Why Play Is The Missing Piece In Learning And Leadership Transcript

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Introduction to Learning Through Play

We talk about with young children, we know that the first thousand days are so important for how the brain is wired you in terms of the care, in terms of the connection.

But we don't stop learning at the age of three. And we have these beautiful opportunities as we get older to continue to bend and change the way our brains work.

Hi, everyone. Welcome back. Today will be a very, very good podcast for you guys to listen about how we can kind of have more fun in education. We have Dr.

Diane Jackson-Schnorr. She's a seasoned educator with over three decades of experience. experience and she's passionate about fostering a love of learning and inspiring curiosity.

She combines literacy, multicultural picture books, and STEM to engage educational experience. So she offers professional development workshops, online courses, consulting to educators, and she seeks innovative and engaging ways to inspire their students drawing on science and learning through play, which is so important.

She holds an M. T. and a Ph. D. in elementary education from the University of Virginia and has founded a preschool, worked in museum education, and collaborated with renowned organizations like Steve Spangler and Kelsler Science on curriculum development.

So excited to have Dr. Diane talk about unlocking the joy of communication, critical thinking, and creative problem solving. Welcome, welcome. Dr. Jen, thank you for having me.

I'm a fan of your show, and I'm so happy to be here. Yes, well, thank you so much. And we're going to talk about a little bit more with adults and play and enjoying learning.

But really, your passion stem from children first, it seems. Can you explain like how you got into this, like why you focus on play and fun and learning?

So a lot of what I've learned about learning through play, I've learned from kids. And over the years, as I've been working in those different fields you talked about, preschool, museums, elementary schools, I've come to realize that the missing ingredient is often the fun that we have as adults.

That when things work well in the classroom, it's because the adult is also having fun with the kids and has somehow unlocked that childlike wonder and joy.

And so, particularly during COVID, when I was at a children's museum and we shut down for six months, I had to find ways to unlock that joy at home and do it for an audience that included adults and kids.

And that was when it was almost like an unplanned masters in how do we harness the things that we know are true for kids, but also make this accessible for grownups.

Mm hmm. Yeah, I think that that's a great point. I mean, even like, I feel like school and learning sometimes is just there.

Why Adults Need Play Too

There's certain personalities that don't do well with it, like don't like to read books. So I grew up, I like loved reading. I still love reading. If I had extra time in the week, I would read.

But my husband and my kids, they are not fans of that. It's not fun for them. So that has been kind of a shock for me because I'm like, oh, I thought everyone just had fun like being a nerd, but that's not the case.

Well, and I love the fact that you love reading because that is a form of play for you. And one of the things that I do in classrooms is try to spark that connection between books and play.

And so one of the ways we do it is by finding picture books that might lend themselves to a challenge. So for example. Dan Santat wrote this beautiful book called After the Fall, which is about Humpty Dumpty.

And it's sort of the anxiety that happens to Humpty Dumpty after he gets put together by the doctors and nurses and all the king's horses and all the king's men.

And so for the kids, the challenge is how do you help Humpty Dumpty safely climb up that wall? And so it becomes a way to connect literacy to something that's a fun hands-on thing for them.

And I think that you can do that with so many different aspects, recognizing that everybody has a different way they play, but we can bring our strengths together and find a way to make that work.

Yeah, and it's interesting just like being a parent, you know, just you want your kids to learn, you want your kids to be engaged. And like my son, what he likes doing, my older son, more of the mechanical engineering stuff, like building our chicken coop or being working on an engine and watching YouTubes and You know, so it's really interesting to see them really want to spend time on things.

And obviously we want to get kids off of screens and we want to get adults off screens. So yeah, it's very interesting to look at that connection and.

I guess you as an educator, you really think we should never stop learning. So how can we support adult learners? And I think this is important actually for, selfishly, for me to learn because my goal is to teach people to be healthier and feel healthier.

But like you said, my fun is reading a book, daughter of a librarian. But for adults, not everyone wants to read a book. It's not how we reach everyone.

So I think that you hit it in that idea of connection. And it's figuring out how do we build a connection to something real. And I'm not saying that there's not value in our cell phones and in these Zoom connections, because there is.

But I think that we have to take a step back from that. And as the kids would say, look at the world IRL in real life. And part of that is figuring out trying something new, it's taking some risks.

