

Chasing Life

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You're Never Too Old to Play

**Speakers**

Dr. Sanjay Gupta, Paul Dixon, Big Movie Clip: Josh Baskin, Big Movie Clip: Billy, Listener #1, Listener #2, Listener #3, Listener #4, Dr. Stuart Brown

00:00:02

Dr. Sanjay Gupta

I want you to think back to your childhood and imagine the toy you treasured most. The game you spent hours playing, or just your favorite way to have fun.

00:00:13

Paul Dixon

As a child, I was a loner and I really enjoyed sports.

00:00:20

Dr. Sanjay Gupta

As a kid growing up in Minneapolis in the 1970s, Paul Dixon loved following the Minnesota Vikings and the Twins. He'd stay up late into the night sitting by a tiny transistor radio, just listening to baseball games. And when he wasn't listening to the games, his world revolved around his electronic football set.

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Paul Dixon

It's a replica of a football field, and you plug it into the outlet. And when you plug it into the outlet, you have, you know, 11 guys on each side, you know, replicating a football team and they kind of buzz along on the field. So it's basically a football game that is being played on a smaller field.

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Dr. Sanjay Gupta

Paul would spend hours imagining that he was the manager of the Minnesota Vikings. He was analyzing plays and directing his team to victory. But like most of us, as Paul got older, he stopped playing.

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Paul Dixon

I guess you could say it just kind of got pushed to the side for whatever reason, because life gets in the way. You know, had a child got married, start working and didn't allow myself enough time to have individual genuine play.

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Dr. Sanjay Gupta

Adult Paul was now working several very serious jobs, until...

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Paul Dixon

By happenstance, a toy buying job opened up. And that job transformed my life. And the reason why it transformed my life is, I mean, okay come on, you're an adult and you're a toy buyer.

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Dr. Sanjay Gupta

Think, Tom Hanks in the movie Big.

00:01:56

Big Movie Clip: Josh Baskin

Well, I play with all this stuff and then I go in and I tell him what I think.

00:02:02

Big Movie Clip: Billy

That's it?

00:02:03

Big Movie Clip: Josh Baskin

Yeah.

00:02:04

Big Movie Clip: Billy

And they pay you for that?

Big Movie Clip: Josh Baskin 00:02:06
Yeah.

Big Movie Clip: Billy 00:02:07
Suckers!

Dr. Sanjay Gupta 00:02:09
And the fun didn't stop there. By 2017, Paul had moved to California to work on children's books when one morning, an idea popped into his head.

Paul Dixon 00:02:20
So you've been in this toy business for so long. What was your actual favorite toy growing up? And then that's when the electronic football set came to mind. And then the idea came to me, Well, why don't you just go ahead and buy it. And do this experiment where for one full month you actually, in the morning, you know, after you wake up and get adjusted, go out and actually play with this toy. At first it felt kind of strange because I'm, you know, plugging in this football set, sitting on the ground and watching these little men buzz around. But after a while, it became interesting and enjoyable. And then I start thinking about why I enjoyed playing the game as a child and other childhood memories popped up.

Dr. Sanjay Gupta 00:03:13
We all know that play is an essential part of a child's daily routine. But as we get older, the act of playing becomes less of a priority. Life gets busy, and making time to play can feel like a waste of time. But it turns out that play is just as important for adults as it is for children. So on today's episode, we're going to explore the natural instincts that drive us to play in the first place. You're going to learn that there are real health benefits, physical and mental, and that you're never too old to reap those rewards. I'm Dr. Sanjay Gupta, CNN's chief medical correspondent. And it's time to start chasing life!

Dr. Sanjay Gupta 00:03:59
Paul isn't the only person who's found a way to reconnect with play in adulthood. We asked you to call in to tell us how you stay playful, even as an adult.

Listener #1 00:04:11
I grew up in the go outside and play '80s where we'd go camping with the whole family, including aunts, uncles, cousins and friends. I think the most fun I have is when I'm outside.

Listener #2 00:04:25
The experience of running. It's pretty much the same no matter what your age is, and particularly on the beach, because I used to do it as a kid. Just connects me with the joy of the wind hitting your face and running into the water. And it just, I think, never goes away.

Listener #3 00:04:38
You know, there are a variety of just playful things that you do with the dog. You squeak their toys, make up a funny voice to go with it, maybe. You make up songs. It brings out a lot of I'll say childlike qualities.

