

EDCAST

Improving Mental Health Through Independent Play

Psychologist Peter Gray discusses how encouraging independent play fosters resilient, self-reliant, and mentally fit young people

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In a world increasingly dominated by structured routines and adult supervision, renowned psychologist [Peter Gray](#) is not surprised that children's mental health challenges and anxiety has been on the rise for decades.

"We are so overprotecting children, because we are so always there to solve their problems for them, they're not developing the sense that they can solve their own problem," Gray says, adding that clinical questionnaires conducted throughout the latter half of the 20th century showed a decline in locus of control for school-aged children as mental disorders rose. "How can you have an internal locus of control if you don't have experience controlling your own life? One thing that clinical psychologists have long known is that if you don't have a strong internal locus of control, that sets you up for anxiety and depression. No surprise. If I believe something can happen at any time, and there's nothing I can do about it, that's a very anxiety-provoking world. Things are frightening. I'm constantly anxious."

He cites many reasons for how we got to this place, including societal shifts and an education system focused on accountability. Gray, a professor emeritus at Boston College, advocates for the urgent need to reclaim the simple yet profound act of independent play, emphasizing its profound impact on children's happiness and long-term well-being.

In this episode, we explore the critical role of independent play in fostering resilient, self-reliant, and mentally healthy young individuals.

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Independent Play Key to Countering Childre...

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Transcript

JILL ANDERSON: I'm Jill Anderson. This is the Harvard EdCast.

Peter Gray knows independent play is crucial for children's well-being, yet play is widely disappearing from most children's lives, even though it may be key to addressing the current mental health crisis. Gray is a renowned psychologist who has spent decades researching children's play. He points out that the children's mental health crisis isn't a recent phenomenon. It goes back decades, through the late 20th century.

What led to this shift, he says, is a decline in children's play and a surge in adult-supervised activities and school accountability. He believes it's having detrimental effects on children, and we need to reclaim independent play. I asked him why independent play is so important for children.

PETER GRAY: Independent play provides all kinds of things for children. But if we're going to talk about the role of independent play and children's mental health, there are two things, two fundamental categories of things that it provides. First of all, independent play immediately is what makes children happy. Play makes children happy. Take play away from children, and they're not going to be so happy. It doesn't take a genius to think that if we deprive children of play, they're going to be kind of depressed.

There is a famous play researcher, Brian Sutton-Smith, who died a few years ago, and he used to say in his talks, the opposite of play is not work. The opposite of play is depression. We shouldn't be surprised by that. What is life without play?

And we have pretty much taken real play away from children. Children are designed to play. They're designed biologically to play. They've always played. And what play is is this activity that's initiated and directed by children away from adults. And we almost don't allow that to happen anymore except online.

Now, the other reason that play promotes mental health is play and other independent activities, where children are doing things on their own. Not being protected and directed, supervised by adults, is where children learn how to take charge of their own lives. It's where they learn how to solve problems. It's where they learn how to make friends.

It's where they learn how to deal with the natural bumps that occur in play, as well as in all of life. They learn how to deal with somebody who's not being nice to them, including how to deal with minor bullying. If they get hurt, they learn what they have to do about it. If they get lost, they find their way home.

It's almost impossible nowadays to get lost. But now, if you've got an iPhone, you can't get lost. But they learn to solve problems. They develop what psychologists call an internal locus of control,

which is an internal sense that I'm competent to take charge of my life. Something can happen to me, and it's not a disaster. I can take care of it.

But because we are so



overprotecting children, because we are so always there to solve their problems for them, they're not developing the sense that they can solve their own problems. In fact, there is a clinical questionnaire for assessing locus of control for school-aged children. And over the course of the second half of the 20th century, it was given to normative groups, from 1960s on. I think it was all teenagers.

And the finding was, that as play was going down, as mental disorders were going up, this sense of internal locus of control was going down. No surprise. How can you have an internal locus of control if you don't have experience controlling your own life?

