Introduction to Play and Learning

you're told this is not important. What's important is what we tell you, you have to learn. And so we are suppressing children's natural ways of learning and we're substituting reward and punishment as the mechanism of learning.

And that just absolutely undermines children's natural instincts about the joy of having questions and pursuing interests and learning through exploration and play, which children are naturally designed to do.

This is Doctor Talks, real talk from real doctors on the issues that matter to you most. Welcome to Vitality Made Simple. This is the podcast that equips you to feel better, look better, and to enjoy better relationships.

Well, you are in for a treat today. I have Dr. Peter Gray from Boston College. Welcome, Dr. Gray. I'm very happy to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

He is the author of a groundbreaking book and I mean groundbreaking called Free to Learn. And you all know that I'm newly a grandma. My granddaughter is four months old.

She's already calling me honey. So I've gotten interested in this area because Dr. Gray's work focuses on the role of play and self-directed learning to promote human thriving.

Dr. Gray's Path to Sudbury Valley

And it's just very, very exciting. He is a professor at Boston College and was really early to this space. When I say groundbreaking, I mean it because his book is from 2013. And there have been other books first, but you started the party.

And thank you for that. So, so here you were a professor in psychology. What got you interested in education and the role of independence in play, Dr.

Gray? Well, so my early career as a professor was really more neuroscience than psychology. I'd been doing brain research with rats and mice. The Department of Psychology actually now is called the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at Boston College, and I was one of the first neuroscientists there in the department.

But as I was doing this work and teaching at Boston College, I had a son who was going to the regular school, started kindergarten at a public school in the neighborhood that we lived in.

Public school that had a good reputation from everybody's reports and so on. But he, from the beginning, absolutely hated school, absolutely hated it.

you know, he would he would come home many days and say, you know, this is this is prison. You're sending me to prison. And and I would I would try to.

Tell him, yeah, I know, I know, there's a lot they tell you to do and so on, but you can do it, just do it, you know. But he was not, and I think people differ in disposition in many ways, and his disposition was, and still is, that in a certain sense he's very stubborn.

And when he strongly believes something, when he really believes something's wrong, he doesn't give up on it. He doesn't say, I'm just gonna go along with it.

He believed that what was being done to him and the other students was wrong. And he called it prison. He said, you know, they make me do stuff that doesn't make any sense.

There's no reason for me to do this. You know, if it was serving some purpose, I wouldn't mind doing it, but it's serving no purpose. And he could articulate that even in kindergarten and first grade.

We fought with him, the school fought with him all the way through fourth grade. And in fourth grade, it really reached a crisis. He was rebelling in very, very systematic ways while he was in school.

And it was very clear that the school didn't know what to do with him. They kept calling his mother and, you know, as if somehow we could do something about it, as if somehow maybe our fault.

Maybe it was partly our fault because we raised him in a way in which his voice mattered. And, you know, we always treated him with respect. And one of the things that they complained about him is that he thinks he's an adult.

Well, you know, he kind of wants to be treated with the same respect as we treat adults. And that's kind of how we had been treating him at home. And he kind of expected that, I guess.

So in some sense, maybe it was partly our fault that he didn't adapt to school. So at any rate, it reached a real crisis near the end of fourth grade.

And there was this big meeting in the principal's office. I describe it fully in the introduction to my textbook, an introduction to my book, Free to Learn.

So if people want to read it there, they can read the whole dramatic episode. The long and short of it was that there was a group of us trying to tell him that he had to follow the rules.

We were going to have no uncertain terms to tell him to follow the rules. And he looked at all of us, my little son, nine years old, look at all these big adults telling him he had to follow the rule and he stared at, looked straight at us and he said, go to hell.

So I can laugh now, but at that time. My late wife, his mother and I looked at one another and we both had tears in our eyes and we realized and we understood that the other person realized that we had to take him out of the school.

He had just won. He had won this fight and we had to be on his side and not against him. And so the end result was We were not in a position to homeschool.

This was a long time ago. Homeschooling was much rarer than it is now. We were not set up well for homeschooling for a variety of reasons anyway. And so the question was, is there some other school that he would accept?

And we visited several progressive schools in the area, none of which we would have been able to afford if they charged us full tuition. These are very expensive schools.

Private progressive schools are very expensive. But he may have been able to get a scholarship to go there. Some said he would likely be able to do that and that would make it affordable.

But we would visit the school and he would say, well, you know, this is a nicer prison, but it's still a prison. And so finally, And I knew about the Sudbury Valley School all along.

And I'm a little embarrassed that it took me so long to go and visit it. And his mother also knew about it. And she, at least at first, was kind of opposed to it because it's a very radically alternative school.

And that we finally went to visit Sudbury Valley School which is a school that, its name is a school, it's certified as a school, you're not truant if your child goes there, but it's quite very radically different from what we think of as a school.

For one thing, there are no classes. There are no courses unless some students ask for one, and very rarely do students ask for a course. So students are, you go there and if all you know is the school, you just assume it must be recess and everybody's on recess right now.

So the kids are playing. They're doing things. Some of them are reading, but they're reading whatever it is they want to read.

Studying Sudbury Graduates

You find an occasional textbook, and if it is, it's maybe somebody who's preparing for going on to college and wants to bone up on something that they have to take an SAT test on.

So students are doing exactly what you would expect they're doing if they're free to do what they want to do. And their kids there from age four on through high school age, but they're not segregated by age.

They're playing in h-mix groups. They're doing all kinds of interesting things. There's music going on. They're strumming guitars. They're doing art. Some of them are reading.

They're hanging around. They're playing all kinds of outdoor games. Nowadays, many of them are on computers, doing interesting things on computers. So that's the school, and the school is run democratically.

The school still exists. It's been in existence now for something like 56 years. 57 years, actually. And it's got hundreds and hundreds of graduates. And so my son said after visiting the school, he said, if this is real, if they're not just putting on a show for me, this is what a school should be.