Listener #4 00:04:54
We were at a restaurant and my great niece gave me the highest compliment. She said to the waitress, she looks like a grown up, but she plays like a kid. And I thought, that is the secret to my happiness at 78.

Dr. Stuart Brown 00:05:10
Because play is considered sort of frivolous for kids and blah blah blah, it's not necessarily taken as seriously as I think it should be.

Dr. Sanjay Gupta 00:05:19
That's Dr. Stuart Brown. He is the founder of the National Institute for Play. Yes, there is such a thing. It's located in Carmel Valley, California. Dr. Brown has spent five decades studying the science of play, which he calls a crucial part of our childhood and our adult lives. When we spoke the other week, he told me he had just finished up his play for the day.

Dr. Stuart Brown 00:05:47
I had a little up the hill bike ride and understand that the geology is changing faster than my age because the hill I rode up is steeper now than it was ten years ago.

Dr. Sanjay Gupta 00:05:59
Amazing how that happens, right? And probably, gravity got stronger somewhere along the way as well.

Dr. Stuart Brown 00:06:03
Right!

- Dr. Sanjay Gupta** 00:06:07
When Dr. Brown first started his career, there wasn't much research on play, but over the years he made significant contributions to the field. And we've learned as a result a lot more about play and its health effects. In fact, Dr. Brown will go so far as to say that he believes our brains are actually hardwired to play.
- Dr. Stuart Brown** 00:06:27
So the play nature is there in most individuals, unless they've got some overpowering kind of cultural or biological system that prevents that. So I, you know, I see our play nature as deeply embedded. And do I wish that Congress could have a poker game and, you know, and play pickleball before they get together in the evening to try and hash out their differences.
- Dr. Sanjay Gupta** 00:06:58
I think they'd kill each other with those pickleball rackets, maybe. Wouldn't they?
- Dr. Stuart Brown** 00:07:02
They might.
- Dr. Sanjay Gupta** 00:07:03
You know, when we think about basic human necessities, you know, food and shelter, water. Do you think of play the same way? Is it necessary for humans to play?
- Dr. Stuart Brown** 00:07:15
Well, take a look, as I have done over the years, to those who are seriously play deficient and very often they are chronically depressed or moderately depressed, not very innovative, fairly rigid, have difficulty adapting to change. There are some real advantages to the quality of life that one has when there is play. So I look on serious play deficiency as having a parallelism to sleep deficiency.
- Dr. Sanjay Gupta** 00:07:53
How long have you been thinking about this? Did you have a relationship with play as a child?
- Dr. Stuart Brown** 00:07:58
Oh gosh. I had a really remarkable, playful family, particularly my father, so I had a grounding. But you and I have both been to medical school and I've had a couple of residencies and they tried to get it out of me during some of the earlier course of medical training, and I was kind of a closet player all through medical school and still am.
- Dr. Sanjay Gupta** 00:08:22
It seems silly, right? If you're an adult to be engaging in play, like the general sort of thinking seems to be that, you know, kids play. Once you've grown to be an adult, you don't play as much. And you keep saying, you know, you get older and society kind of knocks it out of you. If so beneficial, why don't we continue it?
- Dr. Stuart Brown** 00:08:42
I think the natural intensity of play drive lessens as you get into reproductive years and taking care of your kids, taking out the garbage and paying off the mortgage and doing all the things that most of us have done through the majority of our lives. However, if you find and take a look at the wiring of the nervous system and the hard-wiring of the nervous system for play, the triggering of play is capable throughout our lifetime. It's differing potentially. It may be different for a year and a half year old than it is for somebody in a memory ward or in an assisted living place. But if I go to a dementia ward, find out the play histories of some of the people who are agitated and having severe memory loss. Give them a golf club, or a deck of cards. Up comes a smile or a music, a song that they've heard. They need less medicine, there's less agitation. So the play nature is there through a lifetime. It is not always the same, and it's not always the same trigger point. But the hard-wiring of the nervous system and some of the research that's being done, particularly with animal play, solidifies the activation of prefrontal cortical genes through play itself. So we're getting an emergent science of play itself that will make nonsense for adults a little more tolerable.

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Dr. Sanjay Gupta

It's super fascinating. You know, it's interesting because we do talk a lot about music being this activity, whether you're just listening to it or participating in singing, which can be something that can be very activating to all these different parts of the brain. And even in people who have had difficulties with memory, either because of a pathology like Alzheimer's or just because of whatever reason, music seems to be very well retained. I hadn't thought of play sort of in that same way, but being able to have a motor activity of some sort, swing a golf ball, throw a ball, whatever it might be, being something that is really preserved in the brain in a way that's a really interesting concept.

