

# Free Play Matters!

“Really, really.” Shrek

Brought to you by Wilton Youth Council and Wilton Youth Services  
in collaboration with LetGrow, parents, school and community organizations



# What is Play?

*“Play is our brain’s favorite way of learning.”*  
-Diane Ackerman

“Peter Gray is one of the world’s experts on the evolution of childhood play, and applies his encyclopedic knowledge of psychology, and his humane voice, to the pressing issue of educational reform,”

Steven Pinker, Harvard College Professor of Psychology and author of ***How the Mind Works***.

Dr. Peter Gray defines play as:

“Nature’s way of ensuring that young mammals practice the skills they need to survive and thrive.”

Play is...

1. Self chosen & self directed
2. Intrinsically motivated
3. Guided by mental concepts
4. Imaginative



# Properties of Play

Each of the four properties of play has significant impact on the development of a child.

## 1. Self-chosen and Self-directed

- joyful
- proximal zone
- attainment with practice

## 2. Intrinsically motivated

- drive to learn and grow from inside child
- not pushed by others

## 3. Guided by mental concepts

- build brain connections that develop resilience, independence, and creative problem-solving skills

## 4. Imaginative

- try new ideas, test them, try again
- pretend to take on perspectives of others – component of developing empathy



# Why Play?

Play allows children to achieve goals, solve problems, manage worry, grow from within; and be self-confident, responsible, resilient, independent and empathetic.

**“Play is not frivolous: it enhances brain structure and function and promotes executive function (ie, the process of learning, rather than the content), which allow us to pursue goals and ignore distractions.”**

**- The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children  
Michael Yogman, Andrew Garner, Jeffrey Hutchinson, Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff,  
COMMITTEE ON PSYCHOSOCIAL ASPECTS OF CHILD AND FAMILY HEALTH, COUNCIL ON COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA**



# All Kinds of Play Matter

self-directed and adult-guided

- **Object Play**
  - infant/child explores objects and learns about its properties (mouth, symbolic objects)
- **Physical, Loco-motor, or Rough or Tumble Play**
  - Pat-a-cake, foundational motor skills, cooperation, negotiation, win and lose graciously, take risks, empathy
- **Outdoor Play**
  - including outdoor recess, countries that offer more recess to young children see greater academic success among children as they mature
- **Social or Pretend Play Alone or with Others**
  - Experimenting with different social roles, smiling/vocal attunement with infant, adult turning puzzle to help child fit piece, dress-up, and make-believe play

# Why Has Play Declined?

- Increased parental fears for safety
- Fear of judgment (parent shaming)
- Increased pressure and focus on academic performance, athletics and extra-curricular
- More time spent with electronic devices at younger and younger ages
- Lack of infrastructure to encourage free play and connection
- Legal changes regarding our youth



Illustration by Joao Fazenda

# The Consequences of Decline in Play?

- Decline in creativity and problem-solving
  - Decreased ability to see from another's point of view (empathy)
  - Less happiness and joy; more expectations and pressure
  - Focus on achievement instead of the journey
  - Decline in young people's sense of control over their lives – loss of self-efficacy
  - Reduced ability to regulate emotions, tolerate frustrations, persevere through hardship
  - Increase in social isolation or loneliness
  - Increased depression, anxiety and suicides in young people \*
  - Increase in failure to launch successfully into adulthood
- 
- Recent Wilton Survey by Dr. Suniya Luthar showed 30% of our high school students have above average (clinically significant) levels of internalized symptoms (anxiety-depressed).
  - Nationally, suicide rates quadrupled from 1950-2005 for children younger than 15, and doubled for those aged 15-25.
  - August 17, 2019 New York Times Opinion - We Have Ruined Childhood: For youngsters these days, an hour of free play is like a drop of water in the desert. Of course they're miserable. By Kim Brooks

**“The opposite of play isn't work. It's depression.”**

**— Brian Sutton-Smith, PhD**



A powerful and universal antidote is:

**PLAY**



Wilton's Free Play Matters Task Force is working to bring all kinds of play back into the lives of children working on three fronts, shifting culture...



# Wilton's Free Play Matters Task Force

Our Objective is to...

*Inspire* and *educate* the community about the critical importance of play; and to *facilitate the creation* of more play and free range opportunities for children.

