

Free to LEARN



*Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will
Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant,
and Better Students for Life*

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"WE WERE SO INDEPENDENT, we were given so much freedom. But now it's impossible to imagine giving that to a child today. It's one of the great losses as a society." It's not just a great loss; it's a tragic and cruel loss. Children are designed, by nature, to play and explore on their own, independently of adults. They need freedom in order to de-

velop; without it they suffer. The drive to play freely is a basic, biological drive. Lack of free play may not kill the physical body, as would lack of food, air, or water, but it kills the spirit and stunts mental growth. Free play is the means by which children learn to make friends, overcome their fears, solve their own problems, and generally take control of their own lives. It is also the primary means by which children practice and acquire the physical and intellectual skills that are essential for success in the culture in which they are growing. Nothing that we do, no amount of toys we buy or “quality time” or special training we give our children, can compensate for the freedom we take away. The things that children learn through their own initiatives, in free play, cannot be taught in other ways.

We are pushing the limits of children’s adaptability. We have pushed children into an abnormal environment, where they are expected to spend ever greater portions of their day under adult direction, sitting at desks, listening to and reading about things that don’t interest them, and answering questions that are not their own and are not, to them, real questions. We leave them ever less time and freedom to play, explore, and pursue their own interests.

I’m an evolutionary developmental psychologist. That means that I study child development from a Darwinian perspective. I’m particularly interested in those aspects of children’s nature that equip them to learn, on their own initiatives, what they must in order to survive and do well in the culture into which they are born. Stated differently, I am interested in the biological foundations of education. To this end, I have studied education as it occurred in the original kinds of human societies, hunter-gatherer societies, where there was nothing like schools, and children always took charge of their own learning. I have also studied education as it currently occurs at a remarkable alternative school near my home in Massachusetts, where hundreds of children and adolescents have educated themselves successfully through self-directed activities, with no adult-imposed curriculum or testing. In addition, I have looked at education in families that practice a version of homeschooling called “unschooling,” and I have looked deeply into

and contributed to the biological and psychological research on the functions of play.

All of this work tells a remarkably consistent and surprising story, a story that defies modern, mainstream beliefs about education. Children are biologically predisposed to take charge of their own education. When they are provided with the freedom and means to pursue their own interests, in safe settings, they bloom and develop along diverse and unpredictable paths, and they acquire the skills and confidence required to meet life's challenges. In such an environment, children ask for any help they may need from adults. There is no need for forced lessons, lectures, assignments, tests, grades, segregation by age into classrooms, or any of the other trappings of our standard, compulsory system of schooling. All of these, in fact, interfere with children's natural ways of learning.

This is a book about children's natural instincts to educate themselves, about the environmental conditions required for those instincts to operate optimally, and about how we, as a society, can provide those conditions at far less expense than what we currently spend on schools. The drive to play is a huge part of children's natural means for self-education, so a portion of this book is about the power of play. In this first chapter, however, I assess the damage we are causing through our present treatment of children. Over the past half century or more we have seen a continuous erosion of children's freedom to play and, corresponding with that, a continuous decline in young people's mental and physical health. If this trend continues, we are in serious danger of producing generations of future adults who cannot find their own way in life.

THE PLAY-FILLED LIVES OF HUNTER-GATHERER CHILDREN

HALFWAY AROUND THE WORLD, and far removed from the educational pressures that act on Evan and Hank, we find Kwi, also eleven, who is growing up in a culture that trusts children's instincts and judgment. Kwi lives in a hunting-and-gathering band in Africa's Kalahari Desert, part of a cultural group called the Ju/'hoansi. He has no school and no fixed schedule. He gets up when he is fully awake, and he spends his days as he likes, playing and exploring with his age-mixed group of friends, sometimes in camp, sometimes well away from camp, without adult direction. He has been doing this since he was four, the age when, according to Ju/'hoan adults, children can reason and control themselves and no longer need to stay close to adults. Every day brings new adventures, new opportunities for learning.

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WHY SCHOOLS ARE WHAT THEY ARE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF EDUCATION

HOW DID WE GET FROM KWI TO EVAN? How did we go from conditions in which learning was self-directed and joyful to conditions in which learning is forced on children in ways that make so many of them feel helpless, anxious, and depressed?

When we see that children today are required by law to go to school, that almost all schools are structured in the same way, and that our society goes to a great deal of trouble and expense to provide such schools, we naturally assume that there must be some good, logical reason for all of this. Perhaps if we didn't force children to go to school, or if schools operated differently, children would grow up to be incompetent in our

SEVEN SINS OF OUR SYSTEM OF FORCED EDUCATION

CHILDREN GENERALLY DON'T LIKE SCHOOL. As if it needed confirming, a large-scale research study conducted a few years ago showed that children are less happy in school than in any other setting where they spend significant amounts of time each week.¹ When children do like school, it's usually because of the friends they meet there, not because of the lessons. Children's dislike of school is a national joke, not just in our nation but wherever children are forced by law to go to school. It's standard fare in the comic strips, where the first day of school each year is one of mourning for kids and joy for parents (who are apparently tired of having their kids around) and the last day is the reverse. And yet, if adults were treated as children are in school, nobody would find it funny.

Not long ago I read the book *Why Don't Students Like School?* by cognitive scientist Daniel T. Willingham. The book had received rave

LESSONS FROM SUDBURY VALLEY: MOTHER NATURE CAN PREVAIL IN MODERN TIMES

IN THE EARLY TO MID-1960s, Daniel Greenberg was a young professor, first in physics and then in history, at Columbia University and a rising star in the newly developing field of history of science. Everyone who knew him predicted a long, stellar academic career. Greenberg was also a popular teacher, and it was teaching that got him thinking about something that seemed even more important than the new translation of Aristotle he had been working on. Undergraduates claimed they loved his courses, but he couldn't help but observe the passive approach they took to their studies. Here, even in this Ivy League school, students taking physics or history seemed motivated to get the highest

THE HUMAN EDUCATIVE INSTINCTS

ON JANUARY 29, 1999, Sugata Mitra, then science director of an educational technology firm in India, initiated a fascinating experiment on children's capacity for self-education. He turned on a computer he had installed on an outside wall of the building where he worked, facing one of the poorest slums in New Delhi—it was a community where most children were unschooled and illiterate, and had never previously seen a computer. Mitra turned the computer on, left it on, and told the children who crowded around that they could play with it. He then used a permanently installed video camera to monitor activity around the computer.

Children, mostly between the ages of seven and thirteen, immediately began to explore this odd installment, which looked to them like some kind of television set. They touched some of the parts and, by ac-