So it might be signing up for a class and doing something you've never done before. It could be going through the local newspaper. We just moved up to New Hampshire and so I've been having to force myself to go through this whole practice what you preach thing.

And I discovered there's this like weekly newspaper that has these random old school newspaper, like printed free paper that like lists the arts and music things going on and like various meetings.

And so I've forced myself to get out and, you know, pick an event each week to go try. And that's a form of play, you know, getting out on a trail is a form of play.

I might've taken it to extremes recently. I had signed up for ski lessons and I was doing great. And then for Valentine's Day, my husband and I decided we were going to graduate to the next level slope.

And I'm sitting here with a broken arm, but that's going to challenge my ability to play. And it's helping me to figure out, okay, I have to have a sense of humor about this.

I can't do the things that are normally in my repertoire. How am I going to stay sane for the next six weeks and find other things that I can do that are fun?

And so You know, I'm looking at things like, OK, I can do puzzles. I still have a left hand that I can do things with. I can take walks. I can be out in nature.

So that's something I can do. I can go to museums. You know, if you have an interest in something more hands on, you can certainly volunteer. Those are ways that we can get that playful energy going.

Something as simple as having like that silly putty like Aaron's thinker putty. while you're watching TV, you can create and sculpt beautiful things with that and you're just getting those creative juices flowing.

Okay, so that's not just fidgety and that's just not… No. So like when we look at the ADHD brain and Like, you know, always have to fidget or be doing something or multitasking is like, what does that mean?

Does it mean we're not challenged enough? Does it mean that, you know, does that mean something underneath that when it comes to learning or not being like, satisfied in what we're like, we're not being challenged enough?

You know what I mean? Like, yeah. I mean, I think that there are two parts to that. One is knowing yourself and knowing when you're bored and when you're not able to focus and being able to say, okay, this is a moment where I know this is going to be challenging for me.

I need to do something with my hands or to keep me able to focus on this conversation.

Making Learning Hands-On and Fun

And that's sort of building up that repertoire of tools for yourself. So I think that's part of it. But I think the other part is recognizing that we don't all learn the same.

And so when we go to figure out how we're learning, offering our content in ways that we reach, people where they are. If you've ever felt like there's more to learn about your health than what fits into a typical appointment, you're not alone.

That's why I want to share a resource you might find interesting. It's called What Doctors Don't Tell You. This independent health publication was founded in the UK in 1989 and offers a broader outside the US perspective on health and medicine.

It focuses on patient education, helping you ask better questions, understand your options, and take a more active role in your care. What I appreciate is that it explores integrative and natural approaches alongside conventional medicine, looking at how they can work together, which is very much in line with what we talk about here on this podcast.

If you're curious and want to explore their work for yourself, a digital subscription gives you access to their full archive, including an updated women's health report covering menopause, heart, brain, and bone health.

They're offering my listeners a 12-week digital subscription for just $1. You can learn more and sign up at WDDTY.com. It's simply another way to stay informed, ask thoughtful questions, and continue learning about your health.

A lot of what I do is with adult education. And I will tell you, teachers are every bit as ADHD as their students are. And I've come to realize that, you know, they're not going to listen to a talking head with 50 PowerPoint slides.

They need to be up and moving in the same way that we want the kids to do it. And so one of the things I try to do is to offer the same kinds of challenges I would give the kids to encourage the teachers to play as well.

And it allows them to then put it into their bodies and realize, oh, you gave me all these index cards and we built this tower that supported the books.

And what we had to do while we were doing that is we had to cooperate with each other. We had to think about patterns. We had to think about surface tension.

But they were also just having fun. And to encourage them to have fun and to let go and relax and lose some of that perfectionism is super important because a lot of us were raised to think that unless it was done 100% right, it wasn't worth doing.

and giving people chances to practice in safe spaces where the cards are gonna fall down or you're gonna knock over the blocks or it's not gonna be perfect.

It builds that resilience for us as adults where when things don't go right, maybe we have an argument with our spouse or our kids are talking back or we fail to get the promotion we wanted at work.

We've got some of those skills to be able to help us rebound from that and find a new path forward. Oh, I love that. That's very interesting. So why should we even do this?

