



Presented at the 2026
IPA World Conference
in Christchurch,
New Zealand

The Child's Right to Play

IPA USA 2026 White Paper
Accessible Version: Part 6

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the Child's Right to Play*

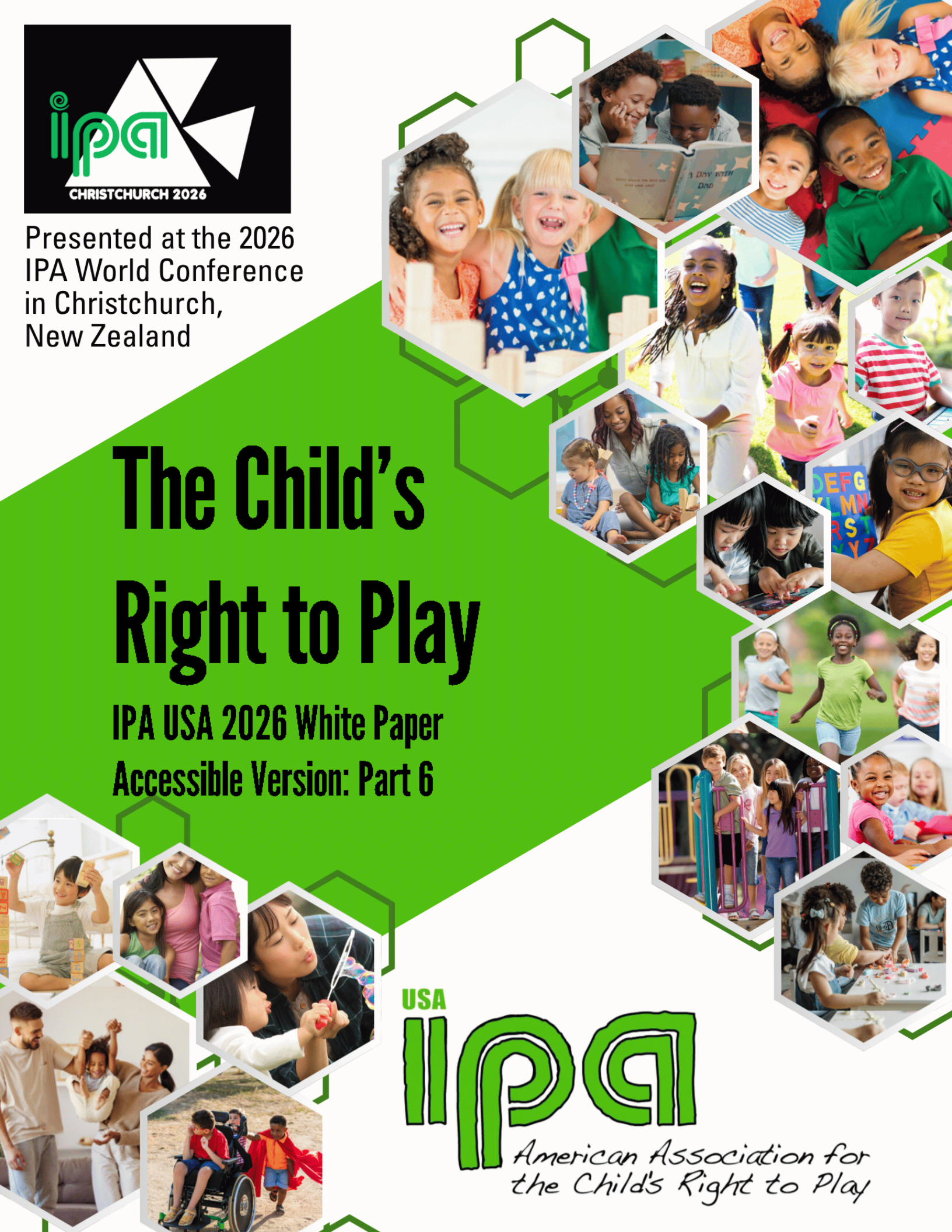


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Executive Summaries

Executive Summaries are organized by category, followed by author.



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Play Across the Lifespan

Play is a lifelong human need that contributes to learning, well-being, creativity, connection, and personal growth from infancy through older adulthood. While play is often associated with childhood, its benefits extend across every stage of life, supporting curiosity, resilience, relationships, and a sense of vitality. The articles in this category explore how playful experiences enrich educational settings, shape professional preparation, and foster engagement in adulthood. From the college classroom to broader reflections on play across the human lifespan, these authors challenge readers to reconsider play as something to be protected, encouraged, and celebrated at every age. Through research, reflection, and practical examples, they show that play is not something we outgrow, but a fundamental part of what it means to be fully alive, connected, and continually learning.

Authors

From the Womb to the Tomb: Play Across the Lifespan

April Kendrick, PhD & Kimberly Blitch, PhD
The University of Alabama
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“How come we never do anything fun?” Inspiring Play Advocates in the College Classroom

Stephanie Kuntz-McAllister, PhD

Being Fully and Vibrantly Alive Through Play: Play in the College Classroom

Sharon M. Peck, PhD

Playful Pedagogies and Preservice Teachers’ Mindsets

Sharon M. Peck, PhD; Tabitha Dell’Angelo, PhD; Tugce B. Arda Tuncdemir, PhD; Ruth V Guirguis, EdD; & Akosua Obuo Addo, PhD

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"What do most Nobel Laureates, innovative entrepreneurs, artists and performers, well-adjusted children, happy couples and families, and the most successfully adapted animals have in common? They play enthusiastically throughout their lives."

(Stuart Brown, Institute of Play)

Introduction

Play is the fundamental right of children (U.N. Article 31, 1989). There are a plethora of studies spanning across fields of education, human development, psychology, and pediatrics on the benefits and impacts of play on physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Frost, 1998; Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012; Saracho & Spokek, 1998; Sanders, 2010). Play is a state of mind, a way of being, an attitude or motivation rather than a behavior (National Institute for Play, N.D). However, the concept of play remains constrained during early childhood, perhaps due to pressures for academic success, the demand for standardized and structured activities in early grades, and even an influx of technology.

Conclusion of Benefits of Lifespan Play

Play is a fundamental aspect of human experience extending beyond childhood, offering invaluable benefits across various life stages. Research suggests that play significantly enhances cognitive skills throughout one's life, fostering problem-solving skills, enhancing cognitive flexibility, and encouraging critical thinking and creativity. The nature of play evolves, but the benefits are the same. Play supports cognitive agility and neural plasticity and serves as an essential outlet for emotional expression and regulation. Play relieves stress, providing relief and joy, thus improving mood, mental health, and well-being. It fosters connection, a sense of community, and belonging (Howes & Matheson, 1992). Play supports balance, strength, and coordination, encouraging physical activity. Playing outdoors offers unique benefits, including

connection with nature, which also supports mental health and well-being. Regular participation in physical play reduces the risk of chronic diseases and contributes to long-term health.

Engaging in play throughout life fosters lifelong learning and adaptability. As individuals encounter new challenges, whether personal or professional, experiences gained through playful learning can help them adapt to new situations.

The stress-free nature of play encourages curiosity and exploration, facilitating continuous learning well into older age (Flack et al., 2023). By nurturing a playful mindset, individuals remain open to new ideas and experiences, enhancing their ability to cope with change (Guralnick & Groom, 1987).

In conclusion, play is a lifelong necessity—an essential component of human growth, connection, and well-being. From prenatal movement to the cognitive and emotional enrichment experienced in older adulthood, play remains central to how individuals learn, adapt, and thrive. Play opportunities for all ages matter across contexts, from learning and schooling to work, hobbies and pastimes, and community-building settings. Recognizing play as a fundamental human need across the lifespan requires shifting societal attitudes, educational practices, and community planning. We invite readers to consider how to integrate play into the settings and contexts we move through daily, from our workplaces to family reunions. By valuing and nurturing play across developmental stages, we promote healthier individuals, stronger families, and more connected communities.