And so he immediately gravitated to it. And so, you know, we didn't really have a lot of choice, so he's rolled him there. And I was delighted to see the, you know, the anger disappear, the brightness coming back into his eyes.

You know, I had my son again, my very bright and eager and always learning son. And so, and both his mother and I were extremely happy that finally he was happy.

and would go off eagerly to this school. It was only a couple miles away from us. And back in those days, this was regarded as easy distance for a child to go by himself, usually by bicycle, two miles away.

So it was convenient. It was very low tuition compared to other private schools. And my son is very happy there. So I, you know, as a typical parent, as most parents would be, I was a little bit concerned about his long term future.

So what if he stayed there all the way through high school, which I guess he probably would. It would be hard for me to imagine that he would at some point want to go back to prison.

So So I assumed he would probably stay there through what would be his high school years. They don't call it high school. They don't call anything, you know, you're not in first grade or you're just at the school.

There's no grades of either kind. They're not grading you, you know, in terms of your academic performance because they're not measuring your academic performance.

and they're not putting you, segregating you by age in any way, that kind of grade. So these just there as a student and the school, I should mention the school is run democratically.

All the rules of behavior are made by vote of the school meeting where all students and staff members have one vote. And of course, there are always many, many more students and staff members.

And the rules are enforced by a judicial committee that models the judicial system of our larger culture. So when you're called to serve on what they call the judicial committee, which in essence is a jury, but you serve on it for a month per term, then you have to serve jury duty.

And the jury always consists of an age-mixed group, always at least one little kid, one middle-sized kid, two teenagers typically, the chair of the committee is usually a teenager, and then one staff member who's always present at it.

So that's the way the school runs. That's the school. And so I was concerned, well, I actually wasn't concerned about his learning because he was a kid who's just always learning anyway.

And I think that was one of his problems in public school is why should they make me do all this stuff? I could do it in a much more efficient way this way or that way.

And I already know this anyway. So that was one of his problems at the public school, but it certainly wasn't the only one. So I decided that I wanted to, I was concerned.

So for example, what if he wants to go to college? Now I was a college professor, but I was not the kind of person who felt that everybody should go to college.

Not even my son should necessarily go to college, but what if he wants to go to college? What if he chooses a career that requires college and can he go to college?

So I began asking about the graduates in a kind of informal way. And I, I, met a few of the graduates and they're doing well in the world. And I met one or two who had actually gone to college.

But being a scientist, I wasn't happy with just a few samples. I wanted to know about all the graduates. So I tried to get other people. This was not my field.

I tried to get other people in the Department of Education, both at Boston College and at Harvard, where I had some contacts. to I said, you know, there's this fascinating school and wouldn't it be great if you could do a study of the graduates of this school?

It's so different. And you know, this would be a great publication. I could not talk anybody under doing such a study. So I finally decided if it's going to get done, I'm going to have to do it myself, even though this is far from my own area of research.

So. Along with the help of David Chernoff, who at that time was a part-time staff member at the school, who was greatly helpful in helping to identify the graduates and find them.

At that time, long ago, there were already something like 90 young adults who had graduated from the school. Our definition of graduation was that they had left the school at kind of a typical age for graduation, anywhere from 16 to 19 or so, with no intention of going on to secondary school anyplace else.

So they were either going on to higher education or to a job or some aspect of life other than secondary schooling was our definition of graduate. And they had to have been at the school for at least what would have been their last two years of high school, if we called it high school.

And some of them had been there, a few of them had been there for everything from what elsewhere would be called kindergarten through 12th grade. Those in some sense were the most interesting group.

So with David Chenev's help, we were able to locate almost all of them, something like 90% of them and something like 90% of that 90%, about 81% of the whole sample of graduates.

filled out a very lengthy survey questionnaire that we sent them. And in some cases, we interviewed them. If we didn't get the questionnaire back, we would call them up and we'd have them fill it out on the telephone.

This was before computers. And in some cases where they were local, we interviewed them personally. But in most cases, it was a written questionnaire that they sent back.

And it asked questions about what they had done at the school, what they had done since leaving the school, whether they went to higher education or not.

If so, why? If not, why not? How did they deal with higher education? How did they get in if they went? A lot of questions about their careers. And questions about whether, in retrospect, they were happy or not happy that they had gone to such an unusual school.

And also questions about if they were happy or unhappy, you know, what was it about the school that led them to feel that way? And so we got a lot of information with these questions.

There's a long and short of it is that I was my fear, my worries as a father disappeared. The graduates of this school were doing very well out there in the world.

Those who wanted to go to college went to college. They got in somehow, even if they'd never done anything like school before, like what we think of as school.

They still got in and were doing fine and doing well. And so it was interesting to learn how they got in, what they did. Interestingly, you know, we think of it when you're talking about group kids graduating from public school, you think it's probably the brighter kids who go to college and the duller ones who, if I could use that word, who choose not to go to college.

That didn't seem to be the case in this case. It seemed to be those who went to college were those who wanted to go on to something that required college.

Those who didn't go to college often were very bright, capable people who just didn't need college for what they wanted to do. They were starting their own businesses or they were doing something that didn't require college.

And so why go to college? They certainly didn't feel like they had to go to college to learn anything. They did learning all along and there are so many ways of learning that are quicker than college if you really want to know something.

Why School Suppresses Curiosity

So you go to college to get a degree, to get that college degree. And the only reason you would need that college degree is if you need it for something beyond college.

And so those who chose to go, there were a few exceptions, I have to say. There were a few people who said, you know, I went to college just because after all those years of studying on my own, I just thought it would be really interesting to take courses where everything is organized for me and to hear what real experts have to say about this.

wow, this would be, as a college professor, this would be my dream student, right? And so there were few who went absolutely for what liberal arts professors think is absolutely the right reason to go to college.

And so at any rate, that was very, I was also a little concerned initially. So you walk around the school and you see a lot of music, you see a lot of art.

It's a little harder to, and these are things that are very apparent. You can see people doing music and art. Other things are not so apparent. You don't know exactly what they're doing when they're hutched over the computer or they're reading books or whatever.

