

Play and Public Life

BY ALISON KADLEC

I first heard Stuart Brown, the nation's leading expert on the science of play and the founder of the National Institute for Play, on the NPR show "Speaking of Faith," and the interview stopped me in my tracks. Brown is a medical doctor and scientific researcher, whose work has been featured in cover stories from *National Geographic* to the *New York Times Magazine*. He wrote the recent book *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*. In the course of this interview about the spiritual dimensions of play, Brown told story after story illuminating an uncanny connection between forms of play and development of fundamental life competencies, such as problem solving, imagination, social intelligence, and emotional resiliency.

Brown told a story about a seemingly doomed sled dog saving its own life by initiating play with a hungry, predatory polar bear (and he directed listeners to the photographs in his book that captured this amazing event).

He told of engineering firms giving hiring preference to job candidates who tinkered with machines for fun, because those who had played with their hands as kids and adults possessed far stronger practical problem-solving skills than their counterparts who merely excelled at theoretical mathematics.

He told stories about play-deprived lab rats entering adulthood unable to tell friend from foe and lacking the skills to mate properly. He told stories of play-deprived children who became mass murderers as adults, and stories of play-deprived adults who have difficulty coping with the normal stresses of life and experience various forms of depression.

By drawing on studies of social mammals, psychological profiles of criminals, and the rapidly mounting body of evidence that neuroscientists are amassing in the field of play science, Brown painted a compelling picture of play as an essential component of human survival and thriving.

As I listened to Brown talk about the tremendous importance of play both for children and adults, two

separate chords were struck in me—one personal and one professional.

On the personal side, as a relatively new parent, I have spent the last year and a half getting a daily education in the power of play. By forcing me to get down on the floor and be silly every day, my toddler has shown me how restorative pure play can be. Not only have I watched in awe as she begins to put the world together through play, but it's been equally powerful for me to become aware of the impact that playing with her has on my own experiencing of the world. This tiny person has helped me learn how to clear my mind of daily worries and just give myself over to purposeless, joyful play; this experience has also led me to seek out new forms of play for myself that have had a significant positive impact on how I cope with the stresses of being a working mom in New York City. Listening to Brown talk about the relationship between lifelong play and human thriving helped bring into focus a number of powerful ideas that had been percolating, but largely formless, in my mind since the birth of my daughter.

As I continued to listen to Brown talk about the serious personal and societal consequences of play deprivation in childhood and adulthood, it dawned on me that the lessons of play science may have profound implications not only for individuals but also for our democracy at large. As a Deweyan pragmatist and public engagement practitioner, I was especially taken with the notion that different forms of play help all social mammals, but especially humans, develop the mental and emotional capacity to navigate a complex, changing environment. Through play we learn empathy, flexibility, creativity, optimism, and communicative openness, and in the absence of play we become narrowed in our thinking, brittle in our emotional responses, and more likely to misread social cues and view others with fear and hostility. For Deweyan pragmatists, deliberative democratic theorists, public engagement practitioners, advocates of citizen-centered politics, and others in the vibrant and growing "democracy movement" in the United States, play science may have a great deal to offer.

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For those of us who believe that “ordinary” people should be treated as vital resources and as partners in public problem solving and community building, democracy cannot be judged merely by the quality of its formal institutions. It must also be judged according to particular habits it encourages citizens to cultivate (though I wish it could go without saying, it is important to clarify that the term *citizen* here refers to any person living in and taking part in the life of her or his community, regardless of national origin or legal status). From this perspective, just as important as free elections are the habits of mind, inquiry, and action that inspire individuals to participate thoughtfully in public life, to take part in charting our shared course. In practice, this means cultivating habits of critical reflection and communicative skills that allow us to creatively and collaboratively navigate an irreducibly plural world fraught with complex shared problems that are experienced in myriad ways under the permanent condition of radical uncertainty. The idea that seemingly purposeless and trivial forms of play can inspire development of critical democratic skills and habits in both children and adults is compelling indeed, and it has potentially far-reaching significance for how we think about the quality of civic life.

In short, play science may open wholly new avenues of inquiry for advocates of deliberative democracy who seek to (1) challenge the hostile partisan rhetoric that dominates American politics and (2) transform our political culture from one that views citizens as spectators or consumers into one that treats citizens (and in which citizens view themselves) as partners in public life. Play science may also help us think more clearly about what it means to educate kids for success in life, and about the methods we use to inspire a sense of civic responsibility in the next generation of citizens, who will be tasked with both the problems inherited from previous generations and those that arise anew.

