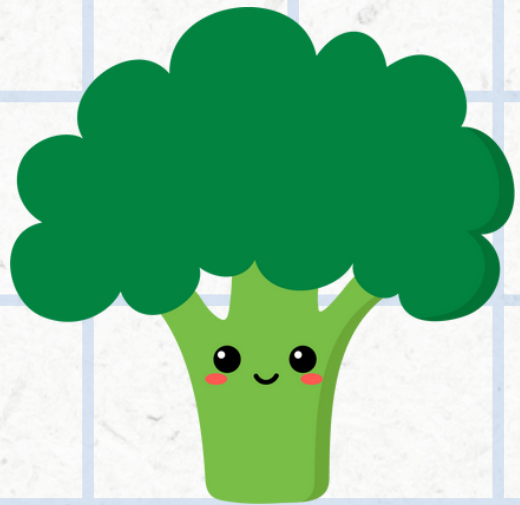


THE POWER OF PLAY

Jaffa Cakes and Broccoli



B E N K I N G S T O N - H U G H E S

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Ben Kingston-Hughes is an international keynote speaker, author and multi award-winning trainer. He is also the Managing Director of Inspired Children and has worked with vulnerable children across the UK for over 34 years. He has appeared on television several times working on a variety of children's projects and his distinctive blend of humour, neuroscience and real-life practical experiences have made his training invaluable for anyone working with children.

Ok so we all know that Play is good for children. The problem is that many people in society don't seem to realise just how good it is for children. We are not talking about "eating a bit more broccoli" good, we are talking about a fundamental building block for every aspect of a child's well-being and development. We are talking about brain growth, lifelong health and even life-expectancy.

Yes, Play is that good!

Working with vulnerable children I see firsthand exactly how "good" Play is for children. I see children thriving through play, children who have been through more trauma in their short lives than I can even imagine.

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The silliest things

We are currently in a world where early years practitioners are paid less, despite overwhelming evidence that they have more impact on a child than any other subsequent teacher. One of the reasons is that people don't seem to value play. Some of the best work we ever do in early years is the stuff that to an outside observer looks the most frivolous and the least important. The truly life changing stuff can often be the silliest.

There are even theorists arguing that we should drop the word "Play" from our agenda when working with young children because it is the concept of play which potentially leads to our entire industry being de-valued.

I say no. Play is not something that can be brushed aside just because it does not conform with the neat adult ideas of what learning should look like. We don't need to pretend play does not exist, we need ammunition to fight for play in a world that does not value it.



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Standing up for Play

This is where neuroscience comes in. I am not a neuroscientist (far from it) but I have researched the neuroscience of Play because it gives me ammunition and evidence to justify what I do for a living. It gives me a concrete, science-based approach to even the silliest things we do with our children.



Play Grows Brains

The first thing we need to acknowledge is that play is vital for brain growth. Brain growth is experiential which simply means that childhood experiences are more important for growing children's brains than any other factor. The most accelerated time for brain growth in our entire lives is our early years which means our experiences in early childhood are critical in ensuring our brains grow to their full potential. Play gives a broader range of experiences than any amount of sitting still or watching screens. One minute the child is up to their armpits in cornflour and water, the next they are climbing a tree and then they are pretending their teddy has an actual personality. In fact, play gives a broader range of experiences than almost anything else a child ever does, making Play one of the key criteria for healthy brain growth.

Studies in Play deprivation with laboratory mammals show that an absence of Play results in a significantly smaller brain.

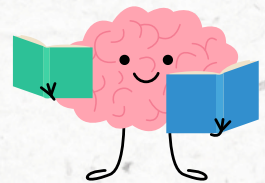
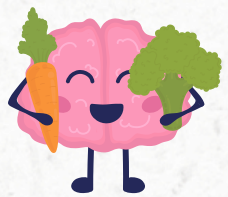
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Playful Brains

But why do children Play in the first place? Here things get really fascinating. The legendary neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp (the Rat Tickler!) proposed that as all mammals play, the urge to play must come from the more primitive mammal parts of our brain. This is not the clever, human bits of the brain, but the older bits associated with urges such as food, sex and sleep. The Paleo Mammalian Cortex, or more simply the Limbic System, has one job which is to keep us alive at all costs. If you are hungry right now it is because your Limbic system is making you hungry. This is simply because we need food to survive, so our Limbic System makes us hungry to ensure we eat.



