

Childlike Play is Affected by Traumatic Experience

Dave Ziegler, Ph.D.

The primary task of every child comes down to two essential activities: playing and learning. These two activities are not mutually exclusive and both are enhanced by the other. New developments in brain research appear to indicate that children never lose their ability to learn, even under the worst of circumstances the child is learning either positive or negative lessons from their experiences and their environment. However the ability to play is entirely a different matter.

The most admirable and attractive trait of a child is their “childlike” approach to the world. Although children go through intense socialization to mature and ‘act your age’ (often meaning ‘act older than you are’), childhood can be a truly magically time of life where possibilities are endless and enjoyment can be found everywhere the child looks. Adults admire the ability of children to take in the world with openness and enthusiasm. The spontaneity of childhood is something many adults long for after this approach to life is acculturated out of them as they grow older.

However, childhood can be a tragic time of life for the many children who experience significant trauma in their early years. While the ability to learn from experiences, despite how negative these may be, continues throughout childhood, the ability to experience childlike play is often a casualty of the trauma. The loss of childlike play is often a serious outgrowth of trauma. The importance of returning a sense of childlike playfulness is the subject of this article.

What is childlike play?

Play may be the most important aspect of living that has no utilitarian purpose. Play is both an activity and a goal. Play is the purest form of re-creation or reinstating a sense of wholeness and well-being. Healthy children are either playing or looking for the next opportunity to do so. A child approaches play as a natural and necessary part of living. It is simply what they want to do and they seldom appear to get tired of it, although for everything else in life they seem to have a short attention span and can become quickly bored. For most children many activities of living take away energy—school work, cleaning their room, doing chores around the house. However play, regardless of how energetic, gives energy back to the child. Adults refer to such activity as recreation, meaning an activity that helps us re-create ourselves and gives us more enthusiasm for living.

True childlike play is not about competition and winning and losing. In fact, children must learn the concept of playing with someone else and coming out ahead or behind, like in nearly all adult games. For children play is engagement in life and in connecting with others. To be involved in play is fun but it is even better to play with playmates. Children who show no interest in social play raise concerns.

Why play is important for children

We are beginning to learn just how good of a job the human brain can do to promote physical and emotional healing. In fact it appears that humans are preset to not only survive but to thrive throughout life (Diener & Diener, 1995). Just as people often lose the ability to enjoy living, they also gradually lose innate abilities to self-heal. For this reason childlike play should be encouraged for all children and specifically for children who have faced traumatic experiences.

Childlike play is creative, it is imaginative and it is nearly always active. Play is engrossing, and all consuming. The child gets lost in play and loses the sense of time and all too often play must be discontinued for the boring and mundane aspects of living such as eating, bathing and sleeping. During childlike play the individual is focused on the process or playful act and not on the self or actor. In this way play is the antithesis to stressful activity.

Play encourages children to use their imagination, an important way that the child's brain develops. There are many other aspects of childhood play that teach children about issues such as roles, relationships, social interaction, the needs of others, and resolving conflict (or not). Even to address the question of why play is important for children is to miss the point somewhat. Play is a natural state of being for a child, it is what a child does. It is how a child learns to communicate and interact with others. The question of why, is similar to asking why fish swim or birds fly—there may be utility in these activities but at the deepest level it is what they do. Play is what children do, that is unless they have been damaged by some form of traumatic experience.

How the ability to play is lost

The stress of traumatic experiences does immediate damage to a child's ability to engage in childlike play. Although some neuron-scientists identify the loss of self-regulation as the most pervasive impact of trauma (van der Kolk, 1996), the loss of childlike play comes before this and is even more pervasive. The reasons for this are numerous but begin with the definition of traumatic experience itself. Trauma is any experience that overrides the individual's ability to cope with the situation (Ziegler, 2000). When trauma occurs the human brain is faced with the primary issue it is designed to immediately address—a threat to survival. As soon as the brain identifies a survival threat, all brain functions are immediately targeted toward a response to the threat. This process takes place through the stress response cycle of perceiving and then responding with the fight or flight mechanism. When the brain recognizes a survival threat the hippocampus signals corticotrophin release factor that prompts the pituitary and adrenal glands of the body to release adrenaline, epinephrine and cortisol enabling the fight or flight response (Ziegler, 2008).

The experience of traumatic stress can be considered the polar opposite of childlike play. Where play is imaginative, expressive and expanding by nature, stress is restricting, protective and confining for the individual. Play produces dopamine, a neuro-transmitter associated with a sense of well-being, while traumatic stress produces hormones that put the brain and autonomic nervous system on red alert producing fear and even terror.

Even more concerning than immediate impacts of trauma are the long range impacts of traumatic stress on childlike play. Unlike most adults who generally can sense when a threat has passed, children often do not accurately perceive the termination of a survival threat. The child's brain is so fundamentally designed to react to traumatic stress that it changes both perceptual experience and literally changes its structure (Ziegler, 2002). Lasting changes in the brain are designed to respond to any future threats. Unfortunately children misperceive future threats and become stuck in a continual cycle of perceiving and reacting to traumatic stress (van der Kolk, 1996).