Because Brown does not specifically take up issues of civic health in his work, I decided to track him

down and ask for his help in connecting the dots between play science and public life. I had the good fortune to speak with him at length and begin a conversation that I hope to continue. Here is a first pass at exploring the relationship between play science and public life, resulting from that initial conversation. Rather than presenting a complete transcript of our conversation, which took many turns and covered a surprisingly large swath of conceptual ground, I have selectively pulled pieces together from our conversation, from email exchanges, and from his book to create a rough sketch of the significance of play science for democratic theory and practice.

Setting the Stage

Prior to our conversation, I told Brown in an email that I was interested in exploring the relationship between play science and civic health, and he offered a list of four principles he thought connected play science and democracy: perseverance, optimism, fairness, and handicapping (“leveling the playing field”). Although an unconventional list in some respects, I found that these principles resonated interestingly with what I take as the fundamental skills associated with Dewey’s “democracy as a way of life”: flexibility of mind, creative imagination, social intelligence, and collaborative inquiry. By virtue of being individual traits, Brown’s principles of perseverance and optimism seem to be necessary conditions for development of the Deweyan traits of flexibility of mind and creative imagination. In turn, by virtue of their fundamental social or intersubjective nature, fairness and handicapping seem to be principles on which social intelligence and collaborative inquiry may be generated and sustained.

By way of simplification, prior to our conversation I condensed the loosely associated principles and skills of democracy into two related categories of inquiry associated with civic health that seemed, from our initial email exchanges, to have special significance with respect to play science: problem solving and social capital. For the purposes of setting the stage for our conversation, I treated problem solving as the umbrella under which optimism, perseverance, flexibility of mind, and creative imagination were placed, while social capital became the umbrella concept under which fairness, handicap-

ping, social intelligence, and collaborative inquiry were tentatively placed. By taking this initial stab at connecting some of the dots between Brown's list of democratic principles and my own view of civic competencies, I set the scene to dive into the question at hand: What does play science have to teach us about the nature of civic health and the conditions of its realization?

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In the remainder of this article, I weave pieces of our conversation with reflections on the key traits and principles of democracy in order to sketch the contours of what play science has to offer those of us who have a personal and professional interest in improving the quality of civic life and the culture of decision making in this country.

Play and Problem Solving

AK: I'd like to know more about the relationship between play and development of an individual's problem-solving capacities. In your book you say that play "seems to be one of the most advanced methods nature has invented to allow a complex brain to create itself." You go on to say that "the great benefits of play . . . are the ability to become smarter, to learn more about the world than genes alone could ever teach, and to adapt to a changing world" and that "the genius of play is that, in playing, we create imaginative new cognitive combinations. And in creating those novel combinations, we find what works." Tell me more about this, because it seems to have deep significance for how I understand the nature and significance of problem solving as an indispensable skill in a democracy. From my perspective as a Deweyan and public engagement practitioner, there is hardly anything more important for a democracy than a citizenry that is capable of incorporating new information and willing to do so in order to think creatively about solutions to difficult shared problems.

SB: Let's go back to kids. Say you've got four five-year-olds, and they're trying to make sense of their

world—the big people, the seasons, animals. They're engaging in the world as very incomplete but curious and safe little kids. What goes on in their mind's eye, if they are in the process of going on a walk and exploring a flower or a bee or a local dog or something and you listen to their dialogue and don't interfere with it? You'll find that they will be making up pretend real stories about everything they see. They are combining spontaneous imaginative involvement with the environment they're seeing, attempting to cope with it in that way—attempting to create an internal narrative that gives them, at their limited level of development, enough sense and enough stories so they're comfortable. This is a form of play that helps them cope with their environment.

Usually, you will find that those stories are about 50 percent off the wall, imaginative and their own concoction, and 50 percent maybe related to the reality of what's out in front of them. They're living in this balance between fantasy and reality, and this is the means by which play and imagination become problem solving.

The neuroscientists I talk with see play as a "fundamental organizer" of very complex emergent systems in the brain. The kinds of qualities that we would say are best achieved in a really competent, mature adult are often achieved in the slow process of integrating play with reality in the rest of the world. Resiliency, the ability to handle unexpected things, emotional competence, empathy, the ability to solve problems, creativity, imagination—these are built through play.

AK: And this process of combining real and make-believe as a way of figuring out what works and what's possible, doesn't end in childhood, right? It's also something we continue to do as adults?

