PLAYFULNESS: A VITAL INGREDIENT OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH

A Life is good Playmakers Research Study
In the past few decades, psychologists, educators, pediatricians, and parents have come to recognize the importance of social and emotional health in the overall development of young children. We know that social and emotional well-being in early childhood leads to school readiness, resilience in the face of adversity, and better overall health (both physical and mental) in adolescence and adulthood. With one in five young children diagnosed with a mental health condition such as depression or anxiety, we also know that nurturing social and emotional health in early childhood is essential for children’s future well-being.

So far, psychology and education have focused on social and emotional skills (e.g., social competence, emotion recognition, problem solving) as key competencies to promote in children in order to prepare them for the ups and downs of life. Another vital ingredient in children’s preparations for a healthy and fulfilling life is their capacity to freely, actively engage in play or what we call “playfulness.” Universal across mammals, engagement in play has numerous neurological, physiological, social, and emotional benefits for children. Yet despite its importance, there is little research or discussion of playfulness as a fundamental component of social and emotional well-being. Therefore, we set out to investigate the connection between playfulness and three other key markers of social and emotional health: social competence, emotion regulation, and resilience.

Just like certain types of foods have greater nutritional value, some types of play are more “nutritious” than others with regard to their healthful benefits.

To lay the groundwork for this research, it’s important to share our definition of playfulness and the way we think about play.

Playfulness is the expression of a child’s natural drive to freely and joyfully explore, engage, and connect with the surrounding world.

PreParing for a healthy & fulfiling life
Play can serve as a mirror on social development and a catalyst for growth. Play time with peers and caring adults provides crucial opportunities to hone social skills. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics argues that play is necessary for the practice of group skills such as sharing, decision-making, conflict resolution, and assertiveness. Play offers constant occasions for cooperation, negotiation, and problem solving whether in creating a fantasy play scheme or simply in deciding whose turn is next. Subsequently, playing with peers is directly and positively linked to social competence and negatively correlated with aggressive and disruptive behaviors and anxious, withdrawn behaviors.

Play is ever-present as infants develop emotional attachments to their parents, garnering their attention with smiles and coos or discovering the rhythm of a favorite lullaby. For preschool-aged children, both pretend play and rough and tumble play are linked to increased emotional competence. In play, children are able to negotiate the rules, circumstances, and the direction of play, all the while learning how to regulate their emotions. Playing with older siblings or adults helps children to more easily recognize and understand different emotions, better regulate emotions (e.g., taking turns, sharing), and refrain from being disruptive or aggressive. It has been hypothesized that rough and tumble play with parents and with peers helps children to learn about emotional expression, practice perspective-taking, and manage a wide range of emotions.

Finally, play provides unique opportunities for children to recreate and control potentially overwhelming events, try on adult roles, and conquer their fears. Playing with caring adults can instill confidence in a child and a sense of connection that leads to resiliency in the face of future challenges. Through play, children develop the competencies they need to face and overcome adversity. Early childhood play intervention can have a significant long-term social, emotional, and cognitive impact on children, even into adolescence and adulthood.

One recently published longitudinal study conducted a randomized controlled trial of the impact of a play-based intervention for children between 9 and 24 months. In the longitudinal follow-up study, Walker et al. introduced a play-based intervention for low-income mothers in Jamaica. For two years, mothers were taught play techniques, given simple homemade toys, and encouraged to play with their toddlers. Participating mothers were assigned to the play-based intervention, dietary supplementation, or both and all participants received weekly visits for two years. At the 16 year follow-up of 103 adolescents, children who received the play-based intervention at an early age showed fewer attention problems, and reported significantly less anxiety, fewer symptoms of depression, and higher levels of self esteem than participants who did not receive the intervention compared to children in the other two groups. At 22 years of age, children in the play-based intervention group demonstrated significantly less violent behavior, fewer symptoms of depression and social inhibition, higher IQ and higher educational attainment.

Clearly, recent research has illuminated the importance of play with respect to social and emotional health. However, there is little understanding of how playfulness is linked to social and emotional competencies. Therefore, we investigated how playfulness correlates with specific competencies that represent three distinct markers of social and emotional well-being: social competence, emotion regulation, and resilience. We also looked at how playfulness correlates with problem behaviors: anger/aggression, anxiety/withdrawal, and negativity/lability (overall negative emotion and rapid mood swings). We asked 28 teachers in six different preschools in San Francisco and St. Louis to complete a set of social and emotional measures, including a measure of playfulness, on the children in their classrooms with parental permission.

A total of 229 preschool children were included in the study.
To understand the connection between playfulness and other markers of social and emotional wellness, we used correlational analysis. Pearson’s $r$ tells us the size and the direction of the relationship between two variables. An $r$ value near $+0.70$ is very desirable because it indicates that the two variables (e.g., playfulness and resilience) are highly related but they are not the same thing. As we expected, playfulness is highly positively correlated with emotion regulation ($r=0.75$), social competence ($r=0.69$), and ego-resiliency ($r=0.69$).

And, playfulness is significantly negatively correlated with lability/negativity ($r=-0.43$), anger/aggression ($r=-0.38$), and anxiety/withdrawal ($r=-0.60$).