Jaak did experiments on rats to determine exactly where play sits in the mammal brain and it was indeed the primitive limbic system. This is significant for several reasons, not least because the only purpose of this part of the brain is survival. This means that running, jumping, skipping, rolling, climbing and similar physical play experiences are instinctive mammal behaviours specifically to build every aspect of lifelong health, from bone density to cardiovascular and respiratory system health. We also know that you cannot build these vital aspects in adulthood. It is far too late by then.

**in short, Play is a key mechanism for life-expectancy
turning vulnerable baby mammals into strong
healthy adults.**

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The Power of Jaffa Cakes

So why is one Jaffa cake never enough? Why do we always follow up each Jaffa cake (or crisp or sweet) with another bite?[1] It turns out our brain is so wired for survival that it actually drugs us into eating more Jaffa cakes. The limbic system releases addictive bio-chemicals every time you eat food, ensuring that you continue to eat more food. This does mean something quite special though. It means that every time you eat a Jaffa cake, it now counts as research into the neuroscience of the limbic system (Guilt free Jaffa cakes – woo hoo!).



The important bit is that because Play is in the same bit of the brain as our urge for food, when children play, they produce a similarly powerful cocktail of biochemicals. This cocktail contains prescription grade anti-depressants, anti-anxiety medication and even pain relief medication. (Oxytocin, Opioids and Benzodiazepines to name a few!) These biochemicals are some of the optimum biochemicals for well-being and utterly essential for our children to thrive. This makes Play one of the most powerful therapeutic experiences a child will ever have.

[1] In the whole history of Jaffa Cakes no one has ever eaten just one Jaffa Cake, unless it is the last Jaffa Cake in the packet and then a small part of your heart dies inside.

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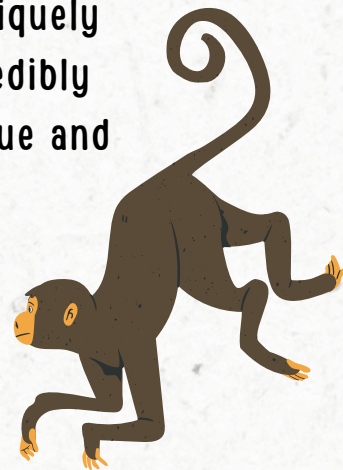
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Enough about Jaffa cakes – what about imagination?

So far, we have looked at the primitive mammal brain, the primal urges and instinctive behaviours that we share with dogs and cats and Jaak Panksepp's rats. What about the special bits, the uniquely human bits? Now don't get me wrong, some mammals are incredibly intelligent, but humans are on a whole other level with a unique and magical upper brain.

To put it into context, a chimpanzee can use a stick as a tool or even a weapon, but no chimpanzee could ever pick up a stick and say, "Expelliarmus!" because they don't have the neurological architecture for even this simple imagination.



What makes humans special is imagination and creativity. These qualities define us as human in the first place and lead to everything humanity has ever achieved from art, poetry and literature, to mathematics, architecture and engineering. Even with all of our understanding of the human brain we cannot fully explain human imagination. However, we do know it begins in early childhood and it begins with play. At some point the toy bear, which in earliest childhood is merely a tactile object, becomes Mr Bigglethwaite and has an actual personality. This seemingly frivolous developmental milestone is fundamental to every aspect of development in that child, underpinning complex language, mathematics and even advanced social concepts such as empathy.

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Uniquely Human

I often deliver Parent Play training to raise awareness of the importance of Play in the home.

Recently a parent, not realising the session was for adults only[1], brought her son with her. He sat in a corner playing with toy dinosaurs and at one point acted out an argument between two of the dinosaurs [2] making appropriate noises for each of the dinosaurs. He was three years old. No other animal on the planet comes even close to this. Just like all mammals, children engage in the limbic system urges to play but only human children take that play to a whole other level, engaging the unique upper brain, unlocking entire worlds of imagination and defining what it means to be human in the first place. Only play does this.



[1] There is always at least one parent who does not read the instructions!

[2] A stegosaurus and a velociraptor

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The Takeaway

Play is utterly unique. It builds brains, supports life-long health and life expectancy, mental health and emotional well-being as well as the development of imagination and creativity and complex social functions such as empathy.

So, its official, play is not merely good for children it is better than broccoli more rewarding than Jaffa Cakes and could be the most important thing a child ever does.

And never forget that Play is a fundamental human right.

Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child clearly states that every child has a right to Play. Children do not always have the power in society to stand up for their rights, so it is up to us to do it for them. Be loud and proud about play and help our children to have the best childhood ever!

The Department for Education Help for Early Years Providers website offers resources, activity ideas and advice for practitioners when planning the curriculum through play-based learning.



Department
for Education

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Evidence Store provides evidence informed approaches and practices to support play-based learning in the early years.



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