“How come we never do anything fun?”
Inspiring Play Advocates in the College Classroom

Stephanie Kuntz-McAllister, PhD

Introduction

One day, my undergraduate students came into my classroom already engaged in a fervent discussion about the struggles they are having in their classes. I listened to the usual complaints of too much reading, unfair grading, and long lectures. What I then heard from them completely reshaped my teaching philosophy:

“How come we never do anything fun? All we ever talk about is how kids learn best, but I don’t think they [instructors] even care about how we learn best.”

This statement shook me to my core. I had to pause and reflect on my own practices. *Do I do fun things in my class? Is my class engaging? Am I teaching in a way that is actually conducive to learning? Am I actually modeling what I want my students to be? Is my teaching going to inspire my students to be play advocates?* I was inspired to be better, and frankly terrified by the possibility that I could evolve into the type of instructor I hated as a college student. I chose to critically evaluate how aligned my beliefs about teaching and play were to the practices in which I was *actually* engaging. I also began to consider how my actions were influencing the professionals my students will become. This paper will discuss strategies I have utilized for integrating play into my college classroom to promote learning and inspire my students to become play advocates, and discuss the reflection process I underwent to develop those strategies.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

How you choose to integrate play into your classroom will be unique to you, your course material, and your students. What works well in my classroom may not work well for you. I encourage you to experiment with different strategies and approaches to find what ignites a passion for play in your students. Integrating play in the ivory tower of academia is a challenge that requires innovation, passion, and sometimes failure. It may be hard, but our students are desperate for play. Our world needs more passionate play

advocates, and you have the opportunity to shape the next generation of advocates for play. So, ask yourself, *do we ever do anything fun in my class?*

Being Fully and Vibrantly Alive Through Play: Play in the College Classroom

Sharon M. Peck, PhD

Introduction

Higher education is one of the least playful environments that adults encounter, despite a growing body of research demonstrating the developmental, cognitive, and social benefits of play across the lifespan. This white paper reflects on my experience engaging college students in studying the role of play in their lives and using improvisation games as a catalyst for playful writing. While the course was intended to support novice writers through freewriting, applied improvisation, and playful exploration, the most profound outcome was my unexpected transformation as an educator. Integrating play reshaped classroom dynamics, strengthened relationships, and challenged entrenched academic norms. It clarified for me the power that play has for teaching, learning, and living fully.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Implications for Higher Education

This case study suggests that integrating play into higher education has far-reaching implications:

- *Play Supports Student Learning:* Play reduces anxiety, increases intrinsic motivation, and supports deeper engagement with content. It helps students take risks, develop voice, and build community.
- *Play Humanizes Educators:* When educators embrace play, they model authenticity, vulnerability, and joy. This strengthens relationships and creates more inclusive learning environments.
- *Play Counters Burnout:* Play offers a pathway to professional renewal, helping educators reconnect with their purpose and creativity.
- *Play Challenges Rigid Academic Norms:* Integrating play disrupts assumptions about what learning should look like. It invites institutions to reconsider how they define rigor, professionalism, and success.

- *Play Is a Lifespan Need*: Higher education must recognize that adults need play just as children do. Universities can become spaces where play is not only permitted but celebrated.

Higher education does not need more efficiency. It needs more aliveness. Improvisation and spontaneous play offer a pathway — not only for student learning but also for educator well-being, creativity, and joy. They remind us that teaching is a relational, imaginative, deeply human act. When we allow ourselves to play, we create classrooms where everyone can breathe again, where curiosity returns, where connection deepens, where learning feels like discovery, and where we — educators and students alike — feel fully, vibrantly alive. Play is not a luxury. Play is a lifeline. And it is available to all of us, at any moment, if we are willing to say: yes.

Playful Pedagogies and Preservice Teachers' Mindsets

Sharon M. Peck, PhD; Tabitha Dell'Angelo, PhD; Tugce B. Arda Tuncdemir, PhD;
Ruth V. Guirguis, EdD; & Akosua Obuo Addo, PhD

Introduction

Although play is widely recognized as central to early learning, higher education often treats it as incompatible with rigor. Grounded in play-based pedagogy and growth-mindset theory, this multisite pre-post study examined whether embedding playful elements in teacher preparation programs [TPPs] shifts preservice teachers' [PSTs] attitudes toward play. Using MANOVA, we found a significant reduction in non-playful attitudes after the intervention, but no statistically significant change in playful attitudes. Age mattered: The highest playful attitudes appeared among PSTs aged 18–22 and over 38, with a dip among those 28–33. Findings suggest mid-adulthood pressures may suppress playfulness, while targeted curricular and environmental strategies can help revitalize it. Results underscore the value of experiential, play-infused learning for creativity, engagement, and reflective practice across teacher education and professional development (Dweck, 2006; Mezirow, 2018; Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Conclusion/Recommendations

Results

RQ1 change in playful attitudes over time. The multivariate effect of pre/post status was significant (Pillai's Trace = .039, $F(2,188) = 3.852$, $p = .023$). Univariate showed no significant change in playful attitudes ($F(1,189) = 1.028$, $p = .312$), but a significant reduction in non-playful attitudes ($F(1,189) = 7.710$, $p = .006$), with post-test scores lower ($M = 2.57$, $SD = .78$) than pre-test ($M = 2.75$, $SD = .82$).

RQ2 age differences in playful attitudes. Age yielded a significant multivariate effect (Pillai's Trace = .259, $F(10,378) = 5.617$, $p < .001$). Playful attitudes were highest among PSTs over 38 ($M = 3.83$, $SD = .59$) and 18–22 ($M = 3.62$, $SD = .57$); lowest for 28–33 ($M = 2.94$, $SD = .57$). Non-playful attitudes also varied ($F(5,189) = 6.378$, $p < .001$), highest over 38 ($M = 3.46$, $SD = .71$) and lowest 28–33 ($M = 2.15$, $SD = .64$).

RQ3 (Interaction). No significant interaction emerged between time and age for either outcome (all $p > .24$), indicating age did not moderate pre–post patterns.

Two takeaways stand out. First, a single semester of play-integrated coursework reduced resistance (non-playful attitudes) but did not yet boost playful mindsets to a statistically significant degree. Transforming adult beliefs likely requires multi-semester, program-level commitments with iterative practice and reflection (Dweck, 2006; Mezirow, 2018). Second, age patterns suggest a dip in playfulness during the 28–33 range—possibly due to career-family pressures and institutional norms valorizing control and outputs—followed by a rebound after 38 as confidence and autonomy grow. This arc echoes scholarship on how formal constraints can narrow play perspectives over time (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Zhulamanova & Raisor, 2020) and how guided, hands-on exposure can renew advocacy for play (Canaslan-Akyar & Sevimli-Celik, 2022; Galbraith, 2022).

The “true fun” triad—playfulness, connection, flow—offers a practical lever (Price, 2024). Classrooms that normalize risk, embed authentic tasks, and structure connection enable deeper engagement; movement, attention breaks, and light-touch games can scaffold flow (Bloomer & Marchese, 2016; Bonilla, 2024; Lengel & Kuczala, 2010). In music and arts contexts, aligning growth-mindset practices with playful making can democratize artistry and build resilience (Hare, 2024; Koops & Taggart, 2011; Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

Recommendations include:

- *Program-wide infusion.* Move from isolated “play units” to a coherent, longitudinal sequence in coursework, fieldwork, and reflection. Treat play as a pedagogical stance—not an add-on—supported by transparent rationales and outcomes (Forbes, 2021; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020).
- *Culture of care.* Engineer environmental signals—spontaneity, informality, flexibility, psychologically safe risk-taking—to counter rhetorics that frame play as unserious (Noddings, 2002; Sutton-Smith, 1997).

- *Age-sensitive design.* Offer differentiated pathways: mentoring and flexible formats for mid-career PSTs; leadership and co-design roles for older PSTs; structured reflection for younger cohorts to connect play with learning evidence (Rodriguez-Meehan, 2022; Zhulamanova & Raisor, 2020).
- *Professional development.* Extend playful pedagogy into in-service learning to refresh practice and reduce burnout through creative, collaborative professional development opportunities (Slade & Gallagher, 2021).