**OUR RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Once we determined that playfulness is highly related to other key markers of social and emotional well-being, we then evaluated how each individual element of playfulness (e.g., active engagement, joyfulness, internal control, social connection) correlated with social and emotional health.

This tells us that a child who is rated highly on playfulness is also very likely to be rated highly on social competence, ego-resiliency, and emotion regulation.

Further, a child who is rated highly on playfulness is also very likely to receive a low score on lability/negativity, anger/aggression, and anxiety/withdrawal.

**THESE FINDINGS SUGGEST THAT THREE OF THE CORE INGREDIENTS OF PLAYFULNESS - ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT, EGO-RESILIENCY, AND SOCIAL CONNECTION - SERVE AS FOUNDATIONS FOR EMOTION REGULATION, RESILIENCY, AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE, RESPECTIVELY.**

Finally, we wanted to understand which combination of playfulness factors was most predictive of social and emotional wellness. Can joy alone predict social and emotional well-being? What about social connection? Or is it the combination of playfulness factors that most reliably predicts wellness? Here’s what we discovered: For emotion regulation and resilience, the combination of multiple playfulness factors was most predictive of positive scores.

Emotion regulation was most related to active engagement ($r^2 = 0.48$), suggesting that children who easily engage in activities are more likely to respond positively to peers and adults and easily recognize emotion.

Ego-resiliency was most related to internal control ($r^2 = 0.44$), indicating that children who feel safe, competent and empowered to challenge themselves are more likely to persevere when under stress.

Social competence was most related to social connection ($r^2 = 0.49$), suggesting that a child’s basic drive to connect with others (e.g., inviting a friend to play, joining a group, negotiating conflict) is a pre-requisite for social competence, which refers specifically to a child’s social skills (e.g., inviting a friend to play, joining a group, negotiating conflict).

Simply put, a child who is motivated to connect with others will be more likely to acquire the skills to do so.

**Emotion regulation**

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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Predictive Power</th>
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<tr>
<td>Active Engagement</td>
<td>48%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional Regulation</td>
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<td>Social Connection</td>
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THE FOLLOWING CHARTS REVEAL THE PERCENTAGES OF EMOTION REGULATION AND EGO RESILIENCE THAT CAN BE EXPLAINED BY PLAYFULNESS FACTORS

HOW MUCH OF EGO RESILIENCE IS PREDICTED BY THE PLAYFULNESS FACTORS?

- Internal Control
- Social Connection
- Active Engagement
- Other

Playfulness factors predict 50% of a child’s score of ego resiliency. That is, a child who is connected, empowered, and engaged is very likely to be resilient in the face of major challenges.

HOW MUCH OF EMOTION REGULATION IS PREDICTED BY THE PLAYFULNESS FACTORS?

- Joy
- Social Connection
- Active Engagement
- Other

Playfulness factors predict 59% of a child’s score on emotion regulation. That is, a joyful, connected, and engaged child is very likely to regulate emotions well.

ALTOGETHER, THESE FINDINGS TELL US THAT PLAYFUL CHILDREN ARE MORE LIKELY TO REGULATE THEIR EMOTIONS, DEMONSTRATE STRONG SOCIAL SKILLS, AND PERSEVERE UNDER STRESS.

And, even though single ingredients of playfulness, such as Engagement or Connection, are very closely linked to specific social and emotional skill sets, it is overall playfulness that is most predictive of social and emotional health.

RESEARCH STUDY AT A GLANCE

# OF PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS: 6

# OF PARTICIPATING TEACHERS: 28

# OF PARTICIPATING CHILDREN: 229

48% BOYS, 52% GIRLS BETWEEN 3 AND 5 YEARS OLD
14% ASIAN, 20% BLACK, 56% LATINO, 10% OTHER

THE MEASURES: PLAYFULNESS ASSESSMENT PROFILE (PAP), SOCIAL COMPETENCE BEHAVIOR EVALUATION (SCBE-30), EGO RESILIENCE SCALE (EISENBERG), EMOTION REGULATION CHECKLIST (SHIELDS & CICCHETTI, 1997)
AN APPROACH THAT WORKS

At Life is good Playmakers, we nurture playfulness in children and their caregivers in order to foster their overall social and emotional health. In our current work, Life is good Playmakers infuse existing academic curriculum, mental health services, and even social and emotional learning programs with a playful approach that provides children with essential ingredients for a joyful, engaged, connected, and empowering future. Our new research tells us that playfulness in children is closely related to their ability to get along with peers and adults, negotiate conflict, problem solve, recognize and manage their emotions, and cope when challenged. Our play-based intervention, Powerplay, has shown powerful effects on the social and emotional well-being of children suffering the trauma of Hurricane Katrina (for further reading, see our study, ‘Life is good Playmakers on the Gulf Coast’).

FUTURE RESEARCH WILL HELP US UNDERSTAND HOW OUR PLAYFUL APPROACH, PROVIDING CHILDREN WITH OPPORTUNITIES FOR JOYFUL, EMPOWERED, CONNECTED ENGAGEMENT, DIRECTLY IMPACTS THE OVERALL HEALTH OF THE CHILDREN WE SERVE.

REFERENCES

15. Fantuzzo et al. (2003)
22. Ginsburg et al. (2007)

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LIFE CAN HURT. PLAY CAN HEAL.