One thing that clinical psychologists have long known is that if you don't have a strong internal locus of control, that sets you up for anxiety and depression. No surprise. If I believe something can happen at any time, and there's nothing I can do about it, that's a very anxiety-provoking world. Things are frightening. I'm constantly anxious.

Something could happen, and maybe there will be nobody there to protect me. And God knows I can't do anything about it. That's the kind of sense of helplessness that gets created when we deprive children of the opportunity to learn that they can do things, they can initiate things, they can solve problems on their own.

JILL ANDERSON: Social media has taken a lot of the blame for this anxiety in kids. But it doesn't exactly correlate in the research we're seeing about it so far. And a lot of kids these days have phones or watches. Their parents are tracking them. They really just don't have any sense of freedom at all.

PETER GRAY: Yeah, that's right. To me, that's the downside of the technology, is it's giving parents even more tools to keep track of their kids, to track them, to snoop on them. It's very hard for kids to get away from their parents.

Even when I was still teaching, and kids had cell phones, I'd see kids walking from class to class on their phone. And I was hoping they were talking to their girlfriend or their boyfriend. But no, if I listen, they're talking to their mom. This has become a long umbilical cord. And kids are not developing the sense of independence that they need to take control of their own lives.

JILL ANDERSON: Listening to you talk, I am thinking back to when I was a kid. And you probably hear this all the time. I'm a child of the 1900s, which makes it sound ancient. But according to the data, I was growing up in the 1980s. But I remember playing outside without adults, going off for hours with my friends in the woods, coming home when the streetlights came on. But this just doesn't seem to exist anymore for kids.

PETER GRAY: So it was already declining in the 1980s. But it was still present and present in some neighborhoods much more than others. It was really some events in the 1980s that helped lead to this change.

JILL ANDERSON: I'm wondering, how do we get to this place and whether we can go back to how things used to be?

PETER GRAY: So how we got to this place, I think that there are a number of reasons for it. There's evidence that the 1980s is when the steepest decline in children's freedom occurred and also, when the steepest increase in anxiety, depression, and suicide increased. Although, these changes were really occurring all the way from the 1960s on to the mid-1990s.

But there were several things that happened in the 1980s that played a big role. One is there were two cases, one in 1979 and one in 1981, of young boys who were kidnapped on the street by strangers and murdered. This really was played up in the media. Everybody heard about this.

The parents, at least of one of these murdered children, made a cause out of this about how dangerous it is for kids to be out in the street. Now, these were two cases out of millions and millions of kids out playing, right? So this is a very rare crime. It's always been rare. Any kind of kidnapping of kids by strangers has always been very, very rare.

But the media played it up in such a way, that people began to think, this is something that could happen to my child at any time. I still remember hearing public service announcements on the radio or television, saying, do you know where your child is now, as if you didn't know, you were a negligent parent. There was a period of time when milk cartons had pictures of missing children on the milk carton. And you would be eating your breakfast cereal, and you'd look at that milk carton and see a picture of a little girl or a little boy and think, that little girl or little boy must have been stolen away by strangers. This is a missing child.

All of this made you think this is very common. It's really dangerous out there. We began to have this phenomenon of stranger danger. Children were taught, don't speak to strangers. Stay away from strangers.

In the past, we were always told, if you get lost, ask a stranger. This is what happened partly as a result of that. So that was one of the causes.

The other thing that happened, also, beginning in the 1980s, is there was a government commissioned study of the education system that concluded that we are, as a nation, in danger because our children are not getting as rigorous an education. They're not doing as well on standardized exams as children in East Asia are. So we began to want to emulate the East Asian schools.

And ultimately, this led to the No Child Left Behind Act, to Common Core, ultimately led to changes, beginning in the 1980s, but then really accelerating in the beginning of the 21st century, led to changes in schooling that made schooling much more anxiety-provoking than it used to be. A lot of

the more pleasurable play-like activities, creative activities, that used to be part of school, were taken away for the sake of more drill for more tests.