Embedding playful elements across TPPs can dislodge resistance to play even within a semester, a promising first step toward culture change. Achieving measurable gains in playful mindsets likely requires sustained, program-level design that blends growth-mindset practices, hands-on creative work, and reflective cycles (Dweck & Yeager, 2019; Mezirow, 2018). When teacher education treats play as rigorous, relational, and purposeful, future educators are better equipped to cultivate classrooms where curiosity, experimentation, and joy fuel deep learning (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; 2020).

White Papers



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Problem Statement

For adults, permission and opportunities for play are further constrained. Often, play is seen as a child-exclusive endeavor, not as important across the lifespan. Is this because as we age, we lose the understanding, joy, and ability to play? Yet research shows that play not only matters but also offers significant *benefits* as we age.

Despite the many conferences, summits, and initiatives devoted to play (IPA, NAEYC, US Play Coalition), justification and advocacy for play still seem needed. This paper will outline the role of play across the lifespan to highlight its value not just in childhood but throughout a person's life.

Background

Play in Childhood

Prenatal Play

While less studied, research on fetal development through the lens of play behaviors shows that the exploratory behaviors exhibited by the unborn child resemble those seen in infants, suggesting an intrinsic need or drive to engage with the environment in novel ways. Using 4D ultrasound to observe fetal movement, Harmon et al. (2014) highlighted complex motor behaviors (kicking, stretching, turning) between 24 and 28 weeks gestation. These movements are not simply reflexive; they are early signs of intentional exploratory behavior in large motor development.

Similarly, Windrim et al. (2006) used 4D ultrasound to document complex fetal movements to examine health and well-being. Other studies explore fetal behaviors related to sensory systems such as hearing and responsiveness to sounds (Hepper & Shahidullah, 1994), where fetuses begin to respond to sound around the 25th week of gestation, which may have implications for language development and cognition. We see bonding and recognition of the mother's voice postnatally (Andrade et al., 2021; DeCasper & Fifer, 1980), which plays a pivotal role in maternal bonding with her infant and thus facilitates attachment. These studies support the idea that early fetal behaviors lay the foundation for infant well-being and likely influence exploration and play-like activities.

Play During Infancy and Toddlerhood

In infancy, play continues to facilitate all domains of development as babies begin exploring their world. Play may be enhanced with parents, siblings, and family members through games like peek-a-boo and by imitating a baby's facial expressions, which ultimately strengthen serve-and-return pathways, communication, and language development. It is through play, such as dropping a toy from the highchair and the parent picking it up to hand it back, that an infant begins to understand cause and effect and their influence on the world around them. They begin to understand objects and people, and develop initial understandings of schemata and concepts.

Babies learn best through experiences and their senses, a fundamental aspect of Constructivist learning theory. Highlighted by pioneers such as Piaget (1964) and Vygotsky (1978), Constructivist learning theory illustrates how play is central to child development, positing that learning is not passive, but actively constructed by the learner through exploration and experience. Through various types and forms of play, children engage in hands-on exploration, social interaction, and a variety of physical experiences through which they actively construct knowledge.

This learning becomes even more important as children become toddlers and seek autonomy. During this time, they engage in parallel and then associative play (Parten, 1932) and move toward more interaction with others. Vygotsky introduced the importance of social influences through his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, highlighting the value of engaging with someone more knowledgeable to support learning and exploration through guidance and co-constructed knowledge. The experienced partner can be an older sibling or peer who can elevate a child's learning and performance (Zuckow, 1989) and help the child access knowledge they cannot gain alone.

Play During the Preschool Years

As children age, play remains the primary conduit for learning, especially as their play becomes more complex with environments, materials, and peers. Preschool helps build skills children will find useful in school, such as working in groups, sharing, negotiating, resolving conflicts, and learning self-advocacy skills. (Erickson, 1985; Hurwitz, 2003; McElwain & Volling, 2005; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). Preschool creates opportunities to engage and play with peers in a variety of ways. Most preschools have learning centers that facilitate learning and play.

Additionally, opportunities to engage in play on the playground also help to encourage development. Outdoor play and nature spaces are valuable, providing rich, hands-on learning that promotes children's overall well-being (Kiviranta et al., 2023) and supports school readiness (Zhu et al., 2024). Children who attend preschool are better adjusted in elementary school (Ladd & Price, 1987).

Play During School Age

Play does not diminish in importance for school-age children, but it shifts in how children engage; play evolves. Piaget illustrates this shift as children enter the concrete operational stage (Piaget, 1964). During this time, children often engage in sports and board games, which have high cognitive demands. Social negotiation in play becomes essential (Winter & Goldfield, 1991), and children's reasoning and understanding of others' perspectives evolve into more complex collaborative play.

Educators are encouraged to create environments that facilitate both unstructured and structured play, allowing children to transition fluidly between different types of play and learning opportunities. This variety provides opportunities to learn in various formats (e.g., large- and small-group, learning centers, routines) and across a spectrum of instructional types that guide play (Hirsh-Pasek & Cook [NAEYC], 2017). Understanding this evolution is critical for educators and parents to foster environments that support children's overall growth and learning.

For adolescents and emerging young adults, play often takes the form of hobbies, recreational sports, creative endeavors, and exploration. These activities promote stress relief, identity formation, and social bonding.

Context of Play in Adulthood

Whether it loses importance or adults have simply forgotten how to play in an ambition-driven world, adults spend less time engaged in overtly playful activities. However, play still serves important psychological and social functions. Adults involved in playful leisure pursuits tend to report higher well-being, better work–life balance, improved emotional resilience, problem-solving, and creative engagement, which enhances innovation and collaboration (NIFP, N.D.).

Play is often used as a paradigm in several therapeutic contexts, including play therapy with children, the role of play in medical preparation and distraction in child life settings, and pediatric healthcare (Dag et al., 2021). In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that pediatricians "prescribe" play to families, recognizing that play is essential for healthy brain development, stress reduction, and social-emotional skills.

These examples illustrate how play is used in professional, evidence-based practice to support child development by instructing and guiding parents to engage as play partners. Instructions such as observing and following the child's lead, without taking over play, are key to an effective play partnership.

Playful Learning

In Kendrick's 2013 study on play behaviors, she examined the role teachers play while engaging children on the playground. Coded for child and teacher behaviors, she found teachers fall into different categories: observer, safety monitor, stage manager, facilitator, and play partner. The study found that more didactic teachers unintentionally disrupted play when they tried to engage with children. Children ceased playing and shifted to attention-seeking behaviors from the teacher in what Kendrick identified as a "policeman effect."

However, the belief that adults play an important role in modeling and engaging in children's play is still supported and encouraged. For example, the Life is Good Playmaker Project (Gross, 2011) teaches and encourages adults to enter play to understand children's development, for the benefit and joy of the adult engaged in play. This foundation works with educators and adults, often following natural disasters as a way of healing the community through play. Interestingly, at the World Association for Infant Mental Health (WAIMH) 2023 conference, a panel session was held on supporting young children in natural disasters (Wantanabe, H., et al., 2023). The panelists shared a common theme: play helped communities heal after natural disasters. This was a global truth and powerful message.

Playful Learning in the College Classroom

As University faculty, we observe that pre-service teachers are often intimidated or inhibited when asked to explore and play with materials they would likely use in the early childhood classroom. They often revert to achieving tasks in the "correct way" and are less likely to engage in play for exploration and joy. While pre-service teachers may see the connection between play and learning, they may struggle to use play to achieve learning outcomes (Szilagyi et al., 2015). Building experiential learning activities helps pre-service teachers overcome inhibition and engage more fully in playful approaches

when working with children in the classroom. How can they model if they are not willing to explore themselves?

Play in the Workplace

In some areas of leadership, play is discussed as a strategy to build team cohesiveness, foster joy in the workplace, and improve worker performance. Play improves leadership, employee satisfaction, retention, problem-solving, and creativity (Johnson, 2014). Even in adulthood, play helps maintain cognitive sharpness, strengthen relationships, and provide outlets for self-expression (National Institute for Play, N.D.). Adults engage in play to support their children's development but also to experience joy, connection, and renewal for themselves. Furthermore, adults who regularly participate in social clubs, supper clubs, board-game groups, or recreational athletics benefit from increased social connectedness and reduced feelings of isolation. Engaging in playful activities may counterbalance chronic stress and contribute to improved cardiovascular and mental health (Robinson, L. et al., 2025).