You can see them playing sports out in the field and playing other ways. You can see them fishing in the pond. So you can see those things. But I began to worry because art and music seems so predominant.

Do they all become starving artists and musicians living in their parents' basements? And, you know, I love my son,

but I did not want him living in my basement.

So I was very concerned that they were going into more other careers where it's a little easier to make a living. And it turned out from the study that they had gone into the whole range of careers that we value in our society.

There were, to be honest, a disproportionate number of artists and musicians, but they were good at it and they were actually, for the most part, making a living doing it or they found a way to make a living and doing it.

If they couldn't do it, you know, by being legitimate through their art and music alone, they were teaching art or music or they were somehow involved in it.

They were museum directors or, you know, they were remaining with their passion and interest and they were continuing as a hobby with their art or music.

But some of them were very successful. extraordinarily successful musicians in famous orchestras. One of them was a was a famous rock star by the time we did our study.

So the so so that was the result of that study. And of course, we also look at why did they come? Were they all like my son? You know, but no, some of them had come right from the beginning because their parents believed in it.

Many had come because they had gone first to public school. This is not like a prep school where most people would be coming from wealthy families. It's private, and so there's a tuition, but it's very low tuition.

And if they were coming from another school, it was almost always from a public school, not a private school. And many of them did come because of suffering or failing to adapt in one way or another at the public school.

So some of them had been persistently failing in the public school. Some of them had been given some kind of diagnosis like ADHD in the public school, and the parents did not believe in giving the child drugs to treat ADHD.

So they took the child out of school, sent the child to Sudbury Valley where the ADHD didn't seem to be a problem anymore. So there was a wide mix and I couldn't see any particular relationship between why they came to school and how they were doing as adults.

It seemed like regardless of why they came. They were doing fine as adults. I couldn't see any, you know, there are some people who would say, well, this is probably a good school for people who are innately self-motivated or a particular kind of student, but wouldn't be good for the majority of people.

I seem to see the whole range of personalities there. And regardless of personality, they all seem to do well, you know, and do well by their own criteria, which is the important criteria of doing well.

You know, not everybody has their goals in life and they were doing very well in finding their goals in life. In fact, I should backtrack. Not everybody has goals in life.

Most people who go to public schools don't know what their goals in life are. But these kids knew what their goals in life are were because they had lots of time to play, to explore, to discover what they love to do and to figure out what they wanted to do as adults.

And so they did have goals in life. a wide variety of them and they were pursuing those goals as adults. Well, that's a long answer to your question. No, it's a great answer.

And, you know, I always say, Dr. Gray, we don't know the snake that doesn't bite us. So I think about those, those people who were innately musicians and artists, had they been sequestered to formal schooling where they had to stand in line to go to the bathroom and, you know, art was one hour a week if they still had it, you know, you might've lost them.

They might've been, You know, on what we call the drug porch, you know, 50 years ago in high school, you know, they might've been so anxiety ridden, so frustrated, so bored that they would not have had the resilience to pursue those, those gifts they had.

I think that's right. It would have been, you know, school takes so much of your time and you're certainly not going to have much time to do any art and music in school.

And that's even more true now than it was at that time, decades ago. The other thing I might say along this line is One of the characteristics, not surprisingly, of these graduates, and it may have been to some degree a characteristic of them even coming in.

It's hard to know how much the school shaped this part of them, but it certainly supported this part of them. Little kids are always creative. They're always creative.

Everything they do is creative, unless you're forcing it. And they are into art. Little kids are doing art, and they're good artists. They're doing creative.

Picasso is famous for what's saying, you know, I could draw like an adult when I was seven and took the rest of my life to learn how to draw like a child.

You know, so he recognized the innate creativity of little children. Well, these kids at Sudbury Valley, even as they grow into teenage years, they're still surrounded by little children who are doing these creative things.

And I think it helps to keep them creative. I think it helps inspire them. There's all these art supplies around. The little kids are doing it all the time, and the older kids are doing it too.

And I think the same thing with music. People dabble with music. They get interested in a little bit of music. And now you've got a bunch of other people who are doing music, and you're jamming together, and you're putting on concerts for the parents occasionally.

You've got a group of people who are interested in what you're interested in doing. Well, and you know, we're designed to move. Really, like it's sort of a guinea pig culture to make people sit down for prolonged periods of time and concentrate on something maybe that they're not even interested in.

It reminds me, Dr. Gray, of Boy Scouts story. We were very active in Boy Scouts. Our son's a lot like your son. In kindergarten, he said, I'm not going to college.

Just don't even plan on it. And he now is a very successful truck driver. I mean, he's doing what he loves. That's what he's always wanted to do. The truck driving school said he's absolutely the best driver they've ever had.

You know, I mean, that's what school drove him crazy, drove him crazy. And so we put him in Boy Scouts. That was a real active place. Well, my husband, Mike, had told me a story years ago about in Boy Scouts.

They were on a camp out and one of the dads brought this kit of plastic leaves and they were going to teach the kids for a badge, you know, what all these different leaves look like.

And all the kids were just, you know, poking each other and fidgeting and, you know, not happy because, I mean, these were, this is a box of plastic leaves that the guy had checked out from like the government or something.

And so, so consequently, Mike has a background in horticulture and he said, hey, let's go on a hike. And on the hike, he showed these kids all these different plants.

They got to touch them and, you know, smell of them and everything. And it was night and day. They learned out in the forest. And still, you know, children come into the world designed to believe that learning is wonderful.

You're always learning, your own curiosity, you're trying to figure things out, it's exciting when you're pursuing your own interests and your own questions.

Age-Mixed Play and Social Growth

But you go to school and your own interests and your own questions are no longer important. You're told this is not important. What's important is what we tell you, you have to learn.

And so we are suppressing children's natural ways of learning and we're substituting reward and punishment as the mechanism of learning. And that just absolutely undermines children's natural instincts about the joy of having questions and pursuing interests and learning through exploration and play, which children are naturally designed to do.

