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# Book Review: The Power of Play: Learning What Comes Naturally

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ABSTRACT: This book review examines The Power of Play: Learning What Comes Naturally. The author of the book is David Elkind, a well-known psychologist and author who has published several parenting books that discuss early childhood and issues that relate to young children. In this book, the intention is mainly about opening adults' eyes to the shift that has happened in methods of rearing children. The tendency towards academic learning, technological games and the overprotection of children is prohibiting and affecting children's normal growth. The book aims to articulate the importance of play in children's development and how it is considered to be an essential element of growing healthily. The book is written to increase awareness of the impact of the current shift towards academic learning and speeding up children's growth.

## Summary

The author divides the book into three parts. Each part contains three to four chapters that discuss the current and common ways of nurturing children and provide several theory-based suggestions to enhance parents' parenting skills. The first part of the book introduces the cornerstone concept of the book, which is the importance of integrating play with love, to work to enrich children's experiences and to encourage them to obtain their full potential. According to Elkind, play, love, and work are not to be separated, not just for children, but for adults as well, if we want to have healthy and happy lives. Having a balance between these concepts is what is needed to overcome some of the challenges that parents, teachers and children face today. Children grow and learn through play, through interacting with each other and through the nature that surrounds them. Anything new, extraordinary and creative comes first from children's play. They acquire skills that promote their intellectual and social skills that will enable them to grow up and reach their full potential. Therefore, it is important to enter the child's playing world and use it to promote the trajectory of positive development. However, Elkind mentions that due to the reality in which we live today there are fewer chances for children to play games that help them to make sense of their environments, their world and their experiences. Cheap plastic games, technological games, indoor activities instead of outdoor activities, and structured organised activities instead of free play are what young children have today. Consequently, they play and interact with things that do not promote their emotional, social, physical and intellectual development as much as before. Instead, these kinds of games turn children into young future consumers who do not have any personal attachment to their toys and thus, do not value them.

Further, the author says that parents are partly responsible for these changes in the nature of children's play. At the present time, there are interrelated factors that cause parents to unconsciously decrease their children's chances of having effective play which in turn impacts upon their healthy growth. Elkind mentions that the overprotection and the persistent feelings of anxiety that something bad might happen if the children play freely outdoors are among the factors that cause parents to limit children's play. Another factor is peer pressure that parents feel to enrol their children in many structured and organised activities, thinking that it makes them better parents. Finally, the author concludes the first part by saying that childhood is not a race; it has natural sequences that come from integrating love with play and work. Play is a crucial part of

childhood and it has outstanding benefits that outperform the benefits that might result from pressing children to grow up too quickly and to learn academic subjects.

The second part of the book discusses the integration of play with learning and different aspects of development. Before the author gives the reader suggestions about how to integrate these aspects, he talks about the common confusion and misunderstanding of children's learning methods. First, he describes how adults think that children learn best by following the suggested steps and advice that they offer to them. According to Elkind, adults are the ones who should learn to watch, not children. Children learn from engaging completely with activities without any disruption. The second misunderstanding is that childhood is a critical period for learning and that children's brains are like sponges that easily absorb what is presented to them. This assumption explains the current tendency towards academic education in preschools. However, there are many studies that indicate that children's brains grow slowly and according to specific sequences; therefore, children's intellectual capabilities develop gradually while they are growing. The last assumption is the belief that children are not trying hard enough when they do not understand something that adults are talking about. What adults may fail to understand is that children have not yet acquired the intellectual abilities and perceptions that adults have, and that it is unreasonable to expect children to comprehend the sorts of things that adults can. As Elkind (2007, p.103) notes:

> …the child does not learn by 'watching', 'absorbing', or 'looking harder.' The young child does learn by constructing and reconstructing the world through his play-generated learning experiences.