Play Among Senior Adults

Engaging in play activities, whether through digital games, traditional games, or other playful interactions, offers multiple benefits for senior adults. These activities enhance cognitive function, promote social connections, improve physical health, and support overall well-being. Cognitive stimulation is one of the most significant benefits of play for older adults. Digital games encourage intellectual engagement through brain-training and problem-solving elements, potentially mitigating age-related cognitive decline. These games often involve physical movements that enhance motor skills and cognitive processing, fostering intellectual activity as seniors navigate challenges during play and contributing positively to mental acuity (Boj et al., 2018). Engagement in play correlates with improved executive functions, potentially leading to better memory and information processing capabilities (Guo et al., 2021; Tsai et al., 2017).

Play serves as a crucial avenue for social engagement among older adults. Shared play experiences contribute to improved emotional well-being and life satisfaction among seniors, underscoring the role of social interaction in promoting mental health (Hirao et al., 2012; Suzuki et al., 2014).

Physical health benefits are also evident among older adults who incorporate playful activities. Exergames, which combine physical exercise with gaming, encourage seniors to move. By making physical activity enjoyable, these games support overall fitness, which is closely linked to improved cognitive function (Rosi et al., 2025). Furthermore, the motivational aspects of games may encourage older adults to participate in physical activity, reducing sedentary behavior that can exacerbate health issues (Cai et al., 2025).

Playful interactions can also significantly enhance psychological well-being. Enjoyable activities foster positive affect, which is linked to greater resilience and stress relief among older adults (Dingle et al., 2021; Wangliu, 2023). Structured play activities have shown promise in alleviating depression symptoms and enhancing quality of life, as they encourage active participation in social settings, allowing seniors to build support networks and camaraderie (Milani et al., 2025; Hirao et al., 2012). By fostering an environment where seniors can partake in playful activities, whether through traditional or digital formats, we can significantly enhance their quality of life and promote healthy aging.

Multigenerational Play

Multigenerational play, involving interaction between children and their grandparents or other elders (aka "Grandfriends"), offers numerous mutual benefits that support the developmental, emotional, and social outcomes for participants of all ages. Older generations have traditionally held many roles, such as providing supplemental caregiving, sharing wisdom, and passing down family traditions, while younger generations share up-to-date knowledge (Uhlenberg & de Jong Gierveld, 2004). One significant advantage is stronger social skills and emotional bonds within families. Interactions in play spaces designed for different generations create shared experiences that promote understanding and emotional connection between children and older adults (Farrell, 2025; Yohannan et al., 2025). They not only allow for skill transfer but also strengthen family ties, aiding in the emotional well-being of both age groups.

Multigenerational play has been shown to positively impact child development. Older adults often serve as mentors or facilitators of play, sharing knowledge and experiences that enrich children's learning and socialization. This facilitative role provides cognitive stimulation for older adults, enhancing their mental health and well-being (Farrell, 2025). This intergenerational interaction fosters resilience and holistic development in children, as they benefit from the diverse perspectives and experiences of older generations.

The University of Alabama lab school pairs classes of young children with senior adults for music, movement, and story time. This interaction strengthens bonds, reduces isolation, and improves psychosocial well-being in older adults (Kaufman et al., 2016; Hirao et al., 2012), while also enhancing young children's experiences through "grandfriends."

Nurturing these intergenerational bonds is essential. Grandparents often play a critical role in their grandchildren's holistic development, leading to better outcomes in socialization and emotional stability while also promoting the continuity of cultural and familial traditions and giving children a sense of identity and belonging (Farrell, 2025). Additionally, children may experience fewer behavioral issues and develop improved coping strategies through the emotional support these meaningful interactions provide (Yohannan et al., 2025).

Implementing these communal strategies can significantly enhance the fabric of community life, creating networks of support that benefit all age groups (Farrell, 2025; Yohannan et al., 2025). Older generations' ability to contribute positively to children's lives underscores the importance of maintaining intergenerational relationships within modern family and community structures.

Conclusion of Benefits of Lifespan Play

Play is a fundamental aspect of human experience extending beyond childhood, offering invaluable benefits across various life stages. Research suggests that play significantly enhances cognitive skills throughout one's life, fostering problem-solving skills, enhancing cognitive flexibility, and encouraging critical thinking and creativity. The nature of play evolves, but the benefits are the same. Play supports cognitive agility

and neural plasticity and serves as an essential outlet for emotional expression and regulation. Play relieves stress, providing relief and joy, thus improving mood, mental health, and well-being. It fosters connection, a sense of community, and belonging (Howes & Matheson, 1992). Play supports balance, strength, and coordination, encouraging physical activity. Playing outdoors offers unique benefits, including connection with nature, which also supports mental health and well-being. Regular physical play reduces the risk of chronic disease and supports long-term health.

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The stress-free nature of play encourages curiosity and exploration, facilitating continuous learning well into older age (Flack et al., 2023). By nurturing a playful mindset, individuals remain open to new ideas and experiences, enhancing their ability to cope with change (Guralnick & Groom, 1987).

In conclusion, play is a lifelong necessity—an essential component of human growth, connection, and well-being. From prenatal movement to the cognitive and emotional enrichment experienced in older adulthood, play remains central to how individuals learn, adapt, and thrive. Play opportunities for all ages matter across contexts, from learning and schooling to work, hobbies and pastimes, and community-building settings. Recognizing play as a fundamental human need across the lifespan requires shifting societal attitudes, educational practices, and community planning. We invite readers to consider how to integrate play into the settings and contexts we move through daily, from our workplaces to family reunions. By valuing and nurturing play across developmental stages, we promote healthier individuals, stronger families, and more connected communities.

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“How come we never do anything fun?”
Inspiring Play Advocates in the College Classroom

Stephanie Kuntz-McAllister, PhD

Introduction

One day, my undergraduate students came into my classroom already engaged in a fervent discussion about the struggles they are having in their classes. I heard the usual complaints: too much reading, unfair grading, and long lectures. What I then heard from them completely reshaped my teaching philosophy:

“How come we never do anything fun? All we ever talk about is how kids learn best, but I don’t think they [instructors] even care about how we learn best.”

This statement shook me to my core. I had to pause and reflect on my own practices. *Do I do fun things in my class? Is my class engaging? Am I teaching in a way that is actually conducive to learning? Am I actually modeling what I want my students to be? Will my teaching inspire my students to be play advocates?* I was inspired to be better, and frankly terrified by the possibility that I could evolve into the type of instructor I hated as a college student. I chose to critically evaluate how aligned my beliefs about teaching and play were with the practices I was *actually* engaging in. I also began to consider how my actions were influencing the professionals my students will become. This paper will discuss strategies I have used to integrate play into my college classroom to promote learning and inspire my students to become play advocates, and the reflection process I underwent to develop those strategies.

Problem Statement

As college instructors, we have a responsibility to support our students’ educational success and help prepare them for their careers beyond the classroom. As play advocates, I believe we also have a responsibility to inspire students with the power of play in our classrooms so they can learn better and become play advocates themselves. This is a challenging task, as academia and play are two words often not used in the same sentence. Play and work are often perceived as contrary forces that cannot coexist in the same activity and space. However, in the wise words of Dr. Stuart

Brown, “The opposite of play is not work; the opposite of play is depression.” (Brown & Vaughan, 2009, pg. 126). Bringing play into spaces designed to shut it out takes intentionality and creativity. Through critical reflection, innovative and creative strategies, and lots of trial and error, we can help play infiltrate the ivory tower of academia.

Background

Play is widely undervalued and underutilized in the college classroom (Forbes, 2021). Play offers many benefits and can help create a classroom environment conducive to learning (Hasheem, 1994). Playful practices in the college classroom can enhance learning, ignite motivation, improve student affect, and cultivate a warm, safe classroom climate (Forbes, 2021). Play offers many learning benefits, and by modeling playful practices in the college classroom, we can help students understand the power of play and become advocates for it in the field.