In order to work towards the restoration of play in our community, the Wilton Play Matters Task Force is focusing on three key areas, each with a dedicated committee:

- ❖ Parent/Neighborhood
- ❖ School
- ❖ Community

# Parent and Neighborhood

Our **Parent and Neighborhood committee** is working to inspire, educate and support parents in practices that will enable greater freedom for children to play, explore, and pursue their interests independently through taking healthy risks

## 1. Educating parents on why free play matters and the risks of over-protecting our children

- Lenore Skenazy, of Let Grow, spoke at the Wilton Library on April 30<sup>th</sup>
- Book Discussions - *How to Raise an Adult* by Julia Lythcott-Haims
- PDF – Playtime, Downtime, Family Time (Challengesuccess.org)

## 2. Getting kids involved to express the kinds of play they want - Choice and Voice

## 3. Implementing block parties and other face-to-face opportunities for children in our neighborhoods

Building Communities One Block at a Time – reconnecting face-to-face

*Barriers: Lack of time, busy schedules, lay of land/distance between houses, other priorities*



# Schools

**Our School-Committee** is working with Educators to unite in the effort to create more play opportunities in and after school. Our goal is to support the Wilton Public School Vision Statement with play solutions.

- We are helping shape WPS new vision. Wellness a priority, including play to learn, more movement, recess, voice and choice
- Homework policy being re-written, hoping new policy will allow more PDF
- *Purposeful Play* and *Bold Moves* – books being read by district staff
- Purposeful Play , Expanded recess, creative maker and comfortable spaces in 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>
- Ideas for middle and high school “play” being developed

Barriers: fitting a lot into a school day, mandates, supervision styles, behaviors of concern among some children related to safety, curriculum expectations, rigor being valued and not clearly connected to play

*“It is paradoxical that many educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play without seeing the vital connection between them.” -Leo F. Buscaglia*



# 10 Reasons to Play BreakOutEdu

By @MariaGalanis

@sylvia duckworth

MATH  
PHYS  
SCIENCE  
MUSIC  
SOCIAL  
STUDIES  
LANGUAGE  
ARTS  
VISUAL  
ARTS  
DRAMA

1

It's fun for everyone!



2

It is adaptable to any subject area

10

It's inquiry-based learning at it's best



9

It's student-centered



8

Students learn to work under pressure



7

It builds inference skills



3

It promotes collaboration and team-building



4

It develops problem-solving & critical thinking skills



5

It enhances communication skills



6

It challenges players to persevere



# World Economic Forum Report 2020

## Top 10 skills



COMMITTED TO  
IMPROVING THE STATE  
OF THE WORLD

## in 2020

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1. Complex Problem Solving
2. Critical Thinking
3. Creativity
4. People Management
5. Coordinating with Others
6. Emotional Intelligence
7. Judgment and Decision Making
8. Service Orientation
9. Negotiation
10. Cognitive Flexibility

# WEF Top Skills & Properties of Play\*\*



## Complex Problem-Solving

Build brain connections that develop resilience, independence, and creative problem-solving skills