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Dr. Stuart Brown

You know, I don't think I haven't forgotten how to ride a bike. And I learned when I was, you know, four or five, probably. Why is that? Friend of mine saying, "Oh, what a beautiful morning" from Oklahoma today. And that triggered a whole feeling state of joy in me. Why? Where did that come from? It was just like riding a bike. It's part of my play nature. Well, that's available to everybody. I don't care. You know, there's a video I saw of garbage men in Brazil, a tough job picking up, you know, dirty old garbage. But between pickups, they're banging on, on their receptacles and drumming and having a heck of a good time while they're working. Well, that's possible. And we can trigger this health giving play urge much more than we do culturally. So part of what you said, the adults think it's nonsense, it's frivolous, it's for kids. Frankly, that's bull.

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Dr. Sanjay Gupta

You know, talking to Dr. Brown got me thinking about all the ways we play in our adult lives, maybe without even realizing it. But if you're still looking for more ways to consciously add more play to your life, Dr. Brown had some pretty good advice. And that's coming up in just a moment.

00:12:22

Dr. Sanjay Gupta

And now back to Chasing Life. You know, a couple of years ago, I remember this one sunny day, I was out on the beach with a few friends just throwing a Frisbee back and forth. We played that way for an hour. It was such a simple activity, but we were enjoying ourselves so much that the time passed quickly. And I remember thinking that if I could just spend time like this, throwing a Frisbee, maybe even every day, that would actually make me feel really good. I told Dr. Brown the story, and I realized what I experienced that day felt really similar to a flow state. I was in my zone. And for play researchers, that feeling goes by a different name. It's called the "play state."

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Dr. Sanjay Gupta

Is a place state one of those things that you kind of know, if you're going through it?

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Dr. Stuart Brown

Well you just described it with your Frisbee on the beach, come on. You know, it's kind of like analyzing a joke. You might ruin it if you start thinking, "Am I playing or not?" But, I think when you experience it, you know it. And when you see it, if I see it on the local beach with two dogs playing or a little kid in the sand, there's you can see that that's pure play and it's contagious.

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Dr. Sanjay Gupta

There are different categories of play, right? What are they?

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Dr. Stuart Brown

Well, I think if you think about it systematically, like you'll see that there is body play, for example, which is chasing and escape, running, wrestling. Rough and tumble play. Those are all forms of body play that can be combined with social play, which is the interaction. You know, the last time I was in the United Kingdom and went to a pub, there was all kinds of heckling going on. That was social play. There's object play, which is construction and the use of objects. There's imaginative and narrative play. You know, there are a lot of these different taxonomies of play itself and a lot of them overlap with each other. But, you know, again, you see the predilection for each of these in certain personalities, particularly very early before life suppresses some of the urge in childhood that's always there.

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Dr. Sanjay Gupta

And I wonder if you can just tick off the various types of play personalities. And how does one determine what type of play personality they have? I'm curious for myself. I'm sure everybody who's listening is curious for themselves as well. What are those personalities and how do you know?

00:15:07

Dr. Stuart Brown

I think part of the clue is this early, unfettered joyfulness that comes from one or another form of play. And I think it doesn't have to stay exactly the same through the lifetime. You know, I'm an old guy with a bunch of grandchildren. I've become a storyteller, probably drives them nuts, but, you know, it just happens. I like to talk about my youth and and blah, blah, blah. So I'm more a storyteller now, but basically I'm a physical guy. I like to get out, ride my bike, hike, and that's been a source of pleasure for me through my whole life. So, you know, I would say that the physical body play is a part of my gestalt. And I've got a grandson who kind of directs traffic wherever he goes, his friends and others, well, he's a sort of a director now. And then in my past, before my tennis partner got a bit infirm, he was a competitor. He had to win. So I don't know what you are, Sanjay, but find out, live up to it and you'll be more fulfilled.

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Dr. Sanjay Gupta

Seemingly, you don't draw a clear distinction between work and play. I mean, can you be playing while you're at work?

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Dr. Stuart Brown

Oh, definitely. You're a surgeon. I spent a year with Michael DeBakey and Denton Cooley years ago, when I realized that they were better with their hands than I was. But they had a heck of a good time once the incision made in what they were doing. And I wouldn't say it was dancing and non- I mean it was serious play, but it was play and it sustained them. So, yes, I think you can combine work and play, and I've had the fun, I've helped make a series for the BBC called The Soul of the Universe, and I interviewed about 40 Nobelists and some of them were grinders, but most of them couldn't tell the difference between work and play. Now, some of their graduate students were doing nothing but work, but they were playful by and large.