SB: This process continues throughout our lives. As a therapist, I listened to a lot of people with their fantasies and their dreams and their associations. We all have a continuing process of problem solving that we do through making up stories that combine pretend and real. We all still do it as adults; it is how we cope in the world.

I asked you before what you were planning to do with the material from this interview and you didn't

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really know. You had some ideas and I had some ideas, but none of that is real yet and we really don't know what we're going to do with it yet—we're just making it up as we go along, telling stories, imagining possibilities, and somewhere in this process of back and forth we'll come up with something that works, and do it.

AK: For me, this brings up two distinct ideas that I'd like to deal with in turn. First, the idea you bring up in the book and elsewhere that humans are built to play for life—and not just during childhood—makes especially good sense if we understand that play helps us develop problem-solving skills. I'd like you to talk a little more about that. Second, the back and forth that you describe is intrinsically communicative and social; we could all do it on our own, but there's something about doing it together that makes it a vibrant process. First, I'd like to ask you to talk more about the value of lifelong play so that I can connect the dots to civic life, but then I'd like to turn to the social dimensions of play.

Regarding the importance of lifelong play, in the book and elsewhere you talk about “neoteny,” the scientific term for stretching the juvenile period and retention of juvenile characteristics into adulthood. For anyone who remembers their own teen years clearly, or is currently living with a teenager, the idea of extended adolescence does not intuitively sound like a good idea, but you say that “since early development is a time when the nervous system is most ‘plastic,’ an advantage that neoteny bestows is extended openness to change, and sustained curiosity, as well as the ability to readily incorporate new information.” You go on to make the bold pronouncement that neoteny “is a boon to humans: it has allowed us to come down out of the trees and live anywhere on the planet. We are designed by nature and evolution to continue playing throughout life.”

The idea that curiosity and open-mindedness are essential components, along with creative imagination, of problem solving is compelling indeed, and it certainly connects with how Deweyan democrats think about the role of problem solving in effective citizenship. I think I have a clearer sense of how play helps us build our problem-solving muscles, but I'm curious to know more about the consequences of play deprivation. Everywhere we look, society tells us that play is for children and that adults must put childish things aside in order to be sufficiently serious and responsible adults. If, as you say, “we are designed to be lifelong players, to benefit from play at any age,” what are the consequences of play deprivation for adults and are there societal implications?

SB: I think that there are complex historic and cultural pressures that have led to suppression not necessarily of a lot of play behavior but of the feeling that play is valuable, particularly in adulthood. The force of playfulness is so intense that you have to really work to suppress it in kids. As you get into adolescence and adulthood, the drive to play is less. It's not gone, but because you can survive in life without it, which you can't do with sleep and food, it can be attenuated or displaced or diminished and we still can survive. But there's a unanimity among developmental psychologists, evolutionary biologists, neuroscientists, animal play experts, and others that play has a huge contribution to make to well-being in adulthood.

Adults, for example, who have either forgotten or lost its joys, or put play in their back pocket, are people who, as a result of their own adult play deprivation regardless of how much play they may have had as kids, will be rigid, narrow in their thinking, brittle in their response to stress, and much less open to handling the curve balls life throws us. Let's say the play-deprived adult is in a hurry and somebody cuts them off in traffic. This person is much more likely to have a rage reaction than the one who's play-saturated, who's still in a hurry but can sort of roll with the punches when something like that happens.

The dictum I put in the book, which comes from Brian Sutton-Smith, is that “the opposite of play is not work, it's depression,” and I think it's really accurate. If you're on the low end of joy, and not

experiencing the benefits of play, then you're not going to handle the normal stresses of waiting in line or being cut off in traffic or having your computer crash or your kid coming in and giving you a bad time. You're just not going to have the flexibility of responses if you are and have been without playfulness for a good long period of time.

I certainly see it from the play histories that I've taken from thousands of people that consequences of play deprivation personally are significant; communally they're significant, culturally they're significant. I can't always quantify that. I don't think there's a whole lot of controversy among scientists who study play that there is a major price to be paid for neglecting one's own play life. This is where the reservoir of emotional competency and resiliency that play fosters is so important.

The play science that I'm grounded in, which is largely the science of animal play—the animal ethology and the neuroscience of play behavior—is becoming more and more sophisticated. The research data form a very compelling story showing that the play impulse and normal, lifelong play are profoundly important for long-term species survival. By long-term, I'm talking maybe a hundred or two hundred thousand years. This is an evolutionary perspective of play, and that's not an easy thing for the average person to take on. That's not how we think of ourselves, or what we think of what play is. Yet this is what in the course of my now long lifetime has become a really compelling and clear path to understanding the importance of play behavior for the human species.