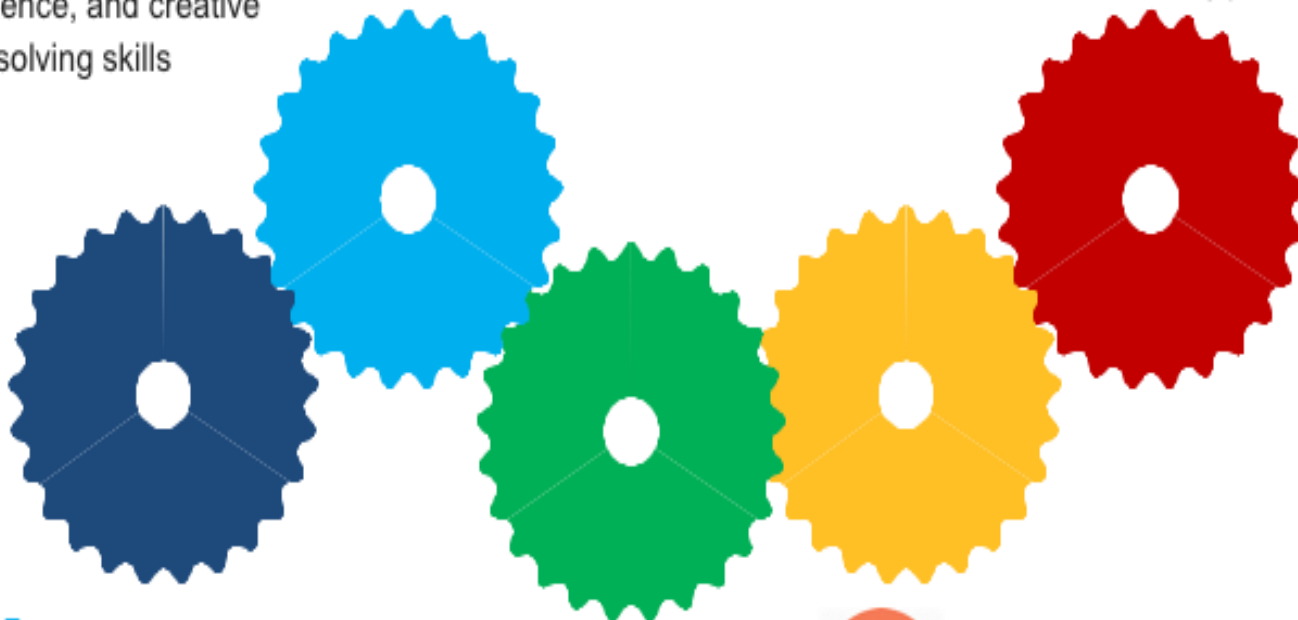
## Creativity

Try new ideas, test them and try again.



## Critical Thinking

Develop independence and creative problem-solving skills.



## Emotional Intelligence

Joyful, imaginative, Taking on perspective of others



## Cognitive Flexibility

Attainment with practice; Try new ideas, test them and try again.



# Wilton Public Schools Leadership engages in a “Breakout”...at 2019-2020 Convocation

Our schools “get it” !





# Community

**Our Community committee** is working to inspire, educate, advocate and support organizations, policy-makers, and community leaders and officials to develop infrastructure that will enable greater freedom for children to play, explore and pursue their interests independently and in public spaces.

- **Playwork Trainings with Morgan Leichter-Saxby**

- **Bike Rodeo**

  - Barrier – supervision styles, safety, fears

- **Inspire and support development and laws that supports free range and free play**

  - Wilton Plan of Conservation and Development

  - Free Range Parenting Law/s

  - Recess Bill

  - Police response, Neighbor response

  - LetGrow projects

- **Inspire and/or highlight organizations that offer free play opportunities**

  - Y, Woodcock, Parks and Recreation, Wilton Soccer Association



# Playwork Trainings for homes, schools and community

Morgan Leichter-Saxby – Playwork trainer and consultant and co-creator of Pop-up Adventure Play

- Professional Development workshop for schools, youth group leaders, program developers
- Parenting talks and Pop-up Adventure Play experience
- Training those that supervise children (parents, school, community) how to facilitate play, rather than interfere