We, you know, the early schools, I say rewarded punishment, In the early schools, of course, punishment was very clear. You got a whipping, not just in school, not just for bad behavior, but even if you didn't learn your lessons.

This was the early schools, the early Puritan schools that evolved eventually into the state schools and so on and so forth. In some of the states in the United States today, it's still legal to spank a child at school, to beat a child, essentially.

But it used to be very common. We don't do that anymore, for the most part, but we do something that I think is even worse, which is to shame children.

Children are always being compared and contrasted And if you did not do as well, if you're a little slower reader than the others in your, now would be first grade, God forbid, they're teaching reading in first grade, even now sometimes in preschool, which is crazy.

But if you're a little slower in reading and you're reading out loud and you're not doing well, you feel ashamed and you are constantly compared. I mean, imagine as an adult, a job, where you are every day compared to your co-workers.

Who's best? Who's worst? You are every day judged like that. What adult would ever stay in such a job? You know, this is this is abuse to anybody no matter what age they are.

So the idea of shaming. So I think I think I talk about shame and hubris as one of the sins that If you're doing well, you're made to feel this kind of false pride about how well you're doing, even though this is a kind of a shallow measure of doing well.

You're not really helping anybody in the world. You're just showing off by getting high grades in school. And if you're doing badly, then you feel ashamed.

And so these are among the, these are among it. It undermines, it undermines the natural ways of learning. It creates shame, hubris about learning. It focuses on competition rather than cooperation.

Children are, one of the things I found in my research on children's natural play is children are actually naturally cooperative. They become competitive when adults become involved.

Even when they're playing a pseudo-competitive game, cooperation is more important than competition because you have to keep your playmates happy. Even if they're on the other team, you have to keep them happy or they'll go home.

I mean, so play requires cooperation. It requires being able to please all your playmates. And so in my belief, we should be going with children's natural way, desire to cooperate, instead of running against it by putting them in competition with one another, both in school and in sports outside of school, you know, that we're constantly setting up competitions as if the goal of life is to beat other people.

which is exactly the opposite of my belief of what ought to be the goal. Even for individual success, my observation is that the people I know who are truly successful in the world And true success, I think, means that you are content with life, you're happy with life, you have real friends, people respect you, you are comfortable in your own skin.

But it also means making a decent living so that you're not dependent on the state or other people to support you. My experience is that the people who know how to cooperate, who genuinely like other people, And they're not trying out to beat them, they're trying out, they're trying to work with other people and help other people.

It's not a zero-sum game, you know. You and I cooperate, we both win, right? Because we're both doing better. Instead of situation where if I win, you lose.

which is the I win you lose is unfortunately what so often happens in school and even more so in adult directed sports where they're put into competitions where one side wins and the other side loses instead of letting kids just play their own ways where they may it's sort of pseudo competitive you're trying to score but in the end nobody really cares who won or lost when it's a pickup game.

So those are those are some of the ill effects of what we're of what we're doing with kids in school. That's just excellent. And I think even from a health aspect, that competition can spur so much stress, you know, where it's all released, which, you know, people have way too much of that now, Dr.

Gray. I think the shaming is so real and really squelches curiosity. I can remember during orientation of dental school, I asked a question and the instructor said, that is a stupid question.

And, you know, and I remember thinking, I will never ask another question in front of the whole class. I mean, you know, so you, you know, when people are wrong in front of a group, they're just going to keep things to themselves.

Their curiosity can really get squelched. And, you know, in my late 60s, I think curiosity is one of the primary health attributes, you know, for having a long health span and staying vibrant.

Now, one thing you talk about in your book that I think is so key is the importance of play among multi-ages. And I mean, that includes, please expand on this, but that includes, you know, babies to, you know, the elderly, correct?

Right. Right. Yeah. I mean, one of the things that I sometimes point out is that from an evolutionary perspective, from a biological perspective, Mixed-age play is normal play.

Age-segregated play is really an artifact of our age-segregated schooling system. Before age-segregated schooling, children always played in age-mixed groups.

Throughout human history, children played in age-mixed groups. Hunter-gatherer bands, I did some research by surveying anthropologists who'd studied hunter-gatherer bands.

The children are always playing in age-mixed groups. They don't segregate themselves. Nobody segregates them by age. So children playing in age-mixed groups, and at Sudbury Valley, because Sudbury Valley doesn't segregate children by age, I was able to observe, and one of my graduate students did his doctoral dissertation on the value of age-mixed play.

And I was part of the observations there to have published a good deal about some of the some of our observations and some of the research we've done there.

But basically, the advantage of HMICS play is that There are advantages both for the younger children and the older children, and there are advantages just in terms of the quality of play when it's age-mixed.

So younger children, it turns out first of all that older children love younger children. And younger children are just thrilled when older children pay attention to them and want to play with them.

So it's not a matter of forcing them. They're drawn to one another. Teenagers especially love little kids. And to me, that's not surprising. Boys as well as girls do.

And it's not surprising to me because by the time you're a teenager, historically, biologically, you're getting close to where you might have a child yourself.

And you don't necessarily want your own child to be the very first child you've ever had interaction with. And so it wouldn't be surprising that there's kind of a natural drive among teenagers to want to be interacting with little kids, get to know what it's like to interact.

And teenagers are so much better than adults at playing with little kids because they're still close enough to being kids, little kids. They still are kids.

that their sense of humor, their energy and so on is not as different as if you're a 30 or 40 or 50 year old adult playing with a little kid. And what happens when edge mix play, even if there's just two or three years, and this could be a five year old playing with a four year old or a three year old, the older child scaffolds the younger one to higher levels of playing.

It's not that the older child descends to lower sophisticated levels of play, although sometimes they might just to engage the younger child, but more often they'll bring the younger child up to their level of play.

So the younger child is being boosted to a higher level. So just to give a few examples, it's not very valid. So you might have a game, a baseball game.

So five-year-olds really could not really create their own baseball game. They couldn't throw the ball straight enough. They couldn't bat the ball. So a five-year-old is part of a team of older kids.

