

Howard Gardner, the Harvard professor known for his investigations into learning and intelligence, once said, “the child never played with never learns to play.” The key is “played with”, not “taught”. Play, like language, is natural to the child.

Played with, the infant and child mirrors the play. The well-known “play-stance,” found throughout the mammalian world, communicates and activates a primary, high-alert, safe-learning state. This safe-learning state entrains body-brain-mind and heart unifying thought-feeling-action. Profoundly deeper than simple concentration, this focused attention to one’s actual relationship with the environment remains global and open. All energy entrains into a fluid, non-conflicted flow which the child and later adult experiences as a natural state of euphoria. Learning becomes spontaneous and non-defensive. A nonselective, high neocortical patterning emerges which incorporates all lower neural structures into its service. In this regard, simple child’s play becomes one of the highest, and most natural learning states possible.

Conditioning, initiated through the startle-response of threat and centered in lower brain structures, also brings a high-alert focus, but one tightly confined to the source against which one must defend. In play the child or adult is one with the world. In conditioning, one is set apart from and threatened by the world.

When conditioning replaces play, attention shifts from the higher regions of the brain to the lower sensory-motor areas with their instinctive, hard-wired responses. Learning then, not only bypasses the higher intellectual functions, it suspends them. In cases of social testing, as found in schooling and athletics, the saber-tooth is ever-present in the guise of parents, coaches and mentors who are supposedly protectors. Ambiguity and confusion run rampant in the child’s mind.

Virtually all current concepts of “teaching”, particularly the “coaching” of children and adolescents in athletics and sports, indeed even the notions of athletics and sports, involve and reflect fear-based incentives: hope for approval, acceptance and well-being, with its counterpart, fear of failure and loss, complete with the deadly alienation of not belonging.

That the Greeks institutionalized play into sport or athletics, carried to macabre extremes by the Romans, grant such deviancy no evolutionary or spiritual sanction. As a conditioned people, however, these disruptive interventions are given a high priority. We can’t even think in any other way, even though the social and personal price is devastating. Since we can’t change the system we must exhort parents and coaches to change attitudes and approaches.

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