When you look at the trajectory of human development, you begin to see these really profound linkages showing humans as having an extremely sophisticated and intricate capacity for play, and this capacity is critical to being able to function effectively in the world.

AK: It's interesting—you talk about the individual consequences of play deprivation over the course of a lifetime, or the consequences of play deprivation for our species over the course of a thousand years, but I'm interested also in knowing about the specifically civic implications of play deprivation somewhere in between, perhaps over the course of a few

generations. Hearing you talk, I wonder how a good dose of playfulness or the elevation of playful ways of being in adult life might help inoculate citizens against the hostile, often vicious, partisan rhetoric that dominates our political culture. We should certainly talk about this more when we turn to the relationship between play and social capital, but on an individual level it seems that play science is telling us that preserving playfulness and making space for play in our adult lives, whether it's through telling jokes or playing sports, helps feed the part of ourselves that can handle the unexpected with flexibility, and remain curious about the world around us and perhaps even optimistic about our roles we might play in improving life in our communities.

This goes well beyond being able to shrug off a rude driver on the highway. It seems that this is also about how well we are able to deal with radical uncertainty. Life is complicated, problems are complicated, and we never have perfect certainty when we have to make decisions about what's best for our families, community, or nation. There are real and perceived conflicts of interest that need to be adjudicated in the context of this uncertainty. I'm curious to know more about how play might help equip us to deal with radical uncertainty and forge ahead in the difficult work of making sense of the problems we face in our communities and nation. Maybe a more concrete way of asking the question is: How does play equip us to deal with real conflicts of interest and collaborate with others across divides?

SB: I don't know if there's a simple and easy answer to this, but I think one of the things that play allows you to do is hold two conflicting kinds of processes or ideas in your mind and heart at the same time and not go nuts. There are paradoxes in the world that are insoluble, but play somehow allows you to juggle them so that you don't have to force everything to fit neatly. This is where I get a little cosmic about it. How do you handle the fact that light is wave and particle at the same time? How can light be a wave and a particle at the same time, and how can it be that it's the observer who determines which is which? I don't know, it's crazy, but that's the way the world is.

This is a crazy world, but the process of play allows us to deal with the craziness and allows generation

of solutions to problems. I see the evolution of play behavior over these millions of years as giving us a leg up on this crazy, paradoxical, difficult world. If you have a healthy play life, you can hold those paradoxes and still be able to sort of go with the flow and be flexible in your responses to things. In the absence of play, we meet life's paradoxes with brittleness and a rigidity that prevents us from really engaging.

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I tend to bring it back to the individual level, since that's where I focus, but maybe this is a start at answering your question: part of the reason kids are doing rough-and-tumble play all over the world is because it's preparing them for the kind of species survival we've had to do as a communal, cooperative, socially conscious species. At least that's how I look at it. Being linear and concrete and rigid does not often help us deal intelligently with radical uncertainty. Without play, we can't develop the resiliency that makes it possible to be an emotionally competent adult capable of solving problems in creative ways.

Play and Social Capital

AK: What you say about humans as a communal, cooperative, and socially conscious species suggests it's time to shift our conversation away from the individual's domain of problem solving and imagination and toward a more explicit exploration of what play science has to tell us about development of our social capacities. For our purposes here, I'm using the term social capital as a kind of umbrella for a number of civically significant concepts I'd like to discuss with you. In democratic theory and practice, social capital refers to the norms and networks of trust and reciprocity that make collaboration possible. As a Deweyan, I tend also to think of social intelligence as a key ingredient of social capital. By social intelligence I mean development of the part of

ourselves that (1) has a taste for communicative inquiry about problems of common concern, (2) is willing to have our views enriched or transformed through open communication with others, (3) is able to view our individual self-interest as implicated in the interests of others, and (4) enjoys the search for previously unknown points of shared interest across divides.

Connecting these somewhat complex concepts in democratic theory to the lessons of play science may be a bit difficult, but you say in your book that "playful interaction allows a penalty-free rehearsal of the normal give and take necessary in social groups" and this seems like a good toehold. Specifically, I'm curious to know what play science has to tell us about the nature of trust and how it can be generated across divides.

SB: Play is the icon of trust, and play signs that are preverbal are universal in social mammals. The play bow of a dog, for example—when that dog goes into a play bow and wags his or her tail, you know you're not going to be harmed. It is an icon of trust. It is the basis by which animals then develop within themselves a sense of safety and a sense of boundaries.

