

Playtime

Are you a serious person, or do you like to play games? According to new evidence, playing games is good for you physically, socially, mentally, and financially. Dr Laurent Bruni, from Evans-Price University in Denver, has spent years looking into why we play. His latest book, *Play More*, features illustrations of well-loved board games like Snakes and Ladders, and also photographs of famous gambling halls in Las Vegas.

“In every culture around the world, people play games,” Dr Bruni writes. His take on the subject is that playing is a process, not a thing. “Usually the focus in play is on the experience, not on accomplishing a goal.” Nevertheless, winning is more important in some games than in others. “Take gambling, for example. Gamblers want to hit the jackpot. That is why they play. Playing to win is OK if the fun in playing the game is not outweighed by the urge to win at all costs.”

When we were very young

Games for young children usually have no structure: they jump on the bed, or pretend to be tigers and chase you around the house. They are engaged in “free play”. Free play is imaginative playing that develops children’s muscles and teaches them how to roll with the punches.

At school, children start playing games with rules. Playground games are important for children’s social development. Many people feel that outdoor play is being eroded by digital games, but Dr Bruni says that physical games are still played in schoolyards everywhere. “Games like tag, and hide-and-seek, are played by children around the world and follow similar rules.” However, he finds it hard to explain why some games are so popular: “Hopscotch, for example. Chucking a stone and then hopping after it does not sound like a barrel of laughs, but kids have played it for hundreds of years.”

All in the family

The popularity of board games is easier to understand. The social advantages of playing these games are obvious. Many people that Dr Bruni interviewed had happy memories of playing board games with their family and friends. “We always take board games with us when we go on holiday. Even my reluctant 17-year-old son will join in a game of Monopoly,” one father explained. “We have a laugh. Sometimes we have blazing rows. We are very competitive! It really teaches you how to follow rules.” Board games are good for your brain, too. Games like chess make you think, Cluedo develops deductive reasoning, and Trivial Pursuit is good for developing general knowledge. Many board games have an online version to keep up with teenagers who like to play on their computers.

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy

Playing games is good for adults, too. Studies show that playing games, like Sudoku or Scrabble, helps memory and thinking skills. So, playing is clearly good for elderly people.

In work life playing has risen to a new level. Research done by industrial psychologists shows that playing is good for business. Some companies like Google have introduced playrooms into their corporate space. “At Google we encourage our software engineers to play. Employees are more creative, happier and more productive when they play.” Playing at work? If playing is so beneficial, the time has come to introduce more play into schools as well.