Appropriate Approaches/Strategies

I will outline the process I used to create a classroom that integrates playful practices and inspires students to become play advocates, starting with my inspiration and beliefs, then how I set the classroom tone, and how I structure my assignments to integrate play.

Find Your Inspiration and Reflect on Your Beliefs

The first step I took to integrate more playful practices was to reflect on what I believe about play and learning. I looked at the Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How of my play story in the classroom. If you are thinking about integrating more play into your classroom, I encourage you to take some time to reflect on your own play story by asking yourself the following questions:

What is play? Outlining what I view as play helped me form a clearer vision of what play could look like in my classroom.

My students know I am a perpetual seeker of definitions. This is a fault when it comes to defining play, as play does not fit neatly into a definition, and some play

theorists oppose an absolute definition of play. Instead, I explored characteristics of play identified by play theorists (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Johnson et al., 2005) and identified the recurring characteristics that resonated most with me. For me, play sparks joy, engages me to the point where I enter a flow state and lose track of time, allows for flexible or creative thinking, is voluntary but can happen during a compulsory activity, and, most of all, *feels like play*.

Why do I care so much about play? Identifying my “why” helped motivate me to change. I often look back to my “why” for continuing inspiration.

I tried to explore my “why” beyond the empirical support for the benefits of play. On a personal level, I care about play because it has changed my life. Play has helped me find resilience in hardship, brought me joy to the mundane, and served as a tool for connection with others. Play has done so much more than just influence my life; play has given me life.

Who inspired me as a play advocate and instructor? According to Bandura’s Social Learning Theory, we learn by observing others (Bandura, 1977). Consider who you admire and whose behavior you would like to model in the classroom.

I think of the instructors I had in school who made coming to class exciting, the mentors who have demonstrated the joy and resilience of play, and the children who play fervently. Those individuals have gained more than my respect; they hold my reverence for their passion for play.

Where and When am I already integrating play into my teaching practice? Identifying where you already integrate play can help you engage more intentionally and build on it. Sometimes, we develop playful practices organically. If you can identify those naturally playful opportunities, you can engage in them more intentionally and more often.

When I started teaching, I had misguided concerns that playfulness could be considered “unprofessional.” I tried to teach the way I thought a college instructor should. Despite my efforts to be someone that I am not, my playfulness often came out

in humor and opportunities for creative expression. It was much more natural for me to build on the playful practices I was already using than to integrate new ones.

How can I integrate play into my classroom better?

This question, along with copious amounts of brainstorming and tapping into my roots in early childhood education, led me to some of the playful practices I will outline next.

Setting the Classroom Tone

I believe the first step in creating a culture of play in the classroom is building relational safety and belonging, starting on day one. I typically start the semester by greeting each student individually as they enter the classroom. Students create nametags on the first day of class. They have free rein to do whatever they want with their nametag, as long as it is readable; this includes the option to NOT decorate it because play is not compulsory. I provide markers, stickers, crayons, cardstock, and other miscellaneous craft supplies. To encourage conversations and collaboration among students, I provide a limited number of supplies. If a student wants a dinosaur sticker, they have to find the student with the sheet of dinosaur stickers and ask them to share. I have seen this strategy spark conversations between students and ultimately create community in the classroom.

For our introductory online activities, students can write a paragraph or create a visual in response to prompts. I provide students with an example visual to introduce myself using a collage of words, photos, and playful humor. On snow days when class is asynchronous, I award extra credit to students who submit a photo or description of how they played in the snow. You may notice all of these activities allow students to opt in or out of creative expression and playfulness, without fear of it lowering their grade.

I regularly bring manipulatives to class for students to play and learn. One of my favorite activities in my Child Development class is having students pick some household materials (without knowing what they are for). Then, they must come up with ways to play with a child using those materials to promote a specific domain of

development. If you do this activity, I highly encourage you to include a lint roller and see how creative your students can be!

Creating a culture of play is hard to accomplish midway through a semester, as I have unfortunately learned from experience. I recommend integrating playful practices on the very first day of class.

Empower Students as Advocates

In every course I teach, I give my students an inspirational pep talk. In this talk, an adult in a position of authority tells them they are important, that their work will change children and families' lives, that they have incredible power to do good, and that their careers will shape the world we live in. For some students, this is the first time they are told that they matter and can make a difference in their communities. This sentiment continues throughout the course.

Model Skills You Want Your Students to Develop

Consider the skills you want your students to leave your class with. What you choose to model depends on what you value. Since I want my students to leave my course empowered as play advocates to the children and families they serve, I must model that I am a play advocate through my approach to teaching. I try to keep my lectures playful and engaging. For example, I teach classical and operant conditioning using pictures of my dogs. I also throw in the occasional comic, meme, and bad joke in a slideshow to keep humor woven into our class. I want my students to be lifelong learners who find joy in what they do. When I attend conferences, I often share photos and something I learned that relates to our course content. I want my students to be flexible when they face challenges, which means I have to be flexible when things don't go as planned, especially with classroom technology.

Structure Your Assignments to Integrate Play

Once a playful classroom tone is established, students flourish when given opportunities for play in their assignments. I reshaped the core assignments in my Child Development course to let students choose how to demonstrate their understanding of course content through an open-ended assignment format. Students are given a list of

several questions they would typically answer in an essay format. With the option of an open-ended assignment format, students can choose to write a traditional essay, create a podcast, an informational booklet, a recorded presentation, or, if they have an alternative idea, run it by me for approval. Students have developed infographics, an advertisement for their future business, a song, a website, and an informational social media post to demonstrate their learning. Importantly, students can complete a traditional essay format if they prefer. This approach lets students play, be creative, and choose their own format. In an anonymous survey collecting feedback on these open-ended format assignments, 96% of students said they enjoyed having the option to choose how they completed their project, 92% of students believed the open-ended format helped them learn better, and 92% of students felt proud of the work that they submitted.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

How you choose to integrate play into your classroom will be unique to you, your course material, and your students. What works well in my classroom may not work well for you. I encourage you to experiment with different strategies and approaches to find what ignites your students' passion for play. Integrating play in the ivory tower of academia is a challenge that requires innovation, passion, and sometimes failure. It may be hard, but our students are desperate for play. Our world needs more passionate play advocates, and you have the opportunity to shape the next generation of play advocates. So, ask yourself: *do we ever do anything fun in my class?*

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Being Fully and Vibrantly Alive Through Play: Play in the College Classroom

Sharon M. Peck, PhD

Introduction

Higher education is one of the least playful environments that adults encounter, despite a growing body of research demonstrating the developmental, cognitive, and social benefits of play across the lifespan. This white paper reflects on my experience engaging college students in studying the role of play in their lives and using improvisation games as a catalyst for playful writing. While the course was intended to support novice writers through freewriting, applied improvisation, and playful exploration, the most profound outcome was the educator's unexpected transformation. Integrating play reshaped classroom dynamics, strengthened relationships, and challenged entrenched academic norms. It clarified for me the power that play has for teaching, learning, and living fully.

Problem Statement

This white paper examines how improvisation and playful learning transformed a freshman writing seminar and, unexpectedly, my own teaching identity. Drawing on research on mindset, applied improvisation, and play, I argue that play is not only beneficial for college students — it is essential for educator vitality and the humanization of higher education.

In my quest to understand how play supports learning, I explored many avenues. I did a deep dive into Fred Rogers, fun (Price, 2021; Rucker, 2023), serious play, humor, and ultimately improvisation (Applied Improvisation Network, 2014; Koppett, 2025). This paper focuses on my experiences exploring how improvisation and spontaneity support learning and development in play across the lifespan. I did not expect to be led to lifespan studies; however, the more I explored, the more I learned about the value of play for all ages. The research is definitive on the role of play in development for young children, elementary-age children, and even middle and high school students. I have focused my work on how play supports learning (Holzman, 2017; Peck, 2022; Playworks, n.d.; Sandel, 2019). I've developed frameworks for incorporating aspects of

playfulness into classroom instruction. Implementing a play-based curriculum policy led me to a deeper understanding of what needs to be in place to support teachers in enacting play-based learning. This led me to team up with IPA colleagues to study the role of the playful mindset in teachers and how to support developing teachers in embracing playfulness. This work also led me to the power of play across the lifespan.