In the case of wolves and coyotes and other species in the wild, it is through play that the pack dynamic begins to take place, and that dynamic is what makes cooperative hunting possible. So, yes, the connections between play and trust and cooperation are clear, and they have implications for our communities. Play impulses allow social mammals to, as I would say, explore the possible. That's a huge gift from nature, and humans have got it too.

Trust is the core process that evokes and allows enough safety for play to take place, and play in turn allows us to experience the benefits of trust, such as cooperation and fairness and optimism. The play then moves naturally toward coping with more complex challenges the solution to which requires creativity and imagination. The degree of demand from the environment is in part modulated by our normal social development, so that we gradually are encultured as normal socially appropriate play ensues. Thus the give-and-take of play is one means of knowing your surroundings and knowing your boundaries, as a kid or an adult. The social pro-

cesses of play are intricate, but you learn not only who you can trust; you also learn the value of fairness. Kids have a tremendous aversion to somebody who's unfair. They won't play with somebody who's unfair, and it's through play that we learn that being unfair is unacceptable. This gets at something deeper and more common that we all share as a part of our humanity. So we've all got this. How we evoke it in a rapidly changing, commodified, pluralistic nation is really, really difficult.

Play and Political Culture

AK: As we begin to wrap up here, I'd like to turn to the contemporary social and political landscape, and have you talk a bit about the implications of play science for contemporary life in America. First I'd like to talk about political culture and to close I'd like you to talk a bit about your view of the implications of play science for how we educate kids for success in life.

As we all know, public cynicism about politics and politicians is rampant, trust in institutions is at an all-time low, and hostile partisan rhetoric dominates media depictions of political life. You say in your book, maybe in a slightly joking manner, that Congress appears to have a "major play deficiency in the area of socialization." It's a funny statement, but I suspect it's also quite serious. Can you talk more about this?

SB: I've enjoyed the company of a few good friends who are senators, representatives, governors, and have gotten to know them well enough in their private life to have some sense of what it's like for them to try and enact the best part of themselves in their work, which would be problem solving and community building. The partisanship that is so rampant right now evokes dominance and competitiveness, and it seems to me to bring out the worst in them. It's win or lose, with a prevailing ethos built around trying to see who's got the most power and who can prevail, rather than looking at how they can really take on these serious, major, complicated issues and deal with them. Play can make the difference between the need for dominance and fostering or inducing cooperation. Developmentally appropriate play teaches cooperation and allows us to go beyond ourselves.

My understanding of play, developed over a lifetime of study, is that if you're going to deal successfully with a changing world filled with unexpected things like global warming and economic crises, it is playful imagination that allows you to explore the possibilities together, to cooperate and come up with some solutions.

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Let's start with this contemporary political culture. Where are the greatest obstacles and opportunities with respect to incorporating the lessons of play science into political culture?

This is tough to answer simply. If no real overriding sense of belonging to a common community exists (which is a sentiment best learned in early play experiences), then communally satisfying outcomes may not occur. So some orientation experience as one enters Congress, for example, allowing a core *deeply felt* identity of belonging to the country first, constituents second, and not to lobbyists, may be central to introducing the benefits of play science to the existing political culture. Exploring the possible as a group collaboration requires sufficient personal safety (as seen with the sled dog and the polar bear via their shared play signaling) for that exploration to occur.

If you watch the developmental processes of healthy children, these things such as fairness, the ability to both win and lose without falling apart, and so on are taking place again and again in a developmentally appropriate and increasingly sophisticated pattern from which the competent adult begins to emerge into a responsible community participant with a sense of belonging. In the absence of play, both in childhood and adulthood, this developmental process is incomplete.

I don't know if this answers your question, but there is a kind of conviviality that used to characterize the social relationships in Congress, and it's been a long time since I was in the Senate dining room. You can't put foosball in the recreation spaces and expect

results; that is “forced playfulness” for many. But there are a number of ways to evoke playfulness. The paradox of play, though, is that you can’t go into a corporation, as I do, and just say “OK, you guys gotta play!” because the purposeless, joyful nature of play can’t be forced. But you can *evoke* playfulness, and you can help people reconnect with their own play impulses.

Take George Mitchell, for example. He has said that a lot of the problem solving he was able to do in brokering peace in Northern Ireland was because he was telling jokes at dinnertime. There are other vignettes like this that indicate there are some major differences that were resolved after the opposing sides had some fun together.