Well, when the five-year-old comes up to bat, everybody just pitches really softly to the five-year-old. They give the five-year-old a little opportunity to run for it.

So the five-year-old now, in this game, because their older kids making it possible, pitching softly to them, making it possible, is actually now playing baseball, which he could not do just with other five-year-olds.

And that applies not just outdoors in pickup sports and other things, it applies to even things like learning to read. So for example, at Sudbury Valley, my observation is, and the school's observation is absolutely everybody learns to read.

There's nobody who's ever gone through the school without learning to read, even though they don't teach reading, right? And there are kids, I did a study, there are kids who have come to the school with a diagnosis of dyslexia, who didn't learn to read in public school, come to Center Reveille and they learn to read.

Why? Because the pressure has been taken off of them. To a large extent, dyslexia is not really so much a brain disorder as it is having been shamed about reading, building a mental block about reading.

not wanting to have anything to do with reading. Now they're suddenly in a situation where that's just fine with everybody. Nobody's putting pressure on them.

And now they feel like they're ready to learn how to read. So that's a bit of a digression. But what happens when kids are playing at school is very often they're playing a game that involves some reading, right?

How Parents Can Foster Independence

And some of the kids know how to read. Nowadays, on computer games, this is very common. Some of the kids can read the words on the screen, some cannot.

They're playing it together. And the ones who can read are pointing out the words to the ones who can't read. And so pretty soon, the ones who can't read have picked up a certain sight vocabulary.

And at some point, they seem to get the idea that there's a code here. Sometimes one of the older kids will even say, you know, there's a code here. You know, hey, that's ah.

Sometimes it's A, sometimes it's A. And so the older kids, not because they're actually deliberately teaching reading, but just because they kind of have to do that to get this kid into the game and not have to always explain every time, tell them what the word is.

You also very often, I said, I said teenagers love little kids. Oftentimes you'll see a little kid sitting on a teenager's lap and the teenagers reading a book to him.

and may or may not be pointing out the words, but the little kid is following around, looking at the words, and so there's all these opportunities that promote reading.

Little kids, kids who can't read, see kids who can read, and they wanna join that club. They wanna, they see, we did a little study of learning to read, and one of the kids, when they asked, so why at this age do you get interested in learning to read, and he said, Well, I saw these kids who, some of them were my age, some of them were a little bit older than me, reading and laughing and enjoying comic books, and I wanted to join that club, so I wanted to learn how to read.

So you're constantly being pulled up by the virtue of the fact that there are older kids doing things that you're not yet doing, but you're kind of at a stage where you could be ready to do it, and this motivates you to get started doing it.

So that's the advantage of little kids. One of the advantages to older kids, or many advantages to older kids, one of which I already alluded to, little kids are always creative and it stimulates the creativity of the older kids.

Little kids have a kind of more unbound energy than even teenagers might have. And the unbound energy of the little kid sort of keeps the teenagers maybe a little more energetic physically than they might otherwise be.

It also keeps you in a good mood. You know, it's hard to be cynical. And some kids who come to the school are cynical. They've been at public school, they're burned out, they're You know, everything is crappy in this world.

But it's hard to maintain that attitude when there's a little kid who wants you to give them a piggyback ride. So that's you know, there's these main amazing advantages for the older kids.

The older kids are learning also how to be nurturing, how to help little learning. Again, and even even a seven year old who's helping out a five year old feels mature.

I can help another person. I can help this little five year old. And I feel good about that. And it makes me feel, it makes me feel capable and mature.

When everybody is the same age, we think of leadership as a personality trait. So there's some people who are kind of leaders and others who are kind of followers and we think of it as a personality trait.

But the reality is in the real world, all of us are leaders in some contexts and we're also all followers in other contexts. And here, in an age-mixed environment, everybody has the opportunity to be a leader, because when you are interacting with younger kids, you're not a leader in the sense of giving orders, but you're a leader in the sense that the younger kids are looking up to you.

They are interested in what you're doing, and you're kind of helping organize what they're doing, whether it's a baseball game or whatever it is. So you are playing a leadership and a kind of a teaching role But then when you're that same person with older kids, they're learning from, they're now in the learner role and the follower role.

So everybody gets to be in all of these roles when it's age mixed, regardless of personality. That reminds me of my dad. He was the youngest of eight.

So when he was born, he had a nephew already. And he was only 18 when I was born. And he was so good at playing with us. Um, it made me think about being out, you know, shooting baskets.

I think I told you in an email, I love to shoot baskets and, um, sort of freak the neighbor kids out. But, uh, dad would, was a great basketball player and, but so gentle teaching us, you know, and, and led us up to where by the time we were playing against each, you know, playing, um, uh, one-on-one, whatever.

on the driveway, he could really use his skills against us when we were in high school. And I think he had learned that living in a big family. And of course, that's just pretty rare these days to have lots of children.

So Dr. Gray, people listening might be a little frustrated and think, gosh, I don't have Sudbury School. close to me, what can they do in their own environments to foster this kind of independent learning that stimulates creativity?

Well, I think the trick today, one thing that a lot of people do is if there's not a Sudbury school and they're really interested in self-directed education for their child, one thing that a lot of people do is they take their child out of school for homeschooling.

And there are many homeschoolers, who some of them call themselves relaxed homeschoolers or unschoolers, who really allow the child to set the curriculum rather than in rather than imposing a curriculum on the child, where basically the parents are supporting the child's own interests.

Now, today, the homeschooling numbers have skyrocketed in recent times. So in any metropolitan area, there are a lot of homeschoolers. And even in many rural areas, relatively rural areas, there are a lot of homeschoolers.

So homeschoolers increasingly are getting together to create learning centers or micro schools or, you know, even or at the other, at the most informal end, you know, let's all get together with let's all have our kids get together at the park every Saturday afternoon.

And then the kids get becomes friends and they even get together more often. And so you're providing these opportunities for them to interact independently.

The parents might be there. especially if they got little kids, but they're just talking with the other parents and letting the kids go. So that's one thing, but suppose you're not prepared to take your child out of school.