Recess was cut down. Homework was instituted, even in elementary school, even in kindergarten, where it didn't exist or was very minor before. This all added to children's anxiety. When you ask teenagers, what makes you anxious? They say, school.

There was a study done in 2014 by the American Psychological Association. They do an annual study called Stress in America. But that year, they included teenagers. Normally, they just include adults. And teenagers were the most stressed out by the measures used. They're the most stressed out people in America, more so than adults.

When asked what it was that created their stress, 83% said, school. That doesn't mean that 83% said it was only school. But that was, far and away, the leading cause cited. The second leading cause, something like 40% or 45% said, my fear about my future, about getting into college, getting a good job.

So we have changed schooling. We have sent the message somehow to children, that if you're not doing extraordinarily well in school, you're a failure. And we have really, truly created mental disorder by that. I think those are the two big causes.

But related to that, we have been gradually substituting adult-directed activities out of school for what used to be free play. So when I was a kid in the 1950s, we played a lot of baseball. But it wasn't Little League baseball. It wasn't adult. We just went out to the vacant lot and created our own games.

We flew kites. We did all kinds of independent play. But already, beginning then, there were some places that had Little League baseball, adult directed. That's not play. That's a little bit more like school, where there's a coach telling you what to do, where you're being judged and evaluated. Do you make the team or not make the team?

Parents begin to start coming and watching it. And it's a whole different thing. And ultimately, this kind of thing began to grow, so that even younger children were-- instead of just playing, were put into adult-directed sports, other adult-directed activities. So even when children are not in school, they're being put into programs. People think of this as enrichment programs for the child. This is taking up children's time, and so they don't have time to just daydream and get bored, figure out what they want to do to overcome boredom, just do the things that children used to do.

JILL ANDERSON: What do you see the role of educators in trying to foster some independence or independent play?

PETER GRAY: I think educators need to undo some of the damage they are now doing. Let's do less testing. Let's go back to having full recesses. Let's make lunch hour an hour. Let's not give homework to little kids. There's no evidence that homework to little kids is valuable, and there's a lot of evidence that it's burning out kids even before they ever get to beyond elementary school.

I hear from kindergarten teachers, talking about their kindergarten kids being burned out. I don't think it's too strong to say this is child abuse to be doing this kind of thing. And a lot of teachers know it, but they claim they can't do anything about it, because their supervisors-- I've heard from kindergarten teachers who say, the principal comes in and takes away the play equipment because school is not a place to play.

Kindergarten used to be a place to play, and it should still be a place to play. And there should be opportunities for play in all the grades. And we've taken so much of that away.

School didn't used to be as damaging as it currently is. What schools are trying to do now is, instead of recognize that they're a big cause of the problem, and they need to fundamentally change what they're doing, instead of bringing in play, they're bringing in therapists. Instead of bringing in play, they're adding courses in social-emotional learning.

The way kids learn social-emotional skills is in play. There's simply-- I won't say a failure to recognize that, because I think most people do recognize it. But they don't do anything about it. They believe they can't do anything about it.

JILL ANDERSON: I'm sure there's lots of folks out there who would agree with you. And with the pandemic-- and I keep thinking about the amount of learning loss that has supposedly happened, I can't even fathom a world in education where they would go back to less testing and structured time.

PETER GRAY: That's just tragic that you can't fathom that. Kids are spending so much more time drilling, and so on. There is no evidence whatsoever that they're learning more than they used to learn before we had Common Core, before we had all this. We're running kids out. More time on all of this doesn't create more learning.

And also, this whole idea of learning, as if learning only occurs in school-- children are designed to learn in play. Children learn all kinds of skills in play, social skills, emotional skills. They learn how to build things. They learn how to solve problems.

I really hate this concept that learning is something that occurs in school and doesn't occur any place else. I would venture to say that there was more learning during the COVID closure than there was during school, more real learning. We actually did a little study during the COVID closure through the Let Grow organization, that I'm part of, in which we surveyed 1,600 families twice during the school closure, families that had children between the age of 8 and 13, and asked them about their experiences while this lockdown was occurring.