What are the benefits of play for grownups? So there are so many benefits. You know, we talk about with young children, we know that the first thousand days are so important for how the brain is wired you in terms of the care, in terms of the connection.

But we don't stop learning at the age of three. And we have these beautiful opportunities as we get older to continue to bend and change the way our brains work.

And it's kind of a little bit of a use it or lose it. As adults, if we allow ourselves to stagnate, we're opening the door for things that we don't want, you know, for entering into senior years where we don't have that cognitive flexibility, where we have stiffness in our joints, where we're sicker than perhaps we want to be, where we feel more isolated and alone.

And what play does is it connects us to other people because we can play by ourselves certainly. And you do when you're walking by yourself or playing card, you know, solitaire or reading a book or doing a puzzle.

But we also do things in connection with other people. You know, we take a ski class with a bunch of other women. We volunteer at the local soup pantry with other people.

We go to a trivia night. We go to the theater. We find ways to build these real human connections that ease our isolation and our loneliness. We give our brains a chance to approach the world from a different perspective.

So we are sharpening our cognitive skills, but we're also putting ourselves in situations where we're with people who might not think the same way we do.

And so as we're playing and as we're getting to know them in a friendly way, we're also hopefully building up our empathy skills and our ability to consider other perspectives.

And that just makes us kinder, gentler, nicer human beings all around. So I think that the more we can encourage play, the less dark and gloomy our life feels to us, and the more hopeful and joyful we are.

Adult Learning, ADHD, and Safe Practice

And I think we need that kind of coat to be able to weather the storms that we're currently facing as a society. Yeah. Now, one thing that you said stuck out to me a lot how you said that we're kind of conditioned that if we don't do it 100% right, that it's not worth doing at all.

So I guess, how do you, how do you work with like, people like me, for example, that are super competitive when they play games. It doesn't matter if it's like cards with their kids or, you know, I'm getting better, but I see that competitiveness like with my kids or, you know, like my teenager where if he's not good at it, like right away that he gets frustrated and is like, I'm not going to do it.

So like, how, how do you work with those people? Because that can be hard. I was one of those people and I raised one of those. I have two daughters who are mostly grown and the oldest is very much like that and she wouldn't mind me sharing that with you because she recognizes that about herself now.

And a lot of it is patience and low stakes opportunities to play where you get a chance to practice those skills and practice being able to lose with grace or being able to not always be the best at something with grace.

One of the things that she did for herself that I thought was really good is She wound up enrolling in a pottery class after she broke up with her boyfriend.

I knew this was going to be a hard year for her because they'd been together for three years. And we talked about what's something you can do for you this year that you didn't do when you were with him that might be fun.

you know, doesn't have to be the best at it, but something that you might enjoy that you've never thought about doing before. And so she signed up for pottery and quilting at the local art museum.

I love that. And she's currently like, She's taken the pottery class every semester for like two years now. And what she's found is she's not necessarily the best in it.

Clay is something that if you don't work it properly, it will collapse in on itself, but then you have a chance to do it again. And so what I've seen her pick up from this is this resilience and this ability to keep trying something that you maybe start out making really lumpy pots, but now she's like, I'm working on lids this semester, mom.

You know, she she's figured that out with the quilting. She actually she enjoyed it, but she realized that two two nights a week out doing art was a little much for her.

But she loved meeting the older women that were in the quilting class because she's like, they had great stories to tell. And she's like, I now know how to use a sewing machine.

So these were random skills that I think because there wasn't a grade attached to it and there wasn't a, you must do this for this outcome. She had a little more grace to be able to make mistakes.

And so it's harder for us as grownups. And that's why I encourage the educators I work with to start when kids are very small to set up these scenarios where they're working together to solve challenges, but we're not looking at the final outcome being the end point, but more a place to go, oh, that didn't work.

What could we do to make it work better and giving kids the opportunity to continually try again? And I think that's something that if we can start it young, it's a whole lot easier than it is being 50 years old and having to come to grips with Oh yeah, I'm not always perfect.

I make mistakes. If it's not easy. I'm just gonna give up. And when I broke my arm, for example, I joked with the people as I was coming down the hill, I'm like, well, that was the beginning and ending of my ski career.

And I've thought about it since I said that, I'm like, maybe it's not, but it might be that my body is telling me that downhill is not the best way, but maybe I cross country ski once.