There are many people who, for lots of reasons, that's not gonna work for them. And maybe in some ways they're even happy with the public school, but they still within the public school system, would like more opportunities for their child to play with other children in a free kind of way.

So one of the things that I've been involved in, I just wrote a substack essay on it if people are interested, if people can You can find my Substack, just Google Peter Gray's Substack.

The name of the Substack is Playmakes as Human. But my most recent letter in the Substack is about a program called Let Grow, a non-profit organization that I helped to start with Lenore Skanezy, who wrote the book Free Range Kids.

And we work with schools to bring more independent activities and play in schools. So one thing parents can do, first of all, see if your school has this.

It probably doesn't. Many schools do, but it's still a minority, a relatively small minority of all the schools in the country. But these are two interventions in schools that we've brought.

Greater numbers of schools are adopting them. So one of them is a very simple one. It's called the Let Grow

Experience. can be adopted by any teacher at any grade level.

And basically what this is, is the teacher gives an assignment to the students in her class to do something outside of school that you've never done before.

And you have to do it independently, not with a parent or another adult helping you. Something that you want to do and you want to do yourself. And it might be something that's a little scary to you.

It might be something. But of course, what the teacher says, you have to get your parents' permission to do this. I can't tell you to do something that you don't get your parents' permission to do.

So let's say, to give an example of this, let's say it's a 10-year-old girl who's been wanting to ride her bicycle all by herself to her friend's house two blocks away.

Now this is something that every 10-year-old girl in the world could do decades ago. Nobody would have batted an eye about it. But nowadays, there are many, many 10-year-olds who are not allowed to ride their bicycle out of sight of an adult.

So the little girl wants to do this. She wants to experience this independence of doing this without her mom going with her. And so she goes home, she says to her mom, so we've got this let grow assignment that I have to do something independently.

And here's what I have chosen I want to do, but I do need your permission to do it. So maybe they talk about it and the mom says, well, that's just too dangerous.

I can't let you do that. So the other thing that at least with some teachers, they sort of teach the child, you may have to negotiate with your parents.

So the girl negotiates. She says, so how about, okay, how about if this time I don't ride the two blocks away. I just ride around our block and you can sit on the stoop and watch me go around the corner and watch me come back.

And, you know, if I don't come back within whatever time you think, you could run around and find me. So the mom says, okay, I could do that. And so the mom nervously sits out on the porch and the little girl does that.

Now the interesting observation, this, this was developed more by Lenore Skanezy and she'd already had experience doing this kind of thing with parents.

The interesting observation is not only the girl beaming with pride that she did this thing by herself, but the mom is bleep beaming with pride that her daughter did this and that she allowed it.

So it, it hooks into this cycle of restraint and creates the beginning of a new cycle of pride in what the child can do independently and more and more willingness on the part of the mom to let the child do things.

I say mom because it most often is the mom who's most directly involved in these things. It could well be the dad too. So the genius of this assignment is that because it's a school assignment and parents think school is so important, the parent has to take it seriously.

She can't just brush it off. Even if she's not going to let the daughter do what the daughter wants to do, she's got to let the daughter do something along the lines of what the daughter wants to do.

Otherwise, the child hasn't done the assignment. So that's one thing and that has had, and usually this is done once a week, and it has the effect of sort of changing the dynamics within the family so that parents become more willing to allow.

Parents can do this independently of the school. I think something I often suggest to parents is So why don't you sit

down with your child and ask your child.

So are the things are the things that you might really like to do, you know, without me independently. even if you're a little bit afraid of, but you would really like to do, but you haven't tried to do yet.

Or you might think I wouldn't allow you to do it. Let's have a discussion about it. If there are such things, maybe you can even come up with a list of such things.

And then you go through and you say, Hey, you know, I could let you do that. Why don't you do that? And it might be simple things like, You know, I want to actually be able to go to the grocery store by myself and do some of our family shopping.

That would be a kick for me. I would feel grown up to be allowed to do. These are some of the things that kids actually do ask. Believe it or not, there are kids who want to cook dinner for the family, never been allowed to.

These are independent. This is part of growing up. This is independent activity. It's not what we call play. But it's really all sorts of independent, self-directed activities, whether play or not, that our children are being deprived of, that they need to be able to do to develop what psychologists call an internal locus of control.

I can do things. I can solve problems. I can manage myself. That's what we're depriving children of. And that's why they're so afraid of the world and so high levels of anxiety and depression, even among teenagers, especially among teenagers.

So the other program we've developed is the one that I was mostly responsible for, which is what the schools call Play Club, which is an hour of free, basically no rules play with age mixed, all grades combined, usually in elementary schools, either before school or right after school.

And teachers monitor it, but the teachers are instructed that when they're monitoring play club, they are not teachers. They're like lifeguards on an ocean beach.

They're only for real emergencies. They are not there to solve little quarrels. They're not there to tell the children how to play better. They're not there to intervene if they think somebody's being treated unfairly.

They're not there to cheer up somebody who looks lonely. They're there only if they really think that there's something dangerous, seriously dangerous happening.

And even then I tell them, count to 10 first, unless it's a dire immediate emergency, because nine times out of 10, even if it looks like an emergency, the kids will solve it.

And the whole one of the major purposes of play is for children to learn how to solve their own problems. And so adults have to step back even when it looks like the kids are having trouble because they their job is to resolve it.

The other thing I tell moderators of monitors of play of Play Club is don't allow yourself to become a target for tattling. If a kid comes to tattle, you know, so and so is being unfair to me or so and so is calling me bad names or whatever it is, the proper response is, oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

Now, what might you do about it? You know, turn it back to the child. And they can come up with something. Oh, yeah, I could just go play with somebody else.

You know, that's one solution. Or maybe I could, maybe I can talk to them about it. Or maybe I can convince them that, but if that doesn't work, I'll just go play with somebody else.