Then, Elkind explains in detail how children develop numerous intellectual skills like reasoning and object permanence while they engage in free play. Mastering these skills is crucial to set the stage for the next levels of development where academic subjects like mathematics, reading and science are introduced. Further, Elkind points out several strategies that adults could use to enable their children to master intellectual, motor, and social skills through playing and storytelling. For instance, using stories to introduce facts, telling stories with rhythm and providing children with firsthand experiences are some of the learning methods that make children naturally motivated. 'Learning is most powerful when it involves self-initiation and personal motivation' (Elkind, 2007, p.151). In addition, children gain the necessary skills that prepare them for advanced skills through direct, active and humorous involvement with people and elements.

The last part of the book is intended to introduce some of the methods that help parents to have cheerful and happy parenting experiences rather than to take parenting too seriously. According to Elkind, humour reinforces children's learning and healthy growth. Parents are encouraged to integrate humour with love, play and work as a way to have a healthy parenting style for both themselves and their children. The author provides several real-life examples that illustrate his point of view and demonstrates how parents, through humour, can turn their negative feelings into positive ones. The long-term memory that young children will carry with them is one that is full of fun and loving moments, and play experiences as well, as these memories become their source of comfort and hope.

The author concludes by suggesting several educational practices and philosophies that integrate play, love and work. Despite the current educational system that focuses on accountability and academic achievement as the main aims of education, Elkind offers several approaches that

combine children's minds, hearts and bodies in school. He provides brief descriptions of John Dewey, Maria Montessori, and several other philosophers' approaches that take a holistic approach in teaching children rather than just focusing on children's minds. To enrich children's learning experiences, adults are provided with several choices: enrol their children in schools like Montessori and Waldorf schools, or follow some techniques that help to integrate play, love, and work.

## Reviewer's Reflections

Over all, as an educator myself, I empathise with Elkind's perspective, which confirms what I already believed about children's development and the importance of play. During my teaching experience, my endeavours mostly reflected the learner-centred approach. My students are at the top of my priorities. I followed a teaching style that was driven by my students' interests, needs and characteristics. I tried my best to provide them with opportunities to express themselves freely. However, because of the evaluation system that was generated as a result of the emphasis on academic achievements, my teaching approach was challenged. The great tendency towards academic learning and achievement in the early years is increasing. Nowadays, kindergartens that focus on academic achievement are highly rated in my home country. Thus, I felt that as an early childhood educator I have to do something.

To be influential and contribute in shifting the emphasis on academic achievement, I decided to empower myself with knowledge. I came cross Elkind's book while I was reading about what really matters in the early years. I found it rich in knowledge and at the same time was easy to understand. Because I know that it is easy to be driven by the current tendency towards academic achievement, I feel that this book is helpful to remind all about what really matters. For parents, teachers and academics I believe that Elkind's book would be of interest because it informs them with the teaching and learning methods that supports children's development. Sometimes, with workload, pressure and the demands to academically achieve, teachers can forget about the essence of early childhood education, which is promoting children's development and progress through lived and shared experiences. Children need to explore the world around them to learn: they can learn best by doing and through playing and interacting with others. Elkind's book sheds light on ways children happily learn without the need of rigid instructions and preset outcomes. I found the book inspirational and a reminder about what really matters in early childhood.

## Critique of the Book

The concept of the book is similar to the concepts of Elkind's other books like "The Hurried Child". The way he wrote The Power of Play illustrates how he is passionate about childhood and attentive to the challenges that are faced by children today. Through the book, he aims to depict the reality that children are living in today because of adults' misunderstandings and faulty assumptions about how children learn effectively and grow in a healthy way. The main audience is parents who are driven by the new tendency that believes a bright future for young generations will be gained through academic learning, extra curricula and structured activities, and technologic games. Elkind delineates the right approach that parents should follow through a constant calling in the book for the importance of finding balance between play, love, and work. In the book, he certainly does a great job in delivering his ideas and uses several methods to make them easy to apply.

First, he utilises real-life examples and stories, which in several cases were from his own parenting experiences, to illustrate and support his notions. For readers, these examples and stories that come from a genuine experience are what they want to learn from and what match their concerns. Integrating reality and the ways in which many parents live today encourages parents to seek change and to make sense of their own experiences. For instance, to explain parent peer pressure, Elkind mentions a parent whom he met in one of his lectures who said that he or she had to enrol his or her child in a football team because all of the boys in the neighbourhood were enrolled. For parents, it is such a relief to know that other parents also face the pressure and the difficult experiences that they face with their children. Thus, Elkind's integration of his notions with real-life stories is a clever method.

