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# CAMPUS LIFE TRENDS

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# PERMISSION TO PLAY:

## Grant It for You and Your Students

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**A**s uncertainty remains constant, stress takes on new shapes and intensity. As the new year begins, don't forget to grant yourself and your students permission to play. Yes, I said *play*. You might think, "There are too many serious issues to deal with right now." But, as play researcher Dr. Stuart Brown wrote, "A little bit of 'nonproductive' activity can make one enormously more productive and invigorated in other aspects of life."

### What is play, exactly?

Somewhat challenging to define, most of us know it when we are in it. Think back to when you were a kid riding your bike or playing with your favorite toy. It didn't have a purpose, you did it voluntarily, it felt good, and you wanted to keep doing it. You may have also lost track of time and not felt self-conscious - not cared how you looked to others while you played. You were *playing*, not performing.

The characteristics I listed above are the commonly agreed upon properties of play. I've been fortunate enough to build a business around a particular type of play - kinetic play. Kinetic play is physically moving objects around your body by tossing, flipping, spinning, swinging, or otherwise manipulating them in order to master tricks *for the fun of it* (think juggling, yoyo, or hoop). Yet even with a life focused around play, I sometimes don't even give myself permission.

### What stops us from playing?

**Too Busy:** Maybe you still have a frequent play practice and if you do - *yay for you!* But for many of us, somewhere around middle or high school we "got serious" about school and life. We focused on getting productive. Maybe we had work-a-holics in our family or school environments as role models, further ingraining the idea that play is a "waste of time." However, as Dr. Stuart Brown's quote notes above, it might be time to rethink this mindset.

**Out of Practice:** When the pandemic first hit, some people had a lot of time at home all of a sudden. I saw articles about people learning to bake and stores running out of jigsaw puzzles. But I also talked to friends that had no idea what to do with themselves. They didn't know how to play. They had been so busy for their adult lives that they never had the time, energy, or space to figure out what they liked to do or what brings them to life. Believe it or not, play takes practice. We need to exercise that muscle again. Think back to how you liked to play as a kid - that might give you an idea of where to start.





**Costly:** Many of your students have to work while going to school and might think, “who has time or money for play” *especially* during the pandemic. Sure, many forms of play are expensive. If you have looked at the cost of a ski lift ticket or horseback riding lessons, you know it’s true. But there are plenty of forms of play that don’t have to be time consuming or expensive. For me, taking a walk to the local park and swinging on the swings for a few minutes quickly lifts my spirits.

**Uncomfortable:** Play can get messy. Whether it’s Play-Doh under the finger nails, getting frustrated when the juggling balls fall to the ground *again*, or drawing a blank during an improv game, literally messy and emotionally vulnerable moments happen along with the happy ones. Play is unpredictable, uncontrollable, and imperfect. That might create discomfort for some and keep them away.

### Why play is important - especially for colleges.

**Resilience:** The discomfort and messiness that might cause some people to avoid play (*count this recovering perfectionist among them*) is exactly the space students need to practice failing so they can build resilience. If you have a student not willing to take risks because of a crippling fear of failure, have them learn to juggle.



When we facilitate workshops, we have students drop *on purpose*, because the dropping can teach them what adjustments they need to make in their throws. We have fun music on and laugh at our own drops to create a space for them to know that dropping is not just okay, but to be embraced. Think about other forms of play that you can incorporate to create a similar space for your students.

**Well-Being:** Research shows that play has positive impacts on the body such as creating new neural connections, releasing endorphins, and reducing cortisol. Why don’t we have “play routines” like we do for running, yoga, or other forms of exercise? Dr.

Stuart Brown observed what happens when adults don’t. “Our work or other responsibilities often demand we set aside play. But when play is denied over the long term, our mood darkens.”

Anxiety and depression rates are rising on college campuses. What if we made play breaks part of the students’ routines? Such as campus-wide play breaks after meals, RA-run play breaks on the dorm halls especially during midterms and finals weeks, or create “Play Ambassadors” that run play sessions in different locations around campus.

**Engagement:** Play engages. In a recent study at the University of Colorado Denver, Professor Lisa Forbes decided to embody a playful personality, include games and play at the start of her class, and weave in competitions and role-plays into her content to see how a playful approach would affect the student

learning experience. Among other benefits, students described, “an experience of high engagement, persistence, and openness to the learning activities...the students were more excited and motivated to engage with the hands-on and interactive nature of play.”

Think about ways to incorporate playful moments into your programming to improve engagement. Maybe it’s starting meetings with a 5 minute warmup game or building playful energizers halfway through meetings.

**Connection:** Play connects. Dr. Brown observed, “There’s nothing like true play to promote social cohesion at work. When people play, they become attuned to each other.” We’ve seen it happen repeatedly in workshops we teach. People come in with their shirts literally buttoned up. But once they start playing alongside one another something happens. Their true selves start to show through as they roll up their sleeves. They no longer need to put up a front. In our juggling workshops, they see how their peers react when they drop and they get to celebrate for each other when one succeeds.

The students in Lisa Forbes' class described play as creating "a sense of relational safety and a warm, inclusive classroom." And it "inspired vulnerability and authenticity in front of their peers which was typically difficult for them to do in class." These are all of the qualities needed for connection - a strong connection to each other and to their campus experience.

### Getting Started/Enhancing What You're Doing

**Be Okay with Play:** In most play activities, students will have opportunities to develop intrapersonal development, interpersonal competence, and cognitive complexity so you can develop CAS learning and development outcomes for them. Yay!

But it's also important to recognize the value of play for play's sake. The benefits listed above scratch the surface of describing the positive impact on students. Also keep in mind that there are benefits for *you*. There's a reason you got into programming in the first place - rediscover the fun & play in it for yourself.

### Broaden the Definition of Play

Play can look like a lot of different things because it turns out we don't all like to play the same way. In his research, Dr. Brown identified eight different play personalities:

- The Joker - play by making other people laugh
- The Kinesthete - play by moving their body
- The Explorer - play by discovering new things (physically or mentally)
- The Competitor - play to win or beat their own personal best
- The Director - play by planning, organizing, and executing events/experiences
- The Collector - play by gathering and organizing an interesting collection of things or experiences
- The Artist/Creator - play by doing activities that involve creating
- The Storyteller - play by going on adventures of the imagination - telling, writing, performing, reading, or watching stories

This opens up the definition of play doesn't it? Most people understand that people running around on a soccer field qualifies as play for those players, but

didn't realize that fully immersing yourself in the story you're reading might provide you with similar benefits for well-being.

Think about how you can develop programming that hits several different personalities. Not all at once, obviously, but over the course of the semester spread out activities so you can appeal to different types.

### Look for Partners

Collaboration makes us stronger. Think about the play experience you're trying to create and potential partners that might be on campus that could help, such as students in the School of Education, Psychology, or Athletics Department. Maybe there are businesses in the community willing and able to help.

**Always be Reflecting:** Play teaches us that there is no perfect - things never go as planned. So look at how it went, what worked, what could be improved upon, and then hit replay (with updates, of course).

*One Final Note: Giving students permission to play and practice doing it will send an important message. It tells them that their well-being is important right now. It's not a "waste of time" to pause, play, recharge, and come back to the thing they're doing feeling better. It's a healthy practice that they can make a lifetime habit. And you can help them get started.*