Background

Play is so often treated as something we leave behind when we enter adulthood, as if the moment we step into a college classroom, we are expected to trade spontaneity for seriousness, curiosity for compliance, and joy for productivity. Yet improvisation and spontaneous play remain essential for human growth across the entire lifespan. Scholars like Sawyer and Henriksen (2023/2024) and Russ (2013) have long argued that improvisation is not a childish indulgence but a sophisticated cognitive process that strengthens the brain's ability to shift strategies, generate ideas, and respond to the unexpected. Adults never outgrow the need to explore, adapt, imagine, and connect. In fact, these capacities become even more important as the world grows more complex and unpredictable.

And yet, higher education — the very place where adults come to stretch their thinking — is one of the least playful environments they encounter. The pressures of assessment, efficiency, and academic performance have squeezed out the qualities that make learning meaningful: Wonder, experimentation, and the freedom to try something without knowing exactly where it will lead.

Universities are often structured around values that run counter to the conditions that support play: Competition, evaluation, hierarchy, and efficiency. Students learn early that success depends on correctness, compliance, and productivity. Faculty, too, are shaped by institutional expectations that reward seriousness and discourage vulnerability or experimentation.

This culture of performance has consequences: Students become risk-averse, fearing mistakes and prioritizing grades over learning. Creativity and intrinsic motivation decline, replaced by strategic compliance among students hoping to create what the professor wants, and by professors trying to meet obligations. Belonging

suffers, particularly for first-generation students, international students, and those who feel alienated by academic norms. And faculty experience burnout, isolation, and a narrowing of their professional identities. Opportunities to connect and share are no longer prioritized in a system of do more now.

Students arrive expecting rigor to mean stress. Faculty internalize norms that equate professionalism with restraint. In this context, play is often dismissed as frivolous or childish, rather than recognized as a powerful mode of learning and human flourishing. But play — especially improvisational, spontaneous play — is not childish. It is not frivolous. It is a biological, cognitive, emotional, and social engine for human development across the lifespan. And higher education lacks it in ways that impoverish both teaching and learning.

Play — with its emphasis on exploration, joy, and relational connection — offers a counterbalance to these pressures. Yet many educators hesitate to integrate play into their teaching, fearing it will be perceived as unprofessional or insufficiently rigorous.

This tension is not merely pedagogical; it is cultural. Bringing play into higher education challenges deeply held assumptions about what learning should look like and who educators are allowed to be.

This white paper argues that play is not only compatible with higher education — it is essential to it. Through a reflection on integrating play into my freshman seminar, I explore how integrating play, spontaneity, and improvisation reshaped student engagement, strengthened community, and, most unexpectedly, transformed my own identity and experience as a professor. The findings suggest that integrating play into adult learning environments can humanize higher education, support well-being, and create conditions for deeper learning.

Appropriate Approaches/Strategies

Reflecting on my experience pulling together a freshman seminar in a few short weeks before the semester began, I turned to what I know works in learning: play. I decided to center the course on exploring play and using improvisation to examine key aspects of writing and building an argument. My hope was that by integrating play as a

content and play as a pedagogical tool, we could explore the outcomes together. I wanted to model the opportunities playfulness as an attitude provides—a stance of openness, curiosity, and willingness to engage with uncertainty. This mindset is as essential for educators as it is for students.

Applied Improvisation, Games, and Unstructured Expression

Each class began with a timed free-write — an improvisational writing technique that encourages spontaneity and reduces self-censorship (Burrell, 2020). Students wrote continuously for increasing intervals, responding to prompts about play, stress, flow, and identity. I wrote alongside them, modeling vulnerability and presence.

Freewriting functioned as a playful warm-up: It lowered the stakes of writing. It encouraged experimentation with ideas and language. It built stamina and confidence. It created a shared ritual that grounded the class.

Students often revisited their free-writes during peer discussions, using them as seeds for longer essays. Over time, they became more comfortable taking risks, embracing imperfection, and exploring their voices. Improvisational techniques made writing feel exploratory and low-risk. Freewriting can empower students to engage more meaningfully with academic writing while reducing anxiety and self-censorship (Burrell, 2020; Chen & Li, 2022; Velasquez & Peterson, 2023).

Applied improvisation became one of the most powerful tools for cultivating playful thinking in the course. Rooted in the principles and practices of improvisational theater, applied improvisation brings theatrical mindsets — presence, acceptance, spontaneity, and collaborative creation — into non-theatrical settings to support personal development, creativity, innovation, and group cohesion. In the classroom, these structures created a low-stakes environment where students could experiment with ideas, take intellectual risks, and engage with uncertainty in ways that traditional academic tasks rarely allow. Research on improvisation shows that these practices strengthen cognitive flexibility and problem-solving by requiring individuals to shift strategies and respond in real time (Graff et al., 2021; Ross, 2023; Sawyer & Henriksen, 2023/2024). They also support emotional development by offering a safe space to try

out new responses, practice regulation, and build resilience (Lillard, 2017; Pellegrini, 2009).

In our course, improvisation served as both a warm-up for playful thinking and a direct bridge to academic writing. To question the role of play as a developmental tool for adults, we explored research on fun, intrinsic motivation, and play cues — small reminders to stay playful. Students shared their own ways of playing, from music to cooking to gaming. We incorporated active games from *Playworks* and *Professors at Play* (Forbes & Thomas, 2023), using them as warm-ups and community-building tools.

These activities strengthened relationships, increased engagement, and helped students get “out of their heads.” It was a gift to help students get into a space where they weren't critiquing themselves but were wholly creating together. They began to accept play as a valid and valuable part of adult life

We used classic improv structures such as “Yes, And”, one-sentence story building, and embodied role-play to help students practice accepting ideas, building on them, and co-constructing meaning. These activities foregrounded the core improvisational tenets of listening deeply, agreeing to the reality offered, and responding with openness — habits that map directly onto the intellectual moves required in writing. As Drinko (2018) argues, improvisation strengthens the neural pathways that support spontaneous thinking, narrative construction, and on-the-spot synthesis. When students practiced “Yes, And,” they were not simply being playful; they were rehearsing the rhetorical moves of acknowledging a claim, extending it, and adding their own voice — the very moves foundational to academic argumentation.

Improvisational games also helped students grapple with not knowing. Rather than freezing in the face of uncertainty, they learned to treat ambiguity as an invitation. This aligns with Beghetto's (2019) work showing that improvisation encourages learners to test hypotheses, revise ideas, and embrace uncertainty as part of the creative process. In role-play activities, students tried on different perspectives — administrators, campus squirrels, imaginary committees — which supported perspective-taking and empathy, capacities Goldstein and Winner (2012) identify as central to social-emotional development. These playful structures lowered the stakes of participation, making it

easier for hesitant or anxious students to contribute. Over time, the classroom became a space where students felt comfortable getting up, moving, experimenting, and laughing together — a shift that not only supported their writing but also strengthened their sense of belonging (Secker et al., 2025).

By integrating applied improvisation into the course, I invited students to experience learning as a dynamic, relational, and embodied process. Improvisation helped them access the spontaneity, flexibility, and collaborative creativity that fuel playful thinking. It also helped them internalize writing concepts in ways that were memorable, joyful, and deeply human. In this way, applied improvisation did far more than energize the room; it provided a research-supported pathway for students to think, write, and relate to one another with greater openness, curiosity, and confidence.

Our explorations reinforced for me the power of improvisational play to fuel creativity by encouraging imaginative thinking, narrative construction, and divergent idea generation — capacities that Csikszentmihalyi (2014) and Kaufman and Beghetto (2013) argue remain essential for adult learners navigating complex, uncertain futures. Socially, improvisation fosters collaboration, empathy, and shared meaning as people co-construct ideas, negotiate roles, and build collective understanding. Goldstein and Winner (2012) show that shared imaginative play strengthens social cognition and perspective-taking, while Sawyer and Henriksen (2023/2024) demonstrate how group improvisation builds the relational scaffolding necessary for deep collaboration.

