

Understanding and Applying The Intelligence of Play

By Michael Mendizza

Nurture the soil and the seed grows fully with little attention. Neglect the soil and the seed's development is compromised at every step.

Children are seeds. We are the soil, but we are often blind to our own lack of mentored development. In our semi-blind state we do unto others what was done, or more often, not done to us - repeating the cycle generation after generation.

We are at a tipping point, personally, culturally, globally. By every measure we cannot rely on the past to respond appropriately to the present and by that act create a different future.

The question is: where do we invest our energy and attention? How do we break the cycle in which we have been trapped for centuries? Do we focus on the seed, the child, or enrich the soil? The answer is, I believe, obvious. We invest in adult development and invite children to stand on our expanding shoulders, as nature intended.

But where do we begin? We have been traveling down the same old path for so long. How do we blaze a new trail through uncharted lands, our fast changing world?

First you, the people who care for young children, must realize that your role has expanded. The social engineers that created your profession failed to understand that child development is dependent on adult development, that optimum social development requires that you and the parents you serve must grow and change as much and as swiftly as the children you care for. No fixed curriculum can do this. No standardized test or government certificate is up to the challenge.

To meet this challenge, and there is none greater, you, I and every parent must rediscover the genius of your own childhood - drilled out of most of us years ago. In a phrase we must rediscover *The Intelligence of Play*.

Understanding and applying *The Intelligence of Play* begins by opening our hearts and minds to new perceptions and possibilities. We think smart people know a lot of stuff. Computers contain lots of data, content, are fast and very stupid. Computer-like behavior is not intelligent. It is reflexive, mechanical. To our personal and global distress much of what we call education promotes computer like behavior rather than developing true adaptive intelligence.

True genius is taking the stuff we already know and discovering what else we might do with it. Lego blocks are stuff but can be combined in novel ways and become just about anything. It is the act of imagining, wondering, trying, testing, crashing, persisting, dreaming, laughing, sharing, telling stories, connecting with others – these are the hallmarks of true genius, not mechanically regurgitating piles of content we already know.

Play is the only state I know where the full spectrum of our vast human potential is present and available. True genius is not forgetting how to imagine. True genius is remaining present, open, flexible, attentive, curious, excited and passionate. True genius is not mistaking mechanical stuff, reflexive conditioning, for heartfelt intelligence with its care, affection and appropriateness.

Is this the state we embody and meet this day's and every day's challenges? Is this what we are modeling for the next critical generation, our innate genius lost long ago?

Many mistake the inner state of Play with the outer activity, the ball. Play is a state - not an activity. Intelligence is a state – not content. Understanding and applying *The Intelligence of Play* shifts attention and values from content-stuff to process, capacity and undreamed of possibilities.

The next frontier in education, I suggest, is not about content. The next frontier in education represents a shift of focus, priorities and values from content to relationship, process and capacity - and the inner state of Play is the optimum way for this continual inner and therefore outer development to unfold.

After interviewing hundreds of gifted individuals, many of whom are top performance specialists in high pressure fields, I have come to realize that homework and tests matter very little. What matters most is the state in which we meet the challenges we are meeting – and play is the optimum state for learning and performance at any age – as we meet any challenge.

Authentic Play is transcendent, transcendent being the act of reaching beyond limitation and constraint. To become four one must overcome the limitations and constraints of being three. Life is a transcendent movement and Play is unfolding human development in action.

The greater the challenge the more we need to play. Develop *The Intelligence of Play* lifelong and you naturally optimize the full spectrum of capacity to meet every future challenge in the best possible way.

Create a heart and mind that are based on fixed content and beliefs and our future narrows dramatically. Create a heart and mind that can imagine, dream, that is willing to ask questions and act in new yet appropriate ways and there is no challenge that cannot be overcome.

The best possible school, at any age, would seek to develop *The Intelligence of Play*, that is, develop the inner skills and capacities needed to meet any challenge fully and completely.

In the state every action produces feedback used to enhance development. Spilling the milk or paint isn't wrong, a failure. Discovering 'too much' is feedback used to refine attention and motor skills.

Developmentally we are always paying forward, always building capacity to meet the next moment more fully. In the state of play, with its enhanced energy and attention, which is very different from cultural competition, failure isn't possible –

play being the act of learning – and learning being expanding capacity – not content.

Understanding the difference between content and capacity and acting to affirm expanding capacity over the score – the content - instantly transforms any classroom into a play based learning environment. Every stroke of the paint brush produces an effect. Every effect is feedback that enhances the next stroke. In such an environment learning and expanding capacity are taking place all the time. Tests lose their high stakes sting. In these environments every action is an exploration, an inquiry that produces feedback and the instant by instant feedback enhances performance. Growth and expanding capacity never end.

The best thing about the intelligence of play, however, is Joy. Retain *The Intelligence of Play* lifelong and you retain the energy, attention, passion and affection you had that spring morning catching pollywogs in the stream behind the old wooden fence. You retain and enhance being present, open and full of wonder as the cat tugs at your shoe strings. Retain *The Intelligence of Play* and you begin each day full of the childlike genius nature intended.

Or, I guess we can know everything and grow increasingly grumpy as life's ever-changing richness and diversity fails to meet our fixed ideas and beliefs.

Most simply and profoundly, understanding and applying *The Intelligence of Play* means never getting stuck in yourself!

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