interventions may be effectively implemented.

In another example, the authors describe animal research findings demonstrating that rough and tumble play can reduce inappropriate hyperplayfulness and impulsivity in rats with frontal lobe damage. They go on to suggest the examination of this relationship in humans. Again, there are various discussion starters such as this throughout the book that the researcher may find engaging as they consider potential areas for future research. In short, this book makes a persuasive argument that play is a critical part of development, and therefore, would have preventative and therapeutic application. Therapeutic recreation researchers and practitioners would benefit from becoming more familiar with this body of literature and integrating it into their own work.

### ***For the Student and Educator***

As an educator, I strongly believe that this book would be extremely informative for students in therapeutic recreation. It ties together many of the theoretical concepts presented in the typical therapeutic recreation curriculum. It also provides new perspectives on this material and challenges the reader to integrate their current understanding of play, leisure, and therapeutic recreation with the presented concepts. While not every element of the book will be directly relevant to the presented curriculum, I do believe that there is very little information that is not useful in their overall development as a professional. Most importantly, “Play” is a book that is directly aimed at many of the philosophical cornerstones of therapeutic recreation, with emphasis being placed on the inherent freedom that is necessary for a true play or leisure experience.