Play in the Time of Crisis
Angela M. Novak, Ph.D.

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Bio: Angela is an Assistant Professor at East Carolina University in gifted education and assessment. She is a single parent of gifted children, one of whom is 2e. She is frequently overrun by pets, children, and the occasional dust bunny. She serves NAGC in a variety of roles, and loves to chat, especially about equity, play, and helping gifted kiddos. Find her on twitter: @Angela_M_Novak or on the web: <https://angelamnovak.com>

As a society, we are operating under multiple pandemics. Covid-19, to be sure. But additional pandemics of racism and anti-Blackness, and of poverty, un- and under-employment, and the working poor (Ford, 2020) were at work long before the novel coronavirus and continue to wreak widespread havoc across not just our country, but the world. As parents, we discuss all of these pandemics with our children. We dialogue about the virus with our children, the importance of social-distancing, mask-wearing, and hand-washing. Why it meant that we loved our family even more *to not see them* during the times when families often gather during school breaks. This summer, we talked about the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, we read books on anti-racism, and we took action towards equity in a variety of concrete ways, knowing that action surpasses words. On January 6th, we discussed the display of white supremacy and privilege at the Capitol, the act of domestic terrorism incited by a sitting president, and insurrection encouraged by members of the government. But today- I'm here to say: *Don't forget to play.*

What? Yes, friends, the Co-Chair of NAGC's Diversity and Equity Committee is also your friendly neighborhood play advocate! If you attended the NAGC 2020 Convention Reimagined, I hope you'll check out my Play session, remember we still have on demand for a few more months! But why play? Isn't play for fun times? Well, yes and no... and yes again...bear with me! Let's start with: What is play?

What's Play? Play, Defined

Peter Gray is a recognized scholar in the play field. Similar to gifted education, play has a few definitions floating out there, though most have similar criteria; I gravitate towards Peter Gray's characteristics. His five characteristics include: 1- play is both self-directed and self-chosen; players are always free to quit if they choose! 2- in play, process or the means are valued more than the outcome, or the ends (consider creativity when you think about this characteristic- I know I do!). 3- There are rules and structure to play but these do not emanate from physical necessity, but they emerge from the needs and the minds of the players. 4- "play is imaginative, non-literal, mentally removed in some way from "real" or "serious" life[. 5-] play involves an active, alert, but non-stressed frame of mind" (Gray, 2013, p. 140). Note that Gray's definition never indicates that play is for children but uses the term "players"! Play is not just for children. When using this play definition, playologists sometimes use the term free play.

Does this mean that the basketball team, violin lessons, soccer team, and YMCA activities that I have my child enrolled in... isn't play? To put it bluntly? That is correct. Beisser et al. (2013) studied play in fifth and sixth grade gifted and talented students. In their sample, which included rural, suburban, and urban students, the researchers found that play was a significant activity for gifted students, in both the learning and socializing realms, in general

classrooms, gifted programs, and outside the classroom. The student participants specifically listed after school activities and practicing instruments barriers to play, as well as chores, homework, and sibling's activities.

Why Play? Play, Defended

Okay, as parents, we get it, kids like to play, right? But why, am I, Dr. Novak, Gifted researcher/professor, a play advocate? Shouldn't I be talking about acceleration and appropriate challenge? Oh don't worry. I do that too! But not at the cost of play! So why play? When we wonder if students are experiencing microaggressions, or how they perceive systemic racism in schools, my preferred answer is "ask them". And so, with great fanfare, I refer to the aforementioned study, Beisser et al. (2013). First, let's kick off with: 100% of student respondents agreed: kids need play. Why? Renewal: students in the study said that they felt that play was a chance for them to refresh and focus back on their work; figurative and literal breath of fresh air. Motivational: study participants felt that being given the opportunity to have play time increased their drive, attention, and focus. Enhancement: children who participated talked about their increased ability to retain information after the relaxing play break, and the benefits that play itself gave them, in developing teamwork and social skills.

This may not come as a great shock to the parents of gifted babies- but the gifted children in this study- they're pretty smart about the effects of play! What they knew in their gut, their reactions to play, that's supported by not just Peter Gray's research (2013), but a host of other play scholars as well. Overstreet (2018) shares that play encourages creative and critical thinking, collaboration, creativity at all educational levels; and while Dr. Overstreet's research is current, I can offer educational researchers from the 1800s and early 1900s that shared the same beliefs about the importance of play. Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, for example, familiar names perhaps for other theories, studied play as well, and believed in the crucial importance of play as developmental and as a medium for learning.

So now you're saying, okay, I'm on board. Play is important. But why now? Surely now is not the time, during these pandemics, while we're pushing towards equity? Why play in the time of crisis?

Why now? Play, Deemed Essential.

First, let's take a look at what the research says happens without play. Instead of why play, we answer why not "not play"? (My apologies to my high school English teachers for the double negative.) Peter Gray (2013) points out a correlation between the decline of play over the past fifty years and a rise in children's reported anxiety, sense of helplessness, depression, narcissism, and other psychological health and wellness matters. While correlation does not prove causation, the social and emotional skills learned in play are the same skills used as coping strategies with many of these neurodiversities. Gray argues that at the very least, a strong logical case for causation can be argued (2013).