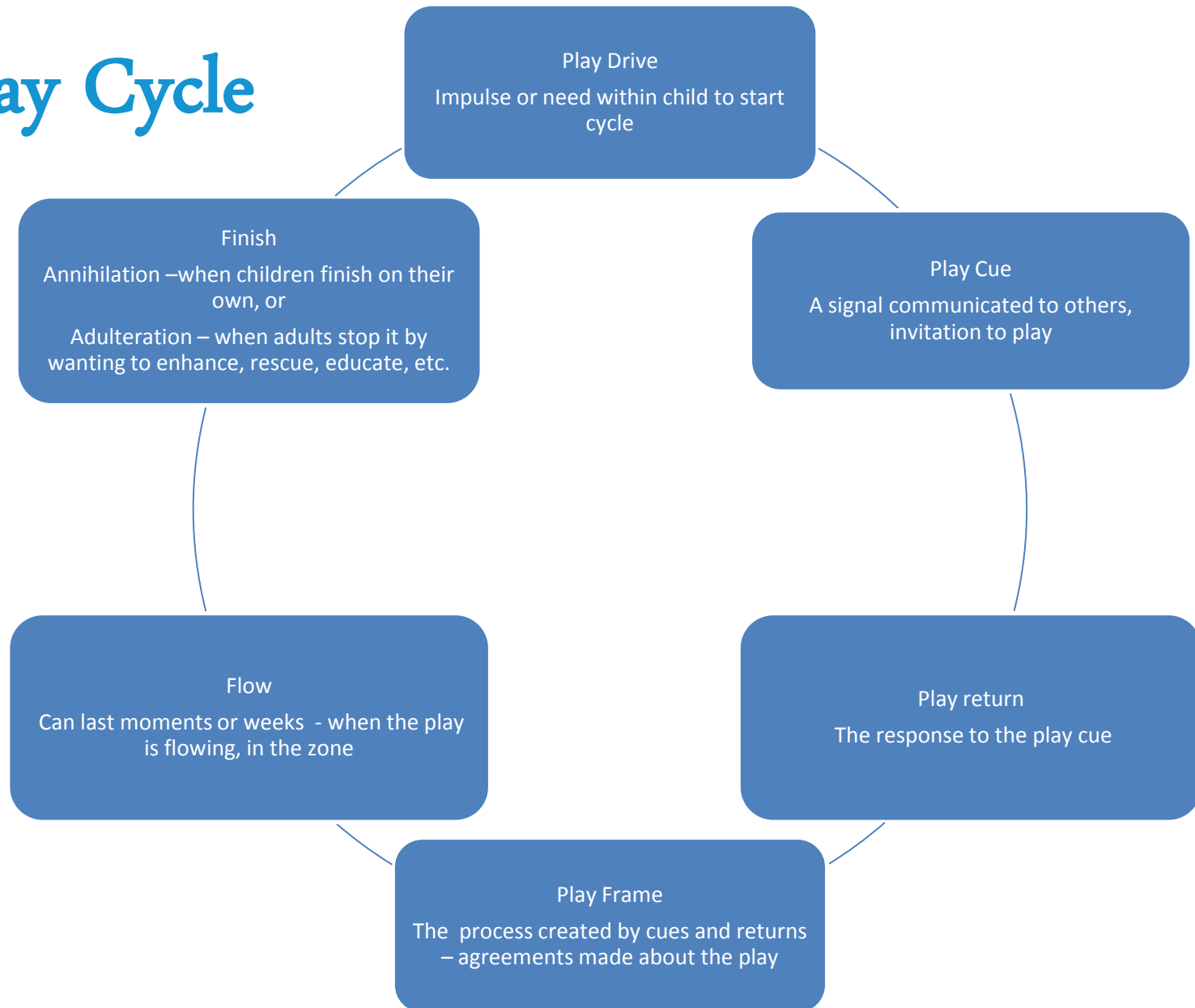
“At its most basic level, play-work is about removing barriers to play, and enriching the play environment...”

The role of the play-worker is to create flexible environments which are substantially adaptable or controllable by the children ...”

Professor Fraser Brown



# Play Cycle



# Not re-inventing the wheel and connecting with others

Collaborating with those who have started this work...

- LetGrow.org [www.letgrow.org](http://www.letgrow.org)
- Pop-up Adventure Play [www.popupadventureplay.org](http://www.popupadventureplay.org)
- Ithaca, NY <https://ithacavoice.com/2018/11/city-proclaims-ithacas-kids-are-free-to-play/>
- Governor's Island Adventure Playground
- Dr. Hynes previous district – Patchogue-Medford (P.E.A.S.) Physical, Emotional, Academic, Social
- Finland's Schools <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/why-are-finlands-schools-successful-49859555/>



# All kinds of play matters for all ages, in all places.

## We envision more play to look like this...



### **Parents & Neighborhoods**

Indoor and Outdoor play

Mix of ages and genders

Block Parties and other face-to-face connection with neighbors

Little to no adult interference at times – health risk taking

Loose parts for imaginative play:  
Cardboard boxes, tools, random

More children in yards, at parks, playing outdoors in indoors creatively and child-directed



### **Schools**

Purposeful Play

Play as Learning throughout day

Mixed age groups

Older students helping younger

Younger students helping older

Enjoyable activities that engage and recharge tweens and teens

Life-long love of learning

School is enjoyable not avoidable



### **Community**

Adventure and Pop-up play

Nature Play

Pedestrian and Bike friendly

Allowing children independence

Health risk-taking

Support parents to Let Go/Let Grow

Child-friendly programming, less pressure, more sport for fun

## Child choice and voice = healthier kids

# Free Play Matters!

For more information, or to get involved, please contact:

Colleen Fawcett, Free Play Matters Task Force Chair [colleen.fawcett@wiltonct.org](mailto:colleen.fawcett@wiltonct.org)

Genevieve Eason, Community Committee: [geason@wiltonyouth.org](mailto:geason@wiltonyouth.org)

Rosalie Witt, School Committee: [rwitt17@gmail.com](mailto:rwitt17@gmail.com)

Vanessa Elias, Family/Neighborhood Committee: [eliasvanessa5@gmail.com](mailto:eliasvanessa5@gmail.com)