That's the best response. If you're not having fun playing with somebody, go play with somebody else. That's how the people who are doing the teasing or the bullying or whatever is wrong, that's how they learn in natural play not to do it because eventually nobody's going to play with them if they keep bothering other people that way and that's

the sort of the natural consequence and that's how kids learn to that you have to take into account the other people's needs.

That's one of the big lessons of play, but it gets destroyed when adults step in and solve the problem rather than kids solving the problem. And oftentimes the natural solution is to go play with somebody else.

The great thing about Play Club is the whole school is playing together. So there's this huge number of possible playmates. The other thing about play club, there are always some kids in any context, but especially in schools, who are a little bit afraid of kids of their own age.

Maybe they're different in some ways, maybe they've been teased, maybe they've been bullied, maybe they feel, but maybe it's just a personality issue.

They're a little bit on what today might be called the autism spectrum. They're kind of socially inhibited. They don't really know how to get involved with kids their own age, or they're just what we would in the past call shy, right?

And so what I've observed at Sudbury Valley when a new kid comes in like this, And what now other people have observed at play club when there's a kid like this, they start off playing with the very youngest kids who they're not afraid of.

And when they're playing with the youngest kids, they're developing social skills. The youngest kids, the little kids adore them.

Play, Conflict, and Emotional Resilience

And they're they're developing social skills. They're learning. And then they sort of gradually move up to ultimately feeling comfortable playing with their age mates.

It's like a natural systematic desensitization therapy that nobody has to impose on them. They just naturally do that. It's just a natural thing to do.

Hey, here's this group of little kids over there. It looks like they're kicking the ball around. Let me go join them. Kick the ball around. And the little kids are delighted to have this older kid kicking the ball around with them or whatever it is that they're doing.

So there's so many advantages of this innovation. So parents, one thing parents can do is if your school doesn't have these, you can lobby for it. Schools that are sensitive to parents, especially if you can get some other parents involved and show them, get them to the Let Girl website, show them my sub stack letter on the Let Girl, which I just published a few days ago.

And you may well, most of the schools that are picking up these days, it's because of parents pushing for it. They've heard about it in other schools and they say we would like this at our school and are effective in getting, I can't say for sure in most cases.

I can say that in many cases, it's parents pushing for it. So that's something. The other thing is libraries in many communities have become places to play.

Many libraries now have makerspaces in them. Kids of all ages can build a constructive play with high-tech equipment or at least some kind of equipment in libraries.

A lot of libraries, including the library, often go to it in my neighborhood. has a hangout room for teenagers so teenagers can go there after school.

They can do the thing that teenagers really need to do which is hang out with other teenagers away from adults and talk about teenage things and in a room that's sort of closed off so they're not bothering other patrons.

And they can play computer games or they can play other games. There's often board games or cards. They can play cards. They can do they can do teenage things away from adults, which is something that teenagers crave.

So there are these opportunities, but you have to look for them. You have to find them. There are other things that I recommend when you go on a family vacation.

Think of that as, think about other families. Maybe these are your brothers and sisters and the cousins to your children. Maybe you could all go on a vacation together.

Or maybe they're just friends at work who have kids. And you say, so let's take our vacation together and let's go someplace where the kids can run and play and we can do adult things.

We can sit around the campfire and talk about whatever it is we want to talk about and sip our drinks and enjoy time away from our kids because our kids are happy playing with one another.

And that's a, you know, parents, adults often think of vacation as family time, but sometimes there's too much family time. And what you really need is the kids need to get away from the parents.

and play with other kids and be with other kids and not be under the thumb of parents all the time. And parents need a little vacation with their kids from time to time.

So that's another way to think. Think about family vacations. Some of my, I used to work at, when I was in high school, I had a summer job working at a family camp.

And so whole families would come to camp and for a week at a time or sometimes a couple of weeks. And the kids were off doing their own kid thing and the adults were doing adult thing.

And it was great vacation. Even my second wife and stepchildren after my first wife died, When we had relatively young kids, we went to, we belonged to the Unitarian Church.

We would go to a Unitarian Church. This was only for an extended weekend, but it was great. The kids would all be off together. We didn't even see them.

They didn't even sleep in the cottage with us. They would sleep in these bunches together, like these cuddle bunches of all kinds of kids together. They are so motivated to be with one another.

It's so kids need to make connections with other kids. And it's such a drive for them. And this was an opportunity for them to do it. They all kind of knew one another because they were all going to the same church.

But this is maybe whatever church your listeners are involved in, if they're involved in the church, maybe you've got some kind of a church camp that would be like that.

So I'm just tossing things out. There are other things, another thing that parents can do, which takes initiative But you can get to know other parents in your neighborhood who have kids and get them together and talk to them.

about the importance of play and the value of play and so on. And wouldn't it be great if our kids had the kind of freedom that kids in the past used to have of just going out and playing with one another without adults intervening.

And maybe we could make something like that happen in our neighborhood. So suppose we designated every Saturday afternoon or every Friday after school or maybe even a couple of days during the week.

when we would all be like old fashioned parents and kick our kids out of the house. Just get out of the house. I don't want you around the house. But we all do it at the same time.

So there's a whole bunch of kids. So all the kids in the neighborhood are out there. And the other thing we might do

if they're somewhat older kids and they've got smartphones is we'll say get out of the house and leave your smartphone inside.

Because otherwise kids today, because they're not used to playing in the physical world, they're more comfortable in some cases on the phone. You kind of want them to put them in this place of temporary discomfort without the phone, but other kids to play with.

And so they're out there with other kids. And you might even predict maybe they'll complain the first time. And after a while, they'll thank us for this because they'll make friends.

They'll start playing together. They'll start looking forward. They'll want more time to do this. They'll want to do it even when it's not scheduled. If there are parents who worry about dangers, then you do what we do at play club.

Have one parent or a couple of parents. I ideally think grandparents. I'm speaking here to a new grandparent and I'm a new grandparent right now. I think grandparents are better at this than parents on average because they're a little bit less likely to want to take control of the kids.