Because improvisation is open-ended, it encourages risk-taking and exploration, helping learners of all ages test hypotheses, revise ideas, and embrace uncertainty—a process Beghetto (2019) describes as central to creative development. Improvisational play integrates cognitive, emotional, social, and physical domains, making it a powerful mechanism for holistic development (Whitebread & Basilio, 2013a, 2013b). Adults rarely encounter learning environments that engage the whole self. Play offers that integration of “all of our selves” — and that integration is what makes learning feel alive.

Improvisation is not a personality trait. It is a practice — one that adults can cultivate through small, intentional habits. The foundational move of “yes, and...” from improvisational theater builds openness, flexibility, and collaborative creativity. The

central concept is that when someone makes an offer- our role is to accept it, “Yes,” then to amend it, “And.” Amending means adding to it by honoring the first suggestion and building on it. The key to improvisation is acceptance rather than negation. Johnstone (1999) and Sawyer and Henriksen (2023/2024) both describe “Yes, and...” as a cognitive stance that shifts individuals from defensiveness to generativity, from protecting ideas to expanding them. This changes our mindsets from immediate judgment or rejection of another’s ideas to acceptance and wonder. This teaches us to be careful listeners who are present, rather than planning a clever response. It helps students embrace spontaneity, as they must think on the spot rather than plan ahead. This is not easy for many of us, but with practice, it can lead to richer contributions and more adventurous writing.

Low-stakes creative play — doodling, freewriting, tinkering, moving — reduces performance pressure and activates exploratory thinking. Russ (2013) shows that unstructured creative expression strengthens imaginative capacity, while Csikszentmihalyi (2014) links such activities to flow states that enhance learning and well-being. Behavioral science shows that adults grow more improvisational when they engage in small, low-risk “micro-experiments,” such as trying one new teaching move or altering a familiar routine. Kolb’s (2015) experiential learning cycle and Edmondson’s (2019) work on psychological safety both emphasize that experimentation drives adult learning.

Practices that build tolerance for ambiguity, like delaying judgment or sitting with unresolved questions, help adults stay present and responsive rather than defaulting to rigid responses— a skill Furnham and Marks (2013) identify as central to adaptive expertise. This helped students craft responses more carefully and feel more comfortable letting the creative process unfold. Collaborative creative spaces — improv groups, writing circles, maker communities — provide social scaffolding that encourages risk-taking and shared play. Sawyer and Henriksen (2023/2024) describe these environments as “distributed creativity systems,” where ideas emerge through interaction rather than isolation.

Improvisational games also helped us adopt a growth-oriented stance toward mistakes. The games and play made it easier to take risks, make mistakes, or catch yourself saying no. It reframes errors as learning data, reducing fear of failure and opening the door to experimentation, a principle central to Dweck's (2006) mindset theory and Beghetto's (2019) work on creative risk-taking. Together, these playful practices create a rich environment where improvisation becomes not just an occasional behavior, but a sustainable habit woven into daily life. As I learned from balloon twisting, when a balloon pops, as it often does when one is learning to twist, we exclaim, "Pop Happens." If we minimize the emphasis on what feels scary or wrong, we help others acknowledge it and move forward. If we can learn from our mistakes and persevere, we are much more likely to succeed.

And yet, for all the research, nothing taught me more about the power of improvisation than one particular class session — a moment that has stayed with me, not because it was extraordinary, but because it was so ordinary and yet so alive. It began, as every class did, with freewriting. The room settled into that soft, collective hush that happens when twenty people are writing at once — pencils moving, keyboards tapping, bodies leaning forward. Freewriting had become our ritual, our way of entering the space together. Students wrote about their play histories that day: The games they invented with cousins, the imaginary worlds they built in backyards, the sports or songs or secret hideouts that once made them feel free. I wrote alongside them, rediscovering my own childhood play — the cardboard-box puppet theaters, the elaborate pretend worlds, the hours spent making up stories. When we finished, students shared lines that surprised them. One student admitted she hadn't realized how much she missed drawing. Another said he couldn't remember the last time he had played anything that wasn't on a screen. A third said she felt "lighter" after writing. Already, the room felt different — more open, more human.

Then we moved into an improvisational game to explore argumentation. Students stood in a loose circle, tossing ideas back and forth, building on one another's claims using "yes, and..." as their only rule. They role-played campus administrators, mischievous squirrels, overworked students, and imaginary committees. They invented arguments about installing a giant slide between academic buildings, instituting a

campus-wide nap hour, and replacing final exams with scavenger hunts. It was silly, yes, but also deeply intellectual: Students practiced rhetorical moves, tested claims, responded in real time, and revised their thinking as the conversation unfolded. The room felt warm, almost sizzling with energy. Students who had been quiet at the beginning of the semester were now leaning forward, laughing, listening to each other with enthusiasm, and offering new stances. I remember looking down at my homage to Mr. Rogers' red sneakers — a playful choice I had made that morning — and realizing how different I felt in my own body. Lighter. More present. More myself.

And when I looked around the room, I didn't see first-generation students, or the high school valedictorian, or the shy commuter. I saw "It just joy". I saw risk. I saw humor. I saw "ah-ha's" and wonders. One student even mentioned that the class was "fun." She said it as an aside, almost sheepishly, as if fun were something forbidden in academic spaces. That moment landed in me with surprising force. It reminded me that play is magnetic. Play is human. Play is alive. And it reminded me that I wanted to feel alive in my teaching again.

That class reinforced for me more about the affordances of play than any article or study ever could. It showed me that teaching becomes stagnant when it becomes scripted. Play interrupts the script. Improvisation keeps teaching fresh because it requires presence, invites surprise, encourages experimentation, builds relational energy, and makes room for joy. When educators improvise — even in small ways — they disrupt the monotony that leads to burnout. They create conditions for curiosity, connection, and vitality. Play is not a break from teaching. Play is a way of teaching that keeps us awake. It reminds us that learning is not merely the transfer of information but the co-creation of meaning between human beings.

The invitation, then, is simple and profound: Let yourself play. Not because it is trendy, not because it is cute, but because it is necessary. Play is how we stay human in systems that often forget humanity. Start small. Try a micro-experiment. Shift one routine. Say "yes, and..." once a day. Invite surprise. Let a student's idea reshape the plan. Follow an unexpected thread. Allow yourself to be delighted. Make space for joy, because joy is not the opposite of rigor; joy is what makes rigor sustainable. Let yourself

be seen, because students learn more from our humanity than from our perfection. And remember that play is your birthright. You did not outgrow play. You simply stopped being given permission. Give it back to yourself.

Perhaps the most unexpected outcome was the impact on my own well-being. I found myself looking forward to class with anticipation and joy. Freewriting became a moment of reflection for me, too. Improvisation energized me. Play reminded me why I teach.

I realized that my previous reluctance to bring play into higher education limited not only my students but also me. By embracing play, I rediscovered the joy of teaching and the purpose that brought me into education in the first place.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Implications for Higher Education

This case study suggests that integrating play into higher education has far-reaching implications:

- *Play Supports Student Learning:* Play reduces anxiety, increases intrinsic motivation, and supports deeper engagement with content. It helps students take risks, develop voice, and build community.
- *Play Humanizes Educators:* When educators embrace play, they model authenticity, vulnerability, and joy. This strengthens relationships and creates more inclusive learning environments.
- *Play Counters Burnout:* Play offers a pathway to professional renewal, helping educators reconnect with their purpose and creativity.
- *Play Challenges Rigid Academic Norms:* Integrating play disrupts assumptions about what learning should look like. It invites institutions to reconsider how they define rigor, professionalism, and success.
- *Play Is a Lifespan Need:* Higher education must recognize that adults need play just as children do. Universities can become spaces where play is not only permitted but celebrated.

Higher education does not need more efficiency. It needs more aliveness. Improvisation and spontaneous play offer a pathway — not only for student learning but also for educator well-being, creativity, and joy. They remind us that teaching is a relational, imaginative, deeply human act. When we allow ourselves to play, we create classrooms where everyone can breathe again, where curiosity returns, where connection deepens, where learning feels like discovery, and where we — educators and students alike — feel fully, vibrantly alive. Play is not a luxury. Play is a lifeline. And it is available to all of us, at any moment, if we are willing to say: yes, and...