So it wasn't just school that was locked down, of course. It was also all these extracurricular activities. So children suddenly had more time. One of the questions for the kids was, are you more anxious or less anxious now than you were before school closure? Many more kids said less anxious than said more. And the parents also said, the same thing. Their kids are less anxious.

Anxiety levels went down. This was across age, across socioeconomic category. It was true for people of every race, every economic group. Anxiety went down. There's now been systematic studies showing that the rate of suicide among school-aged children dropped precipitously during the period of school lockdown. And it stayed down until schools opened up again.

We asked about what the children are doing. We asked both the children, and we asked the parents that. And the parents were amazed that the children would come up with all kinds of interesting things to do.

Some of them said, I want to cook. And the parent said, I never dreamed my child would want to cook. And they learned to cook. This is learning, right? Children learn how to use Zoom and other ways of connecting. They learn video games that they could play with their friends that they hadn't played before.

Many of them were reading books that they wanted to read, as opposed to books that they were forced to read by the school system. Parents commented on this. And they were very often impressed by the initiative and abilities of their child. Many of them said, I really think more highly of my own child now than I did before. Parents began to see what children can do when we aren't making them do what adult-directed stuff all the time.

JILL ANDERSON: Just to latch on to that last thing that you were saying-- because I do think a lot of this, in this moment, is up to parents and guardians. Our children have really structured lives, and

we have really structured lives. How can you begin, as a parent, to take some initiative and cultivate that independence in your child? Because I don't think our society necessarily encourages that.

PETER GRAY: Our society definitely does not encourage it. And so the question is, how can you do it? An increasing number of people are taking their children out of school. The rate of home-schooling has skyrocketed in recent years.

The evidence is that many of them, at least, if not most, are taking their children out of school because they recognize the school is damaging their children. It used to be that home-schooling was primarily being done by people who were fundamentalist, religious, and they were homeschooling for religious purposes. But that's not true of the new cohort of home-schoolers.

So a lot of people, in fact, over the course of COVID, realized, wait, my child is happier not going to school. My child is doing all of these interesting things. Why send my child back to school? Let's start homeschooling.

Many of those families stayed with home-schooling. This was particularly true with Black families, as it turns out. The rate of home schooling increased much more among Black families than among White families, partly because of the recognition that Black children even today are being discriminated against in many school settings.

We went from something like 5% of American school children being home-schooled prior to COVID to what's now something like 7% or 8%. For a while, it was 10% home-schooling. But within schools, I think that there are things that can happen.

So I'm one of the founders of an organization called Let Grow. Lenore Skenazy, who wrote the book *Free-Range Kids*, is another founder of it. And she and I and a couple of other people founded this organization. And among other things, we work with schools to bring more real play into schools, to bring independent activity into schools.

So one thing that parents can do is to find out about Let Grow and talk with the principal of their school about it. Is this something that you would consider, bringing these programs? So there are two basic programs that we've brought to schools, with considerable success. One of them is what schools have called Play Club. And this is an opportunity for free age-mixed play, where all the kids in the school who sign up for this-- and in many cases, it's, essentially, all the kids in the school-- play for an hour, age-mixed, using the school playground, the gymnasium, some of the indoor rooms in the school.

Every school so far does it either before school or after school, not during school. So this is in addition to school. Most schools just do it for an hour a week, but some schools are beginning to do it more often. And kids love it. And it turns out the teachers are learning a lot by watching the kids, those who monitor kids.

Sometimes, there'll be 100 kids or more, all playing at the same time. The only rule during Play Club is don't hurt anybody or don't deliberately break anything that's valuable. The teachers who monitor it are told that play is for the children to solve their own problems. Don't intervene in it unless there's a real emergency.

