

# The Benefits of Play for Adults

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**Just because we're adults, that doesn't mean we have to make life all about work. Learn how play can benefit your relationships, job, and mood.**

**The importance of adult play** – In our hectic, modern lives, many of us focus so heavily on work and family commitments that we never seem to have time for pure fun. Somewhere between childhood and adulthood, we stopped playing. When we carve out some leisure time, we're more likely to zone out in front of the TV or computer than engage in fun, rejuvenating play like we did as children. But play is not just essential for kids; it can be an important source of relaxation and stimulation for adults as well. Playing with your romantic partner, friends, coworkers, pets, and children is a sure (and fun) way to fuel your imagination, creativity, problem-solving abilities, and emotional wellbeing. Adult play is a time to forget about work and commitments, and to be social in an unstructured, creative way. Play could be simply goofing off with friends, sharing jokes with a coworker, throwing a Frisbee on the beach, dressing up on Halloween with your kids, building a snowman in the yard, playing fetch with a dog, acting out charades at a party, or going for a bike ride with your spouse with no destination in mind. There doesn't need to be any point to the activity beyond having fun and enjoying yourself. By giving yourself permission to play with the joyful abandon of childhood, you can reap oodles of health benefits throughout life.

**The benefits of play** – While play is crucial for a child's development, it is also beneficial for people of all ages. Play can add joy to life, relieve stress, supercharge learning, and connect you to others and the world around you. Play can also make work more productive and pleasurable. You can play on your own or with a pet, but for greater benefits, play should involve at least one other person, away from the sensory-overload of electronic gadgets.

## **Play helps:**

*Relieve stress.* Play is fun and can trigger the release of endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals. Endorphins promote an overall sense of well-being and can even temporarily relieve pain.

*Improve brain function.* Playing chess, completing puzzles, or pursuing other fun activities that challenge the brain can help prevent memory problems and improve brain function. The social interaction of playing with family and friends can also help ward off stress and depression.

*Stimulate the mind and boost creativity.* Young children often learn best when they are playing—a principle that applies to adults as well. You'll learn a new task better when it's fun and you're in a relaxed and playful mood. Play can also stimulate your imagination, helping you adapt and solve problems.

*Improve relationships and your connection to others.* Sharing laughter and fun can foster empathy, compassion, trust, and intimacy with others. Play doesn't have to include a specific activity; it can also be a state of mind. Developing a playful nature can help you loosen up in stressful situations, break the ice with strangers, make new friends, form new business relationships.

*Keep you feeling young and energetic.* In the words of George Bernard Shaw, "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing." Play can boost your energy and vitality and even improve your resistance to disease, helping you function at your best.

**Play and Relationships** – Play is one of the most effective tools for keeping relationships fresh and exciting. Playing together brings joy, vitality, and resilience to relationships. Play can also heal resentments, disagreements, and hurts. Through regular play, we learn to trust one another and feel safe. Trust enables us to work together, open ourselves to intimacy, and try new things. Making a conscious effort to incorporate more humor and play into your daily interactions, you can improve the quality of your love relationships — as well as your connections with coworkers, family members, and friends.

*Play helps develop and improve social skills.* Social skills are learned as part of the give and take of play. During childhood play, kids learn about verbal communication, body language, boundaries, cooperation, and teamwork. As adults, you continue to refine these skills through play and playful communication.

*Play teaches cooperation with others.* Play is a powerful catalyst for positive socialization. Through play, children learn how to "play nicely" with others — to work together, follow mutually agreed upon rules, and socialize in groups. As adults, you can continue to use play to break down barriers and improve your relationships with others.

*Play can heal emotional wounds.* As adults, when you play together, you are engaging in exactly the same patterns of behavior that positively shape the brains of children. These same playful behaviors that predict emotional health in children can also lead to positive changes in adults. If an emotionally-insecure individual plays with a secure partner, for example, it can help replace negative beliefs and behaviors with positive assumptions and actions.

**Fixing relationship problems with humor and play** – Play and laughter perform an essential role in building strong, healthy relationships by bringing people closer together, creating a positive bond, and resolving conflict and disagreements. In new relationships, play and humor can be an effective tool not just for attracting the other person but also for overcoming any awkwardness or embarrassment that arises during the dating and getting-to-know-you process. Flirting is a prime example of how play and humor are used in adult interactions. In longer-term

relationships, play can keep your connection exciting, fresh and vibrant, while also deepening intimacy. It can also help you overcome differences and the tiny aggravations that may build up over time.

**Play at work** – Many dot-com companies have long recognized the link between productivity and a fun work environment. Some encourage play and creativity by offering art or yoga classes, throwing regular parties, providing games such as foosball or ping pong, or encouraging recess-like breaks during the workday for employees to play and let off steam. These companies know that more play at work results in more productivity, higher job satisfaction, greater workplace morale, and a decrease in employees skipping work and staff turnover. If you're fortunate enough to work for such a company, embrace the culture; if your company lacks the play ethic, you can still inject your own sense of play into breaks and lunch hours. Keep a camera or sketch pad on hand and take creative breaks when you can. Joke with coworkers during coffee breaks, relieve stress at lunch by shooting hoops, playing cards, or completing word puzzles together. It can strengthen the bond you have with your coworkers as well as improve your job performance. For people with mundane jobs, maintaining a sense of play can make a real difference to the work day by helping to relieve boredom.

**Using play to boost productivity and innovation** – Success at work doesn't depend on the amount of time you work; it depends upon the quality of your work. And the quality of your work is highly dependent on your well-being. Taking the time to replenish yourself through play is one of the best ways you can help your career. When the project you're working on hits a serious glitch, take some time out to play and have a few laughs. Taking a pause for play does a lot more than take your mind off the problem. When you play, you engage the creative side of your brain and silence your "inner editor," that psychological barrier that censors your thoughts and ideas. This can often help you see the problem in a new light and think up fresh, creative solutions.