So it's sort of going, how could I keep trying without hurting myself? Yeah. And I think that's important, like physical limitations, you know, and especially like me being honest, like with kids, for example, or even with adults, like.

Women in perimenopause, no, you should not train for a marathon right now. It's going to wreck your hormones

and tank it, you know, but maybe do a 5k and train with your cycle.

So I think it's, there are limitations, but you know, it's scary because yeah, if you get someone that's a perfectionist and they're like, well, here's my goal and I'm going to do it.

I'm going to push through no matter what. Well, that could have negative consequences on our health, like when I look at that. But also, yeah, I mean, for example, me starting like a mini farm and we had a chicken just peace out for no reason.

We're like, oh, what just happened? And we also introduced a guinea into the flock and it got chased off by the other ones because guinea fowls, they're kind of rude.

So this is learning and this has been stretching me.

Benefits of Play for Brain Health and Connection

And I, the day that our cow ran away and I had to chase her, I did a solo podcast on this because it was so ridiculous, but I was so defeated and that part of me came back like, why am I even trying this?

Why am I doing this? I messed up. I'm not, you know, when you start going down that perfectionist, you know, which is, which is not good. It's like flesh based, you know, just ego and, you know, but, but I got through it.

You know, I was praying and stuff, but I said to a neighbor who, you know, his in his eighties and I was like, why am I doing this? I'm like, I can't believe like, like, can we even have cows?

Like what's going on? He's like, you're, he's like, you're trying something new. You're not going to be good at it right away. Like it's okay. This stuff happens.

Even people that have had cows for decades, their cows get out sometimes. Like it's okay. And I was like, Yeah, so I guess my play right now is I'm trying to be out in nature and that makes me love it.

Yeah, like looking back and reflecting. I'm like, I'm trying to do these things, but I had that perfectionism come in and you and now I'm old enough to recognize it.

But but this, you know, gosh, in my 20s and 30s, You wouldn't be able to tell me I can't do something perfect. Oh, I was the same way. Yeah. There is a freedom and a liberation to hitting your late 40s and early 50s, where if you allow yourself to go through that door, you're able to start shedding some of that perfectionism and realize I'm enough.

But there's a whole lifetime that leads to that. And I think about that with my daughters going, I wish there was a way to help them shortcut some of that, those years of perfection.

I realized some of that is It's life learning and it's figuring out who you are and what you bring to the world. But when you can figure that out in partnership with other people, whether it's a trusted doctor, whether it's with your group of girlfriends, whether it's with your spouse or your family, having people that you can rely on to sort of call you on it when you're getting ridiculous about the fact that, you know, your chickens aren't laying.

We have chickens too. And we've got two chickens, one of whom is an absolute freeloader and the other one lays eggs every morning. And I can't figure out why Daisy is a freeloader, but I love her anyway.

And I'm realizing that we've done everything we can for her and we just kind of have to trust. that she is what she is and she's going to eventually maybe lay an egg.

And if she doesn't, then she's a really cute pet, I guess. Yeah, and things go wrong, things happen. I also think of kids when they're young, they love building up blocks and stuff and just that building until it falls down, so it's high

enough and then it falls down.

It's almost like, and they're okay with that failure. You know, it's, it's probably you would probably explain this better, but like how we go from that and being okay with not being perfect in play to being you know, consumed with it?

Is it our school education? Is it just one person saying, you didn't do that the right way? What do you think is leading to this? Because it makes, it stops us from playing and trying new things.

It 100% does. And I think sadly, we see that shift happen. It's happening earlier than it used to happen. I would have said it used to happen between like eight and 11. And I see it happening even as young as six and seven now.

And I think that part of it is we have pushed academics further and further down and we've left out the opportunities to continue to play and build. And there's a sweet spot where academics meet play and they meet that chance to keep practicing and keep playing.

And so I think that part of what we have to do is create breathing space, whether it's at home, whether it's in the classroom, to allow children to have these opportunities to build and to play and to test ideas, to let things fall down and to let them keep trying.

But I think also to respect who they are as individuals and to realize that, you know, Dr. Jen is different than Dr. Diane. We have different strengths and different skill sets.

And the same thing is with these beautiful children in our class. Each one of them comes to us. They're already a planted seed. Like as educators, we're not planting the seed.