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Dr. Sanjay Gupta

The saying goes if you enjoy what you do, you'll never have to work another day in your life. I mean, I think that's.

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Dr. Stuart Brown

Very true.

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Dr. Sanjay Gupta

Yeah, I really feel like that is true and I feel like I've been blessed with that. It sounds like you have as well. You know, I think a lot of people draw a bright line between work and play and you don't need to.

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Dr. Stuart Brown

No you don't need to. And I just feel very fortunate. It was a tough start, but it really got through to me that there's something really major going on with play and it's been a great odyssey to chase it all these years since.

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Dr. Sanjay Gupta

When we talk about play, is it play just for play's sake? And I guess, what I mean by that is, I'm thinking about my own life, and I think I'm a pretty playful person in terms of how I engage with people. And, I got three teenagers who aren't totally embarrassed by me. They actually enjoy, I think, I think at least they enjoy spending time with me. But I, you know, like if I go for a run and, you know, I got a family history of heart disease, so I go for a run to try and take care of my heart. Now, I'm running in part because I have this sort of thing hanging around my neck. I don't want to develop heart disease. Is it still play if I'm doing it for that reason or is it just play for play's sake?

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Dr. Stuart Brown

Well, not everything is pure play. So what is playful? Well, if you're running to and thinking the whole time, "I'm going to lower my cholesterol, I'm going to lower my blood pressure, I'm going to look better. Oh, my God, I'm going to beat the guy next door." Then I would say that's not play. On the other hand, if it's "hey, you know, smell the air, this is really feeling better. Oh, this is fun. Look at me, I'm still at 50, whatever you are, able to go like heck, this is a great time." That's playful and it's a playout more than a workout.

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Dr. Sanjay Gupta

Oh, I like that. Playout instead of workout. I'm I'm really going to embody that. You know, I watch some runners sometimes when I'm run and they look miserable and I'm thinking, you know, I get that you're maybe doing this because you feel like you have to you, but look miserable. I'm going to play out from now on instead of work out. I really like that.

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Dr. Sanjay Gupta

There's something to this, you know, whether it's changing your mindset during a workout, taking a trip to the beach with friends, or playing with your favorite childhood toy. The pure joy of play can sometimes seem so distant from the lives we created for ourselves in adulthood. So I asked Dr. Brown for his advice for people who want to start playing again. Tip number one: make play a part of your routine.

00:20:16

Dr. Stuart Brown

When you wash your hands in the morning, take a look in the mirror and say, "What am I going to do today that's really playful? Prioritize play as if it's as important as your early morning toiletry and as important as good nutrition and a night's sleep and you may have a better life.

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Dr. Sanjay Gupta

Tip number two: figure out what kind of play you really enjoy.

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Dr. Stuart Brown

What is it that triggers play in me? What do I find? Is it music? Is it reading a novel? You know, is it telling a stupid joke? Is it going to a pub? It's available, even if your life can be pretty grim. It still is a part of you.

00:20:57

Dr. Sanjay Gupta

And tip number three is from Paul Dixon. He's the electric football toy fan from earlier in the episode. His advice: try the "play experiment."

00:21:06

Paul Dixon

And what I would say is try to step outside your comfort zone and truly actually go out and buy that favorite toy of yours when you were a child. and try this experiment or do whatever you may see fit to find a way to just have a great, fun time with something that brought you such joy and fun when you were a child.

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Dr. Sanjay Gupta

I think the idea that play is valuable at all stages of life is important. After all, making space for play in life is all about having fun. I'm actually really fortunate because, as I reflected on this episode, I realized that I do get a fair amount of play in my life. I do like to exercise and I'm going to think of that as "play out" instead of workout, as Dr. Brown suggested. But I'll also do things like play a game of foursquare with my girls, a game of pickleball with my wife. Sometimes I'll just start playing cards or we'll have a spontaneous dance party. And yes, I will pull out that Frisbee as often as I can and just start throwing it back and forth for play's sake. It not only makes me happy, it makes me feel like I have some luxury in my life that I could find the time to do this. So if you already prioritize play in your life, I hope you keep it up. And if you don't, why not start today?

00:22:34

Dr. Sanjay Gupta

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