**Playing at work:**

- keeps you functional when under stress,
- refreshes your mind and body,
- encourages teamwork,
- increases energy and prevents burnout,
- triggers creativity and innovation,
- helps you see problems in new ways.

**Tips for managers and employers** – It's tempting to think that the best way to cope with an ever-increasing workload is to push your employees to work longer and harder. However, without some recreation time, it's more likely that the work will suffer and your workers will become chronically overwhelmed and burned out. Encouraging play, on the other hand, creates a more lighthearted work atmosphere that in turn encourages employees to take more creative risks.

- *Provide opportunities for social interaction among employees.* Throw parties, put a basketball hoop in the parking lot, arrange a miniature golf tournament, stage an office treasure hunt.
- *Encourage creative thinking* or just lighten the mood of meetings by keeping tactile puzzles on the conference room table.
- *Encourage workers to take regular breaks from their desks,* and spend a few minutes engaged in a fun activity, such as a word or number game.

**Playing with your children** – Rolling on the floor with your baby or getting down on your knees to play with a young child is vitally important — both to your child's development and to your own health. Play is essential for developing social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills in children. In fact, far from being a waste of time or just a fun distraction, play is a time when your child is often learning the most. Whether it's an infant playing "peek-a-boo," a toddler playing make-believe, or an older child playing a board game, play develops social skills, stimulates a child's imagination and makes kids better adjusted, smarter, and less stressed. As well as aiding your child's development, play can also bring you closer together and strengthen the parent-child bond that will last a lifetime.

**How to play with your child** – While children need time to play alone and with other children, playing with their parents is also important. Here are some helpful tips to encourage play:

*Establish regular play times.* It may be for twenty minutes before dinner every night or every Saturday morning, for example. Remember, this time spent playing together is benefiting both of you.

*Give your child your undivided attention.* Turn off the TV and your cell phone and make time to play with your child without distraction. Having your undivided attention makes your child feel special.

*Get down to your child's level.* That may mean getting down on your knees or sitting on the floor. Match your child's intensity during play — if your child is loud and energetic, be loud and energetic, too.

*Embrace repetition.* It may be boring to you, but it's not to your child. Children learn through repetition. Let your child play the same game over and over. Your child will move on when he or she is ready.

*Let your children take the lead.* Become part of their game rather than trying to dictate the play. In pretend play, let your child call the shots, make the rules, and determine the pace of play. Ask questions and follow along — you'll likely get drawn into imaginative new worlds that are fun for you, too.

*Don't force play or try to prolong a game.* The best way to teach a new skill is to show children how something works, then step back and give them a chance to try it. When your child grows tired of an activity, it's time to move on to something new.

*Make play age-appropriate and consider safety.* If a game is too hard or too easy, it loses its sense of pleasure and fun. Help your child find age-appropriate activities and understand any safety rules for play. Nothing ruins a fun game faster than a child getting hurt.

**How to play more** – Incorporating more fun and play into your daily life can improve the quality of your relationships, as well as your mood and outlook. Even in the most difficult of times, taking time away from your troubles to play or laugh can go a long way toward making you feel better. It's true what they say: laughter really is the best medicine. Laughter makes you feel good. And the positive feeling that comes from laughter and having fun remains with you even after the giggles subside. Play and laughter help you retain a positive, optimistic outlook through difficult situations, disappointments, and loss.

**Develop your playful side** – It's never too late to develop your playful, humorous side. If you find yourself limiting your playfulness, it's possible that you're self-conscious and concerned about how you'll look and sound to others when attempting to be lighthearted. Fearing rejection, embarrassment or ridicule when trying to be playful is understandable. Adults often worry that being playful will get them labeled as childish. But what is so wrong with that? Children are incredibly creative, inventive and are constantly learning. Wouldn't you want to be childish if that is the definition? Remember that as a child, you were naturally playful; you didn't worry about the reactions of other people. You can reclaim your inner child by setting aside regular, quality playtime. The more you play, joke, and laugh — the easier it becomes. Try to clear your schedule for an afternoon or evening, for example, and then turn off your phone, TV, computer, and other devices. Give yourself permission to do whatever you want for the time you've allotted. Be spontaneous, set aside your inhibitions and try something fun, something you haven't done since you were a kid, perhaps. And enjoy the change of pace.

**Creating opportunities to play** –

*Host a regular game night* with friends or family.

*Arrange nights out with work colleagues:* bowling, playing pool, miniature golf, or singing karaoke.

*Schedule time in a park* or at the beach to throw a Frisbee or fly a kite with friends.

*Play with a pet.* Puppies, especially, make very willing playmates. If you don't have your own, borrow one from your local animal shelter. *Surround yourself with playful people.* They'll help loosen you up and are more likely to support your efforts to play and have fun. *Joke with strangers* at a bus stop or in a checkout line. It'll make the time pass quicker and you may even spark up new friendships. *Visit a magic store* and learn some tricks or invest in art supplies, construction toys, or science kits and create something new.

*Play with children.* Goofing around with kids helps you experience the joy of play from their perspective. If you don't have young children, arrange a play date with your grandkids, nephews, nieces, or other young relatives.

**Other Resources:**

*5 ways to bring play back into your life* – Tips on being more playful as an adult. (Mayo Clinic)

*Playing with Your Child* – Tips on games to play with your children. (Child Development Institute)

Authors: Lawrence Robinson, Melinda Smith, M.A., Jeanne Segal, Ph.D., and Jennifer Shubin. Last updated: June 2019.

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