They're a little bit more easy going with the kids on average. I'm not saying this is always true, but have grandparents, ideally have a grandparent sitting out there, but if it has to be a parent, it could be a parent.

And just for safety, again, just for safety, not to intervene, not to tell them how to play, not to be a target for tattling, but just like what I say, just for safety, that way the parents who are worried about traffic or worried about who knows, sketchy strangers who might grab a child away.

This is not something that actually happens, but something that people worry about happening. that parents will feel comfortable about doing this. So these are some of the things that can be done.

I do have, for people who are interested, one of my Stub Stack posts, you can Google it, is titled something like, 13 Ways to Bring More Play to Your Child's Life.

And the things I've just described are among those 13. Those are terrific. You reminded me, Peter, of when I was in junior high, we had three families we traveled with and went camping with and we were in a particular state park and all of us kids were just out running around and we actually decided to build a campfire and we cut a tree down in the state park.

Think there, you know, we didn't know we didn't think there was anything wrong with it. And before we knew it there was a park ranger there and Our folks let us handle it.

I mean, you know, we were we were all you know, probably 10 to 15 and it was it was a really great learning experience. Yeah. Yeah Well, that's that's great.

And that's illustrates another point is that Kids on their own don't always do the right thing. But that's part of growing up. That's part of learning.

That's a more direct learning experience. And I think that their parents were very enlightened to have you solve the problem rather than them solve the problem.

You did it. It's your responsibility. And that's also treating you as a responsible person. It's not like saying, you're my child. I'll forgive you for this mistake and I'll solve the problem for you.

It's like, you know, of course, they had some long term sensor forgiving you for the mistake, but they're saying they're still saying this was your thing that you did and it's your problem to solve.

One of the things that happens when kids are out playing by themselves is that not everything goes right. They sometimes get into trouble, but they have to figure out how to get out of trouble.

And that's part of growing up. They sometimes do things that are hurtful to somebody else and they learn that, hey, you know, I just hurt somebody else and I have to, and they think about it and they improve.

So these are, Also, there are some parents who not only wanna protect their child from physical dangers, but they wanna protect their child emotionally.

And of course, one understands why you wanna protect your child from emotional difficulties, but there's a mistaken way to do that. And that mistaken way is to believe that every time your child feels angry or every time your child feels sad, that this is your problem to fix.

It's not your problem to fix. except maybe by helping empower your child to think of ways to fix it. That children need to, and you know, part of, also part of, there's a whole theory about play that originally came from people studying animal play, which is called the emotion regulation theory of play.

that one of the functions of play is to learn how to control your negative emotions, learn how to control fear and anger. And when children are playing in ways, children almost deliberately, in fact, do deliberately in play put themselves into fear-provoking situations.

It happens when little kids are playing witches and trolls and so on and they're imagining these. And it happens when kids are climbing trees high enough that they actually feel some fear.

Why are they doing that? They're learning how to manage fear from an evolutionary perspective. They're learning, I can do this. I can feel some fear and I can control myself and I can come down safely from this tree.

And they're learning that they can feel fear and they don't panic. Similarly, when children are playing together, the play is not always harmonious. Sometimes they get angry with one another.

Now, when you're angry with your playmate, there are a number of possible things you could do. One possibility is you could lash out fighting. Now that automatically ends the play.

That automatically has a play. The other child is just either of those are going to be a fight that occurs and you end up just going home mad. or the other child leaves and it's going to be a long time before that child ever wants to play with you again.

It's just not a very effective way to deal with your anger. Another way you might deal with your anger is having a temper tantrum. And as I often point out, temper tantrums sometimes work with adults, but they never work with your playmates.

Your kids are just not impressed by temper tantrums. You're acting like a baby when you have a temper tantrum. So what is the appropriate way, the effective way?

And that's to be assertive. That's to say, in so uncertain terms, you know, what you did, that really hurts. And if you keep doing that, I'm going home.

I'm not playing with you anymore if you keep doing that. That's the assertive way of responding. And the other person, you've really basically taught the other person a lesson.

Most often, the other person will hear you and respond, especially if they're a real friend. If they don't respond to it and they continue to read it, then you just say, okay, I'm going home, this is it.

I'm not playing with you anymore until you decide that you can play with me without doing this, whatever it is that you're doing, calling me this name I don't like, Poking me in the rib or whatever it is.

Well, this is an extraordinarily important lesson for people to learn The lesson of saying no and meaning no I you are not going to do this to me We can be friends if you stop this But otherwise not and I think that there's a lot of

adults suffering because they don't know how to do that in a constructive and firm and definite way There are too many people who just want to appease the person who's bullying them or just totally avoided them, in which case they might be avoiding somebody that they actually could get along with and would actually like and get something from if they knew how to be assertive in a way that that other person actually understood.

That is such a key point. So many people in adult relationships are just frustrated because they never learned that. Yeah, exactly. So there's so much children learn in play.

I think all the really important lessons in life, the lessons that lead to being comfortable in your own skin, knowing how to get along with other people, being able to control your emotions in a way that allows you to deal with the ups and downs of life, these are all practiced in play.

I agree and I thank you for your wonderful book. I would recommend this book to anybody because the thing about it, we all need to be playing even now at every single age.

If we learn younger and keep the we'd never stop playing. It's really one of the best vitality strategies that I've ever seen, Dr. Gray. Thank you so much.

It had to be kind of tough to study play in a way because people think you're always supposed to be studying something on the lab bench, but you know, it's really quite innovative.

So people can find you at your Substack, Dr. Peter Gray. That's G-R-A-Y. And I just thank you so much for your time today. This was absolutely fascinating.

Well, thank you. It's been a pleasure. And to our listeners, we're now in 140 countries and I think about 6,000 cities. And that's because you've been sharing vitality made simple.

Follow me on Instagram and look at Dr. Gray's sub stack and learn from him and share this episode with anybody who wants better relationships, who wants to live younger longer.

Blessings until next time. Thank you for tuning in to Dr. Talks. We hope today's episode has enlightened and inspired you on your path to optimal health.

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