Perfectionism, Failure, and Resilience

The seed was planted in their home and we don't necessarily know whether we've got a cactus or a rose or an ear of corn. But we do know that those seeds all need care, and they need good soil, they need affection, they need the right environment to open up their possibilities.

And so our job as educators, as people working with kids in afterschool programs, as people working with kids in churches, alongside the families, is to be able to provide opportunities for kids to test all of their strengths, to not force them into a specific hole early on.

Just because a kid is good at acting doesn't mean they might not also be really good at building blocks or baking cakes. So encourage them to explore, encourage them to try things.

That kid who loves to build with blocks might be the kid who ultimately builds like multi-tiered wedding cakes down the road. There's a form of construction to that.

So let them play a little bit. And if they fail, if it turns out not to be their thing, that's okay too. They tried it and let them have that space. I also think that with kids, so much of their lives are lived on social media.

And that's a form of pressure that's different than it was when I was a kid. I'm very grateful that the many times that I stood up and fell down are not available for the entire world to see and judge in an instant click.

Because I think that is a lot of extra pressure on these kids. Right. Right. Yeah, it's interesting. I remember a friend told me a story about how her kid just like made an impulsive mistake and like pushed a kid at a, you know, the bus stop and someone was recording it and the kid got like kicked out of the school and like all this stuff and it's like, yeah like people aren't allowed to make mistakes anymore or they're ashamed from it and we're all just learning like none of us are perfect we're all sinful and yeah I think it is there's so much more pressure right now or even like kids in sports you know everything could be recorded and it's it's hard so I think that that freedom you know and I've tried as a parent just yeah to let my kids mess up at home you know or if they drop eggs and break them while

you know getting them out of the the coop you know I'm not going to yell at them if they purposely throw it on the ground you know then yes but but yeah to allow allow to make mistakes I'm trying to learn Well, re teach myself how to knit and then learn how to crochet because I want to make some cute cotton like sweaters.

But you know, it's that's play. Yeah, you can you know, I was just making long strings and then you can just unravel it and start again, you know. So yeah, I would say definitely give yourself grace if you take up cooking or you know a lot of people are doing like sourdough or kabucha you know you're gonna mess up and you're gonna waste a little bit of time and material to learn a new skill a new way to play for sure.

I bought watercolors recently and so I've been playing just with watercoloring and there's no real downside to that. You know, it's not like I'm putting everything I paint up on a wall.

I'm just playing in a sketchbook and nobody ever has to see it but me. It's sort of taking journaling to a different level, but it's giving me a different outlet to just play with color and texture and it's kind of fun.

Now, how is play connected to empathy and joy? Because, you know, we do see a lot less empathy and joy because everyone is, you know, just on their computer saying really hateful things.

Which, yes, social media can be play if it's used positively. But I think people are not getting out there and playing as much. And it's showing as lack of empathy, in my opinion.

I would agree with you on that. And that's one of the things that I love about play. Like when I look at young children, for example, when you read a story where they see people who maybe don't share the same experience as they do.

They see other possibilities, other cultures. Kids have this beautiful capacity to enter into the story and to be able to identify with people who are different than they are.

And so it's one of the reasons, you know, I think it's super important. Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop talks about books as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors, that we see mirrors where we see ourselves and our family and our experiences reflected.

We see windows where we are able to see other possibilities, other cultures, other experiences, other ideas reflected.

Empathy, Joy, and Play Across Life Stages

And then the sliding glass doors are those transformative experiences where we enter in and we come out feeling changed. And if you think about your favorite book, that might have been like a sliding glass door experience for you, something that you felt changed who you were.

We have that opportunity as adults, if we're readers, we certainly can do that. And I think that you sometimes can do that through movies and television, but I think that it happens more viscerally through the pages of a book.

But what then happens is, like with young children, they'll take these ideas and if you are a sensitive educator and you're paying attention and observing, you can create opportunities for them to play, to act out the ideas within the story, to build on their interest and go, oh, wow.

In that book, they were creating a community garden. What would happen if we tried to do something like that? What do we have to do? Or in that book, they were creating musical instruments.

I wonder if we could use the things that we have here to try to do that. And so they're working together. They're building empathy for the characters in the book.