Secondly, Elkind supports his ideas with scientific theories. He uses Jean Piaget's theory to provide parents with insights about children's growth and the developmental stages that they grow through. His aim is to make parents realise that each child develops at his or her own pace and that children's capabilities differ from each other. Moreover, he uses several philosophers' theories like Jean-Jacques Rousseau who promotes children's individuality and that they learn best through their own ways of thinking and knowing. He also cites the work of John Locke and Maria Montessori who assert the role of the senses on children's growing and learning processes. He simplifies the theories so that any adult, regardless of the level of education he or she holds, is able to fully understand it.

Thirdly, the book is full of advice and suggestions about how to nurture children in ways that promote their healthy growth. At the end of each chapter, Elkind illuminates several approaches that integrate play, love and work. Some of his advice is about the importance of introducing learning experiences to young children. Another piece of advice is about how to answer children's questions appropriately in ways that encourage them to think deeply rather than discouraging them. In addition, he provides several crucial suggestions to parents about how to enjoy their parenting experiences and their children's childhood as it will end much sooner than the parents might think.

Moreover, through several explanations and examples, Elkind attempts to answer the questions that he knows many parents are seeking answers for. To illustrate, he mentions that the book chapters are designed as guidance on some questions that concern parents; for example, when and how much should we, as parents, expose young children to electronic devices? When is it too much and when is it enough? And many other timely questions that relate to the inquiries of today's reality. Parents, nowadays, are faced with new challenges such as when to introduce smartphones and for how long they should allow their children to browse the internet: the advice Elkind offers in this book is applicable and pertains to the issues that concern today's parents.

Overall, The Power of Play is a book that, in my opinion, every parent and teacher must read. It is highly accessible thanks to its clear writing style. Even the scientific theories and philosophies are simplified in ways that make it interesting and pertinent to everyday parenting and teaching styles. Further, the book brings up clear and useful guidance for parents and teachers to foster children's healthy growth and creativity by integrating play, love and work. Also, it shows how play is a crucial part of children's development and how it is an effective tool for children's emotional, intellectual, social, and physical growth.

What is really fascinating about the book is that while reading it one comes to the deep realisation about how childhood is being hurried. It is a wake-up call to pay attention to what is being taken away from young children these days and what is offered as an alternative. Simply, the author sends a message that says let children be children. Being a child who explores his or her world by his or her own abilities and interests is something that should not be compromised. Free play, fun moments and cooperative playmates are the effective learning tools that will fulfil children's need, curiosity and growth.

In spite of the tremendous strengths of the book and its abundant resources, there are some chapters that discuss and repeat the same ideas mentioned in previous chapters. In addition, due to the valuable and realistic notions and issues that Elkind points out throughout his book, it would be of benefit if the book targeted different audiences such as educators and policy makers. I believe that it would be very helpful if the book discussed how teachers could modify the curriculum to promote learning through play.

In conclusion, Elkind encourages adults to reintroduce play into children's lives to enable them to grow according to their natural sequences, instead of pressuring them and making childhood a period that just prepares them for adulthood. Through his book, Elkind not only provides enormous practical and realistic methods to reach children's fulfilment, but he also answers important questions, highlights parents' concerns and provides real-life stories and situations. It is not a book that is written from the perspective of a psychologist, it is the product of an expert, parent, and grandparent's perspective and that is what makes it really a special book. I would certainly recommend the book to parents, teachers and academic as a great and complete guide to nurturing children in a healthy way and also to enjoying parenting and teaching experiences.

## Author's biography

Nada Zal AlWadaani is currently a PhD student at the University of Sheffield at the faculty of Social Sciences. Her focus is on early childhood education and issues that relate to the education of young children. She has a master's degree in early childhood education from the University of British Columbia. Her area of interest is in inclusion in the early years and how it can be implemented to ensure the needs of all children are met.

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