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## Book Reviews

**Free to Learn: Why Unleashing  
the Instinct to Play Will  
Make Our Children Happier,  
Self-Reliant, and Better  
Students for Life**

*Peter Gray*

New York: Basic Books, 2013. Notes,  
bibliography, index. 274 pp. \$27.99 cloth.  
ISBN: 9780465025992

Robert Paul Smith, in a 1957 memoir of his youth, *Where Did You Go? Out. What Did You Do? Nothing*, mused that one time he discovered while playing that if he could apply his finger to a spinning phonograph record, he could manipulate its speed to produce different kinds of sound. “This,” he recalled, “I believe, is science, and I found it out for myself.” Peter Gray would rejoice because, to him, Smith’s playful curiosity was what education should be. In *Free to Learn*, a passionate paean to the kind of free play and free learning exemplified by Smith’s example, Peter Gray, an evolutionary psychologist at Boston College, makes a largely compelling case that children learn best when unencumbered by adult-imposed activities and institutions. Naturally curious,

children need to be free to learn from each other and from their own self-structured experiences. If encouraged to do so, Gray argues, children will be “happier, more self-reliant, and better students for life.”

Gray uses two models to elucidate his argument: hunter-gatherer societies of the distant past and the Sudbury Valley School in present-day Framingham, MA. Children in hunter-gatherer cultures, he claims, were (and are, in those tribes still existing today) unfettered by adult rules. They could roam freely and learn by experiment and by observing older children and adults. They mingled their “play-filled lives” with vital knowledge and smoothly became contributing members of their societies as they matured, learning in the process to control their impulses and emotions. Gray does not mention that these peoples never learned how to prevent famine and disease, but his appreciation for the self-structured lives of hunter-gatherer children has merit. Eventually, according to Gray, the transformations from hunter-gatherer to settled, agricultural societies turned children into workers for the family, reducing their freedom and wedging them more securely

under their parents' thumbs. The learning process thereby became more rigid. Capitalism and industrialization exacerbated the situation, merging education with obedience. The larger society took control of schooling and made it compulsory. Learning became work and "play became the enemy of learning."

Gray's cursory history lesson provides the entry to his celebration of the Sudbury Valley School. Located in a bucolic setting, this "school" educates children ages six to eighteen, has no "teachers" (only adult staff members), no prepared curriculum, no grades, no admission requirements (only an interview), and relatively low tuition. Children learn simply by following their own interests, mingling in inter-age groups, and participating in a totally democratic environment. The result is that play becomes true learning and learning becomes fun. Sudbury Valley thus contrasts with formal schools, which, says Gray, imprison children, force them to learn—and forget—packaged knowledge, and fill their lives with stress by making them perform on endless, senseless tests. Not surprisingly, Gray's son, once a difficult learner, attended the school and benefited from it.

The major drawback of Gray's analysis is that he thinks Sudbury Valley invented the music when in fact we have heard this song before. Education historian Diane Ravitch, in *Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945–1980* (1983), surveys a number of previous Sudbury-like projects in a chapter entitled "Reformers, Radicals, and Romantics." Ravitch pays special attention to A. S. Neill's account of Summerhill, a British libertarian boarding school. Writing in 1960, Neill made the

same argument as Gray, observing that a child "is innately wise and realistic. If left to himself without adult suggestion of any kind, he will develop as far as he is capable of developing." Neill added, "Children, like adults, learn what they want to learn." Neill's work was followed in America by critiques such as Paul Goodman's *Compulsory Mis-education* (1964) and Jonathan Kozol's *Death at an Early Age* (1967) and by a fascination with the Westfield Infant School in Leicestershire County, England. The point is not necessarily that Gray assumes his ideas are unique. Rather, in overlooking earlier advocates and examples of "open education," he has not considered that these projects failed because they too naively expected children to behave rationally and to learn all they needed to know from play. As Donald Myers wrote in a 1974 article, "Why Open Education Died," "Why is it difficult for so many American educators to acknowledge that writing a sentence, speaking clearly, playing the piano, or learning differential statistics, is simply difficult work?"

Despite his excessive optimism, Gray does make sense in critical ways. His conclusion that parents, and adults in general, need to trust children is his most important. Childhood in America has been co-opted by grown-ups who live in (exaggerated) fear that the world outside the home and school threatens children at every step they take and that unless children's waking hours are completely structured, their future success is at risk. Instead, trustful parents should tolerate children's independence and give them flexibility to learn by taking risks. As he urges, "Enabling your kids to play freely and relatively safely with other kids is one

of the most valuable things you can possibly do for them” (p. 226).

—Howard P. Chudacoff, *Brown University, Providence, RI*

### **The Boy on the Beach: Building Community through Play**

*Vivian Gussin Paley*

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Preface, contents. 90 pp. \$17.00 cloth. ISBN: 9870226645032

The gently illustrated cover of this charming, succinct book matches the meditative, exploratory tone of the pages that follow. Vivian Gussin Paley, a highly experienced kindergarten teacher and authority on children’s play, explicitly eschews the rigorous, experimental methods of much of “play scholarship . . . [to] search for the meaning of play along more dramatic paths.” She painstakingly records vignettes of children’s solitary and socio-dramatic make-believe play, observed primarily in kindergartens with the direct or indirect involvement of teachers, and then reflects on the children’s play and the teachers’ responses. She develops many of her insights in conversations with her pen pal Yu-Ching Huang, a teacher from Taiwan, whose thoughtful responses contribute meaningfully to the book.

As the book’s subtitle, “Building Community through Play,” suggests, one of the author’s main interests concerns the social aspect of play. The author and her Taiwanese cohort never cease to be impressed by the ingenious ways young children manage to generate “creative

kindness.” The players invite each other to enter their limitless private make-believe worlds, but do not lose their own differentiated selves in the process; they respect each other’s distinct make-believe roles and creative inventions. Solitary play can also be considered social in this respect, because the playing child creates an imaginative community, balancing individual roles and interpersonal dramatic acts.

Paley has explored similar themes in books such as *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter* (1991) and *Bad Guys Don’t Have Birthdays* (1988), but in each new work she elaborates and builds on these themes and integrates them into captivating accounts of the specifics of children’s play. A small sample of excerpts from the book demonstrates how the author and her correspondent write in suggestive, thought-provoking ways. For example, Paley observes of her interchange with the boy playing on the beach: “He and I are here to create metaphor and find hidden meanings in the moment. . . . We are looking for the story that is ours alone to tell.” Huang in turn muses, “To me it is all about friendship. The children are trying to find out how the pictures and words in their minds become the path to a friend.” And in another letter Huang adds, “Children become a character who is not themselves to prove the necessity of their existence. . . . By proving they are necessary and useful in a story, they demonstrate that they have a reason to exist, to be here with others.” Paley reflects, “children . . . play in order to see what they already know and what they might wish to experience again in a different way. . . . When we are young we need the dramatic impulses of play to help us organize . . .