Dr. Stuart Brown, another forerunner in the play field shares another perspective on the why not "not play" question. In a scientific study of play, he studied the life and death of Charles Whitman, known to many not by his name, but as the Texas Tower Massacre. After the tragic event, Brown participated as a team member that interviewed all aspects of Whitman's life, from childhood to adult. "After extensive interviews with everyone who had entered Charlie's life, it became clear that the *lifelong lack of play* had itself been an important factor in his psychopathology" (Brown, 2009, p. 95-96). It was the lack of play that caused a lack of true self expression, or even an understanding of his own self. His first act of autonomy was his final act;

he documented in his diary that it was a way to gain inner relief, to murder, first his wife and mother, then those at the Texas tower, and finally, to commit suicide (Brown, 2009).

So what magic is play, that it is so significant in our lives? The magic of science, neuroscience, to be specific. Studying the brains of rats due to obvious ethical reasons, neuroscientists have studied play and the brain for over fifty years and have recently found connections between rough and tumble play and increased levels of brain-derived neurotrophic factor which is needed for brain cells' growth and maintenance (Dewar, 2014). Play is a simulation of life. Gray studies hunter-gatherer communities where play is practice for adulthood, both socially and in the work the children would do as adults (2013). Brown, an M.D., expands on the idea of simulations, with storytelling, playing or watching sports, anything from arts to movies to life; play is all around (2009). Part of play is in the imagination, part is in the creativity, part is in the world created, the sense of otherness, and part is in the escape.

So why now? Why in times of crisis? This is when the relief of stress is sorely needed: a time of imagination, for creativity, otherness, escape. And there is precedent. Historian George Eisen studied play during the Holocaust, "a young girl, who was asked how she could play in Auschwitz, looked at her interviewer, 'her face lit up with amazement, and exclaimed: "But I played! I played there with nothing! With the snow! With the balls of snow!"' (1990, p. 72). At such a time, play was essential, for both children and adults. Childrens play could be lighthearted as in the earlier quote, but most of the examples in Eisen's book *Children and Play in the Holocaust: Games in the Shadows* were more reflective of what they saw and experienced. Play was a simulation, an imitation of what went on around them, and was used to help them process and deal with their surroundings. Adults, in contrast, would play for the escape, through sports, art, and music when possible. "For these musicians, playing in an orchestra not only sustained their spirits but also provided opportunities for resistance and even survival" (Facing History and Ourselves, 2021, para. 1). The Birkenau Men's Camp Orchestra is a well-known example, though it was conscription, hardly play; however, at some concentration camps, musicians were given the opportunity or choice to play.

For additional reasons to seek out play in the time of crisis, visit [29 Reasons Play is So Important During Times of Stress](#). But before I run out of space (see my bio, I like to chat), I want to get to some tips on what to play during a pandemic!

What now? Play, Detailed.

So, you're stuck in a bubble because the world is, well, imploding, huh? Y'all, my email signature is "Yours in hand-washing, mask-wearing, and anti-racism, Angela", you are not going hear me say to go on a playdate, even after all that. Sorry (not sorry). But I'll remind my kiddos to go wash their hands again. It's been a few minutes. But what I will offer you is some ideas from around the globe (and by globe I do mean the world wide web) of playing, pandemic style.

First, well, I'm just going to say this, though I'm sure it is on every list out there, get thee outside! Take your mask, social distance, and get out in nature! Kids love their phones? Install an app like Seek by iNaturalist, where they can identify local flora or fauna or AllTrails and find a local trail, take and post pictures of their adventure along the way. Challenge their friends and family to do the same. Maybe they'd want to leave a video scavenger hunt for their friends to solve? Geocaching, with a video twist, since we want to avoid touching the same actual cache. Remember the aspects of play: allow the ideas to emerge from the participants!

Now, I say this with full acknowledgement that I live in the south, and even though it's cold today, next week it will probably be in the 50s, and I can do that. Play advocates say there's

no bad weather, just bad clothing, but, well, we don't always have the best clothing, outerwear, or footwear to take on these adventures. So, on to other options!

My personal favorite way to torture, I mean, play with my children are to engage them with board games and card games. Now remember the definitions of play- are these play? No- they aren't free play. Because the rules are already in place, not created by the players. So let's table that for now, but when you find lists of ways to play with your kids during times of crisis on the web- you'll see that often, and that's okay! Engaging in a board game has many of the other components- just be aware that when we talk about engaging in free play or open play, using Peter Gray's definition- no rules except for what the players decide upon. If, however we pick up a deck of cards and make up our own game, that is free play.

As promised, here are some play resources (after my chattiness) about playing during a pandemic:

- [In Times of Crisis, Play is the Work of the Child](#)
- [Social Distancing Games and Safe Activities for Kids](#)
- [Playful Childhoods: Play in Crisis](#)
- [Children's Play in the Covid-19 Pandemic](#)
- [Pure Play Every Day Play Kits](#)

For what it's worth- don't forget about what you might have on hand. Buckets of yesterday's legos are today's bridges and tunnels. Boxes that delivered meal prep, groceries or prescriptions to avoid that trip to the store are just another fort, hiding place, or crafting tool. Welcome the power of inquiry; toss the directions to the microscope and play with it! I confess, I list that as an activity, but it was my eleven-year-old that refused to look at the directions that I held in my hand while he and his six-year-old brother explored, discovered, played. And yes, after a few minutes, I learned from my children and tossed the directions (neatly in a drawer), and we played.

Yours in hand-washing, mask-wearing, anti-racism, and playing,
Angela

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