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Playful Pedagogies and Preservice Teachers' Mindsets

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Introduction

Although play is widely recognized as central to early learning, higher education often treats it as incompatible with rigor. Grounded in play-based pedagogy and growth-mindset theory, this multisite pre-post study examined whether embedding playful elements in teacher preparation programs [TPPs] shifts preservice teachers' [PSTs] attitudes toward play. Using MANOVA, we found a significant reduction in non-playful attitudes after the intervention, but no statistically significant change in playful attitudes. Age mattered: PSTs aged 18–22 and over 38 showed the highest playful attitudes, with a dip among those aged 28–33. Findings suggest mid-adulthood pressures may suppress playfulness, while targeted curricular and environmental strategies can help revitalize it. Results underscore the value of experiential, play-infused learning for creativity, engagement, and reflective practice across teacher education and professional development (Dweck, 2006; Mezirow, 2018; Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Problem Statement

Despite abundant scholarship on the benefits of play (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; 2020; Lunga et al., 2022), many faculty still deem play frivolous, limiting its use in higher education classrooms. Implementing playful curricula requires transformative approaches—sustained experiences that shift perspective—supported by growth mindset principles (Dweck, 2006; Dweck & Yeager, 2019; Mezirow, 2018). In teacher preparation programs (TPPs), play can drive creativity, problem-solving, and real-world transfer, improving engagement and outcomes (Blinkoff et al., 2024; Forbes, 2021). Yet pre-service teachers (PSTs) often enter with narrow or compliance-driven understandings of play shaped by prior schooling and policy contexts. This reinforces the need for making intentional, research-informed integration of play into teacher education programs essential (Dogan Altun, 2018; Rodriguez-Meehan, 2022).

Beyond individual lessons, a culture of care and joy matters: environmental signals, spontaneity, informality, flexibility, and psychological safety help adults experience learning as both challenging and enjoyable (Noddings, 2002). Studies show teachers value play but struggle to connect it to measurable outcomes or to integrate it confidently in practice without hands-on training (Blom & D’Amico, 2020; Jung & Jin, 2014; Lobman, 2005). When TPPs model playful pedagogy directly, PSTs become more prepared to enact it and advocate for it (Canaslan-Akyar & Sevimli-Celik, 2022; Galbraith, 2022).

Background

Conceptual Framework: The Playful Mindset

The study synthesizes Sutton-Smith’s rhetorics of play (1997)—which explain cultural resistance in academic settings—with Dweck’s growth mindset (2006) to articulate a Playful Mindset: Curiosity, flexibility, risk-taking, and openness to new experiences, supported by environments that normalize iteration and error (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Five illustrative “playful elements” guide application across content areas: playful literacy (Cunningham, 2019; Han, 2021), “true fun” as the intersection of playfulness, connection, and flow (Price, 2024), musical engagement that builds resilience and artistry (Davis, 2017; Hare, 2024; Koops & Taggart, 2011; O’Neill, 2011), creative drama for perspective-taking and improvisation (Heathcote, 1984; O’Neill, 1995; Peter, 2003), and curricular/environmental design that bakes play into routines, materials, and assessment (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009).

Appropriate Approaches/Strategies

Methods

PSTs in Early Childhood and Elementary programs at five U.S. institutions completed an online Play/Playful Mindset Survey at semester start and end (Fall 2024–Spring 2025 cycle). Convenience sampling yielded 115 pre-test and 97 post-test responses, primarily from students aged 18–22, with representation across academic levels. The six-item survey adapted items from Dweck’s Mindset Scale and similar instruments (Dweck, 2006; Dweck & Yeager, 2019). Exploratory factor analysis

supported a two-factor solution—Playful Mindset and Non-Playful Mindset—with acceptable sampling adequacy ($KMO = .654$), significant Bartlett’s test, strong loadings (.63–.78), and good internal consistency ($\alpha = .81$). Faculty at each site implemented play-integrated curricula (e.g., movement, music, storytelling, role play, open-ended materials; parallel process in field tasks). Analyses used MANOVA to test effects of pre/post status and age group on both factors.

Conclusion

Results

RQ1: Change in playful attitudes over time. The multivariate effect of pre/post status was significant (Pillai’s Trace = .039, $F(2,188) = 3.852$, $p = .023$). Univariates showed no significant change in playful attitudes ($F(1,189) = 1.028$, $p = .312$), but a significant reduction in non-playful attitudes ($F(1,189) = 7.710$, $p = .006$), with post-test scores lower ($M = 2.57$, $SD = .78$) than pre-test ($M = 2.75$, $SD = .82$).

RQ2: Age differences in playful attitudes. Age yielded a significant multivariate effect (Pillai’s Trace = .259, $F(10,378) = 5.617$, $p < .001$). Playful attitudes were highest among PSTs over 38 ($M = 3.83$, $SD = .59$) and 18–22 ($M = 3.62$, $SD = .57$); lowest for 28–33 ($M = 2.94$, $SD = .57$). Non-playful attitudes also varied ($F(5,189) = 6.378$, $p < .001$), highest over 38 ($M = 3.46$, $SD = .71$) and lowest 28–33 ($M = 2.15$, $SD = .64$).

RQ3 (Interaction). No significant interaction emerged between time and age for either outcome (all $p > .24$), indicating age did not moderate pre–post patterns.

Two takeaways stand out. First, a single semester of play-integrated coursework reduced resistance (non-playful attitudes) but did not yet significantly boost playful mindsets. Transforming adult beliefs likely requires multi-semester, program-level commitments with iterative practice and reflection (Dweck, 2006; Mezirow, 2018). Second, age patterns suggest a dip in playfulness in the 28–33 range—possibly due to career-family pressures and institutional norms that valorize control and outputs—followed by a rebound after 38 as confidence and autonomy grow. This arc echoes scholarship on how formal constraints can narrow play perspectives over time (Sutton-

Smith, 1997; Zhulamanova & Raisor, 2020) and how guided, hands-on exposure can renew advocacy for play (Canaslan-Akyar & Sevimli-Celik, 2022; Galbraith, 2022).

The “true fun” triad—playfulness, connection, flow—offers a practical lever (Price, 2024). Classrooms that normalize risk, embed authentic tasks, and structure connection enable deeper engagement; movement, attention breaks, and light-touch games can scaffold flow (Bloomer & Marchese, 2016; Bonilla, 2024; Lengel & Kuczala, 2010). In music and arts contexts, aligning growth-mindset practices with playful making can democratize artistry and build resilience (Hare, 2024; Koops & Taggart, 2011; Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

Recommendations Include

- ***Program-wide infusion.*** Move from isolated “play units” to a coherent, longitudinal sequence in coursework, fieldwork, and reflection. Treat play as a pedagogical stance—not an add-on—supported by transparent rationales and outcomes (Forbes, 2021; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020).
- ***Culture of care.*** Engineer environmental signals—spontaneity, informality, flexibility, psychologically safe risk-taking—to counter rhetorics that frame play as unserious (Noddings, 2002; Sutton-Smith, 1997).
- ***Age-sensitive design.*** Offer differentiated pathways: mentoring and flexible formats for mid-career PSTs; leadership and co-design roles for older PSTs; structured reflection for younger cohorts to connect play with learning evidence (Rodriguez-Meehan, 2022; Zhulamanova & Raisor, 2020).
- ***Professional development.*** Extend playful pedagogy into in-service learning to refresh practice and reduce burnout through creative, collaborative professional development opportunities (Slade & Gallagher, 2021).

Embedding playful elements across TPPs can dislodge resistance to play even within a semester, a promising first step toward culture change. Achieving measurable gains in playful mindsets likely requires sustained, program-level design that blends growth-mindset practices, hands-on creative work, and reflective cycles (Dweck & Yeager, 2019; Mezirow, 2018). When teacher education treats play as rigorous, relational, and

purposeful, future educators are better equipped to cultivate classrooms where curiosity, experimentation, and joy fuel deep learning (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; 2020).

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