And then we talk about what could be a real emergency. We give them the example like, you're like a lifeguard on an ocean beach. You're not there to tell children how to play. You're not there to solve minor quarrels. You're not there to worry about skinned knees. You're only there if you really think that a life is in danger.

That might be a little bit of an exaggeration, but that's the way to begin thinking about it. And even then, count to 10 before you intervene. Because there's a pretty good chance that children will solve this problem themselves.

Well, this has turned out to be very valuable. The children love it. The parents say that when this occurs before school, the kids are telling the parents, be sure and get me to school early because we've got Play Club. And they really love this. It's nowhere near the amount of play that kids had in the past. It's like a cup of water on a desert.

We're actually now doing a systematic research study in the state of New Hampshire, sponsored by the state of New Hampshire, where some schools have Play Club. Others don't. And we're doing systematic research to determine the effects it has on children's mental well-being, their desire for school, their grades in school, and how many friends they make, and even how much play they engage in outside of Play Club. Does this stimulate them by making friends, by getting them familiar with play? Does this create more play outside of school?

So that's one of the programs that is very successful. We would like to see more schools adopt it. The other program is a much easier one to adopt. It just takes individual teachers wanting to do it. And this is called the Let Grow Experience.

And in this exercise, the teacher gives the children in his or her classroom an assignment every week of doing something outside of school by yourself that you've never done before. So this is an exercise in an independent activity, something that you've never done before. It might be something

you're a little bit afraid of doing. It might be something that your parents have been reluctant to allow you to do, in which case, you need to negotiate with your parents.

We're not asking you to do something that your parents would forbid you from doing. So you have to talk with your parents and see if they'll give you permission. And if they don't give you permission for exactly what you want to do, maybe you can negotiate and find out something similar to what you want to do that they would agree to.

This is an exercise in independent activity, where the children are thinking of something they really want to do. Some of the examples are, I want to ride my bicycle to my friend's house all by myself, two blocks away. This might be a 10-year-old girl who's never been allowed to do this before. Maybe her parents don't allow her to do it, but they will, as a first step, allow her to ride her bike all by herself around the block while they sit on the stoop and watch. And then the next week, maybe they'll allow her to do this other thing.

It turns out that what this does is it helps break this cycle of overprotection. The genius of this is because it's a school assignment, the parents have to take it seriously. So the parents can't just automatically say no. This is a school assignment, so the parents have to listen to the child, and they have to negotiate with the child.

One of the things that we've observed is that not only does the child feel happy and proud that I did this thing that I was a little afraid of-- I did it all by myself-- but the parent sees how happy the child is. And the parent feels proud that she or he allowed the child to do that. And so now the parent is a little bit more primed to support other independent activities for the child than the parent was before.

And this is actually something that I also just recommend to parents. Have a discussion with your child about some of the things that you would really like to do, but you haven't done, either because it seems a little frightening or maybe because you think I wouldn't allow it or maybe, actually, I haven't allowed it. But you would really like to do it. And let's have a discussion about that. And could you do it?

It's interesting, the kinds of things that people have come up with. And they're very similar to the things that parents observed that children began doing during COVID. Many kids, interestingly, want to cook. So maybe they'll start by just baking a cake or maybe helping out with the cooking.

And during COVID, some of them really wanted the pleasure of cooking an entire meal for their family by themselves. What a great thing. Talk about learning, one of the things that's happened--

because we think of learning only as schooling. Children today are not learning essential skills like cooking.

We hear from colleges that kids are going to college, not knowing how to do their own laundry. Kids actually want to do these things. And to allow them to do that is real learning. And these are some of the things that parents can do.

Stop thinking just about homework from school. That's only a small portion of real learning that's important for life. And yet, they're devoting so much time and so much anxiety and mental energy to that, at the neglect of the rest of their education.

JILL ANDERSON: Peter Gray is a research professor of psychology at Boston College. He is the author of many books, including *Free To Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-reliant, and Better Students For Life*. I'm Jill Anderson. This is the Harvard EdCast, produced by the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Thanks for listening.