But then as they're working with each other, They're also building compassion for other people's ways of doing

things. It's trickier for us as grownups a little bit because some of our empathy muscles are really rusty.

They've atrophied. We haven't used them in a very long time. And so I would say start by doing something that takes you out of yourself. And it might be super small.

It might be read a book by an author who belongs to a different culture than you do and allow yourself to enter into that world or. Sign up to volunteer and help out.

Do one small thing. It might be go and help out at a 5K on a Saturday afternoon. You don't even have to run it. You can help run the table that gives people their medals.

But just find something that's going to get you out of yourself. Nature is a great form of reigniting your empathy as well. It's hard to spend time in the forest with trees or looking into the eyes of an animal or a bird and not feel some of that empathy begin to wake up in you.

And so giving yourself opportunities to reawaken that connection and that joy, It's amazing how quickly that you want more of it. It's a fabulous hit of dopamine and of feeling better.

And when you feel that you want to experience a bit more than that, I think that as you practice, you want to start giving that to other people as well.

And so it starts, I think, by reconnecting with yourself and finding one thing to connect with. and then let it grow from there. It doesn't have to be everything all at once.

Start with small things and then allow that to grow. But I do think that that recipe helps. Yeah, I love that. Yeah, we could all definitely use a little bit more empathy.

Now, for women in menopause, how do you think that this, you know, bringing playback in, how can that help them in that season? As a woman in menopause, I will say that reconnecting with my own sense of wonder and curiosity has been so helpful.

It's allowed me to treat what's happening in my own body in ways that are less being down on myself and more curious. Oh, that's interesting. Why is that happening?

You know, how can I accommodate these changes without giving into the whole wave of them? So it's helped the recovering perfectionist in me be able to deal with the less perfect parts of my body right now and recognizing, okay, this is just different.

It's not where I was before, but I kind of like who this is. It's giving myself permission to not have to be the same person I've been for the last 50 years.

I'm remembering things I used to love to do as a kid. I'm like, why not try those? As a kid, I loved climbing trees. That obviously won't happen for a few more months.

I can walk among the trees and I can enjoy the trees. I loved animals. I remember watching Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom and I was fascinated by the lions and I was fascinated by the elephants and my career did not take me into lions and elephants and things like that.

But I have found myself lately in situations where I've gotten to travel and I've gotten to see animals in their natural habitats.

Menopause, Curiosity, and Closing Thoughts

And I'm doing it in a playful way that's allowing me to then work towards conservation and educating kids and other adults about the steps we can take to help preserve habitat for these animals.

So I'm trying to take my own sense of wonder and curiosity out into the world. And it's allowing me to lose some of my fear and be able to say, oh, wow, I think you're really cool.

I'd love to have a conversation. Let's sit down and have some coffee, which is also a form of play, you know, reaching out to somebody and not being afraid to say, would you like to hang out and have a cup of coffee?

No strings attached. Let's just have a conversation. That's play. My podcast is play. I get to talk to really interesting human beings and ask the kinds of questions that little me wouldn't have had the courage to reach out and say, hey, would you like to be on my podcast and have a conversation?

And I'm learning so much every day. So I think just approaching the world with a sense of wonder helps you to come through the challenges of menopause and find not a different self, but a fuller, more defined self.

Yeah, I love that. So turning it into a positive for sure. Well, Dr. Diane, I just loved our conversation. I think it's very eye-opening. And I would challenge those listening to, you know, first of all, check out your website.

We'll find that out soon. But also adding in a little bit of play to your week. Like, just one thing this week and then build from there. So it will help reshape your brain.

So where can we find you? DrDianeAdventures.com and the podcast is the Adventures in Learning podcast and you can find it on all of the major podcast platforms.

Oh, awesome. Are you on social media? I am at Dr. Diane Adventures. There we go. Okay. Well, we will definitely link everything and just so excited. This is, it was just a little different of a topic.

And I love that because I can see in me and my kids, my husband, like what we can do to increase play every day. And I just think it's, this is great.

This is probably a good longevity tool to have in your tool belt. I absolutely agree. Dr. Jenn, thank you so much for all the work that you do in helping people to make it through these transitional years and to come out brighter and happier on the other side of it.

Yes, of course. All right, well, everyone check it out and share this with a friend that needs a little bit more play. Thank you so much.