

## Why Be Playful?

I was part of a study day recently in which one of the other participants said that he had never learnt anything of any value which hadn't be both difficult and painful. This rather puritanical view struck me as rather depressing and I've been trying to decide if my fellow student was stating a universal truth.

The notion of "difficult" is often yoked to the idea of pain, but I'm not so sure that this pairing is inevitable. The sense of achievement when a goal has been difficult is much greater than when it has been easy. Life provides us with challenge and stimulation. Even in our leisure time many of us seek out difficulty. Rather than rest and do nothing, we often engage in hobbies and pastimes that test us. We play sports; do the crossword puzzle; go to evening classes or develop our skills in cooking and gardening. We seek out difficulty because we find in it the opportunity to grow. Difficulty need not be painful rather it can be exhilarating.

We learn our most important lessons early in life: how to walk, talk, read, write, relate to others, and manage our emotions. These skills provide us with a foundation upon which we can build other skills whereas learning in later life is cumulative: we develop by building on what we can already do. By contrast, we develop our early life, primary skills from the potential with which we are born. Developing these early skills is difficult indeed. A very young child cannot read an instruction book, nor ask the advice of others, so what does she do instead? She plays. A pre-lingual child makes all the sounds she can and eventually, largely by happy accident, she makes sounds that adults recognise and applaud her for.

As adults we are less easy with the idea of creating happy accidents or of playing. Whatever other riches we take from childhood, few of us remain playful. Play is all about being experimental, of getting things wrong in order to work towards getting things right. Play involves being wasteful, making mistakes, making a mess, and being as interested in process as much as product. Children play well because they are determined; they are willing to be fascinated and absorbed. They tend to be less concerned than adults with clock time; and have a sense of joy and wonder and are, perhaps, at times a little cavalier and reckless.

Living life to the full is important: too important to take seriously.

Think of a current difficulty or problem you are facing now in your life. Remember now that wonderful resource from childhood of playfulness. A life well lived may be difficult for sure, but if learning and progressing are painful maybe you need to take the pain as an invitation to be more playful.

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Comments and feedback on this article are warmly welcomed.