Play must be a part of recovery and treatment of trauma

Trauma strikes at the very foundation of being a child in a world where physical and emotional survival requires receiving the protection of caring and supportive adults. When a child experiences a threat to his or her survival, the child cannot afford to delegate vigilance to adults who may or may not provide the needed protection. These children believe they must assume responsibility for their own safety. The result is that the child must move from enjoyment to vigilance and from imaginative play to continual scanning the environment for any hints of concern, which they all too often find, whether the threat is real or perceived.

Although it has been known for sometime that traumatic experiences adversely affect childlike play, little attention has been given to the role play should have in the treatment and healing of trauma. This oversight must be rectified in the homes, treatment programs and schools where traumatized children struggle to get by each day.

The primary message of this article is that childlike play does not come naturally to children following traumatic experiences; in fact, play violates the priority of the child's brain. Without intervention, trauma does not improve with time, on the contrary it often heightens in serious symptomology. A hypervigilient young child can become an isolated depressed older child. The social requirements of successful living become more complex and difficult as the child matures and traumatized children are ill-equipped to negotiate this complexity successfully.

When children lose their ability to engage in childlike play they change an opportunity into a vulnerability. If the child's brain misses the opportunity to develop essential components of imaginative enjoyment and stress reduction, instead the brain becomes vulnerable to high levels of overwhelming traumatic stress that results in the loss of enjoyment and positive social contact as well as fearfulness that overtime has been linked to auto-immune disorders and physical disease (Felitti, 1998).

Play must become as big a priority for traumatized children as learning social skills, receiving immunizations, and psychological treatment. In a real way, childlike play provides the child with aspects of all three of these elements. Play is one of the best ways for children to learn social skills because children learn best when having fun. Immunizations build the immune system of the body and positive brain develop can support marshaling the body's defenses. Psychological treatment is designed to help the child regain a sense of self and the positive components of childlike play do the same. Therefore play is treatment in its purest form.

But my traumatized child plays all the time

It is important not to assume that a traumatized child is actively involved in childlike play. Close inspection will often result in noticing that play activity may be taking place but it is anything but childlike in nature. Traumatized children do engage in play activities but bring into their play the stress they feel in all aspects of life. Play often becomes totally focused on winning and losing. Control become critical, they become obsessed with rules and attempt to alter the process so they do not come out the losers. These children often get into conflicts, with the play activity ending with unpleasant social conflict. Each time these types of play occur, the child is one more step removed from childlike play.

Recommendations concerning childlike play

Since play is adversely affected after traumatic experience, the question becomes how to help the child develop or regain a childlike sense of play. The place to begin is to first recognize the child's need for the benefits that childlike play provides. Most adults assume that play comes naturally for children. Since play comes naturally to most non-traumatized children but being serious does not, parents primarily stress responsibility and accountability. When parents of traumatized children stress serious issues and not play, they can make the problem worse. Beyond this important awareness, there are other suggested steps including the following:

Teaching the child to play—these children nearly always lose the understanding of what pure play is and how to go about it, so play must be specifically taught. This can be more challenging for adults than it may sound. Adults are much better at teaching a child to be serious, responsible and more 'grown up.' To teach a child to play, adults need to consider what childlike play entails and assist the child to do what does not come naturally.

Integrating play in daily living--we must integrate childlike play into all aspects of the lives of children who have experienced significant trauma. At home, play needs to be a part of weekend activities as well as week day activities. In school, play needs to be encouraged both at recess and in the classroom. Children learn more when they are enjoying the learning experience.

Modeling play--We must model childlike because child learn best through modeling. Modeling requires the adult to regain the ability to engage in activities that are enjoyable and have no specific purpose other than to have fun. Such activities are as valuable for the adult as for the child.

Assessing the child ability to play--we must observe whether playfulness is something a child is capable of and whether they gravitate to playful experiences. When we assess, we can also determine if the child is improving with our help and interventions.

Promoting childlike play--we must design environments for traumatized children that encourage not only responsibility, good decisions, moral reasoning and other 'adult-like' traits, but also silliness, laughter, expression of all types and childhood enjoyment.

Finally we must recognize that if we allow traumatized children to grow up without childlike play, we are allowing them to head into adulthood without the natural experience of finding the fun and enjoyable aspects of all parts of living. To do so would make us complicit in the trauma the child has already experienced.

References

Diener, E., & Diener, C. (1995). Cross-cultural correlates of life satisfaction and self-satisfaction and self-esteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68, 653-663.

Felitti, V.J., Anda, R.F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D.F., Spitz, A.M., Edwards, V., & Koss, M.P. (1998). The relationship of adult health status to childhood abuse and household dysfunction. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14, 245-258.

Van der Kolk, B. A., McFarlane A.C. & Weisaeth, L. (Eds.) (1996). Traumatic stress: the effects of overwhelming experience on mind, body, and society. New York, Guilford Press, 214-241.

Ziegler, D.L. (2000). *Raising Children Who Refuse To Be Raised, Parenting Skills and Therapy Interventions For The Most Difficult Children*. Phoenix: Acacia Publishing.

Ziegler, D.L. (2002). *Traumatic Experience And The Brain, A Handbook For Understanding And Treating Those Traumatized As Children*. Phoenix: Acacia Publishing.

Ziegler, D.L. (2008). *Beyond Healing, the Path to Personal Contentment after Trauma*. Phoenix: Acacia Publishing.