I think a state of play is very similar biologically to a state of sleep or dreams. It is something you get into, and when you get into it you’ve got a different level of consciousness and accessibility to imagination and to other ways of being and experiencing belonging or peacefulness or community. Ritual play, like music and dance, can evoke these experiences for individuals and communities. There seems to be a collective play urge that is a part of being human, that’s deeply ingrained in us as a social and communal need.

AK: By way of closing here, I’d like to ask you to reflect on what play science has to tell us about what it means to educate kids to become productive, responsible members of society who have a robust sense of civic agency and feel attached to the life of their communities.

SB: You can take this at a collective level or at a family level or at an interpersonal level and begin to see the effects of a play deficiency or play-insufficient culture on kids. I think I’d start out by saying we really need in every neighborhood and every school a sense of community belonging, and that play is an integral component of development of one’s capacity for belonging. In a commercial, commodified culture, there are a lot of kids for whom the inner life is less important to them and their parents than the toy that tells them how to react to it, and that kind of neglect of one’s inner life interferes with their development. When kids—or even adults—are being

entertained instead of actively engaging in forms of play, our capacity to develop a sense of belonging, or being a part of community, is diminished.

One of the things we didn’t talk about, but that to me is really significant, is to go back in your own mind’s eye (and the book says a little about this), to those most pure, joyful, and empowered experiences that you can remember when you were little. Then try to link them, if possible, to what you’re doing now. The sense of personal clarity and empowerment, which we all like to have in our lives, can often be amplified. I can’t see that there are any public officials who wouldn’t want to be more empowered and clear in using their talents. This is what we want as parents for our kids. It isn’t that we want them to necessarily have to get into Harvard. We want them to be competent and happy adults. I think play is certainly one of the keys to getting there. I don’t think that’s part of the way we typically think about the world, and it’s certainly not how our institutions are set up to educate kids.

The evidence is getting more and more solid that, for example, recess time increases long-term performance academically. It doesn’t diminish it. That increased imaginative time and fantasy time, ages three to five, is associated with a more imaginative adult. As I put it in the book, tinkering and using one’s hands to mess with things is also associated with a better capacity to problem solve in a changing and unexpected world than for those who don’t tinker. These are all byproducts of healthy play. The consciousness of that is present among some wonderful educators and others who have got it and who are enacting it in the schools, but the mainstream culture doesn’t get this at all.

Conclusion

In a recent *New York Times* blog titled “Let the Children Play (Some More),” Brown takes the opportunity at the start of this school year to call for “a change in public consciousness about play.” As the No Child Left Behind mandates continue to squeeze recess and physical education out of schools, and as kids and adults spend more and more time inert in front of computer and TV screens, our society appears to be paying the price

for play deficiencies. “Through the lens of play research,” he writes, “we can see that there is a direct line between play deficiencies and some frightening public health and social trends: tragic statistics for obesity, 4.5 million children diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, an increase in childhood depression and classroom behavioral problems involving violence, and an inability to interact well with peers.”

Although Brown does not suggest that all of these problems are simply the result of insufficient play time for children, he calls our attention to the mounting body of scientific evidence suggesting that our national attitude toward play needs to be rethought if we are to accomplish our educational aims and fulfill our obligation to prepare all our kids to thrive in our twenty-first-century “knowledge economy.” From this perspective, play science has serious implications for public policy around early education and development, K–12 education, public health, and workforce development.

What I’ve tried to show here is that play science also has potentially profound implications for how we think about the quality of our democracy and the civic health of our communities. As Brown says: “Playfulness enhances the capacity to innovate, adapt, and master changing circumstances. It is not just an escape. It can help us integrate and reconcile difficult or contradictory circumstances. And, often, it can show us a way out of our problems.” One need only begin ticking off the complex and dire challenges we face in our nation and world to argue,

without exaggeration, that we have never been more in need of new ways out of our problems than now, as we stumble headlong into the twenty-first century.

That our individual and collective problem-solving capacities appear to be steadily eroding at the same time that vexing shared problems mount around us is perhaps the most troubling thing about our current situation. Crushing cynicism on the part of the public, shameless pandering on the part of leaders, and enough hostile polarization to go around are the main symptoms of the erosion of our capacity and will to engage each other and our shared problems in new ways. If, as Brown suggests, play is an essential catalyst for learning and for development of the kind of resilience, creativity, and optimism we need in order to intelligently navigate a complex, changing world, then we must all share in the work of creating new room for play and advocating on behalf of playfulness in the various arenas of our lives.

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