

PLAY! Reclaiming the power of play to build families and children's mental health and to prevent child maltreatment.

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# Ethical disclosures

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I receive royalties from the PCIT licensing exam and I will mention PCIT as one play intervention for parents.

# Acknowledgements

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Robin Gurwitch

PCIT Community

# Learning Objectives: Official version

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Participants will identify barriers to play and playfulness in current culture.

Participants will identify how play contributes to child and adult mental health and can possibly be a preventative factor of child maltreatment.

Participants will discuss how to integrate play and playfulness into interactions with children who have experienced trauma in a legal setting.

# Learning objectives: My simple thoughts.

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We don't play  
enough.

Play is good  
for children.

Play is good  
for adults.

Play can build  
relationships.

Play can help  
you.

Play more.



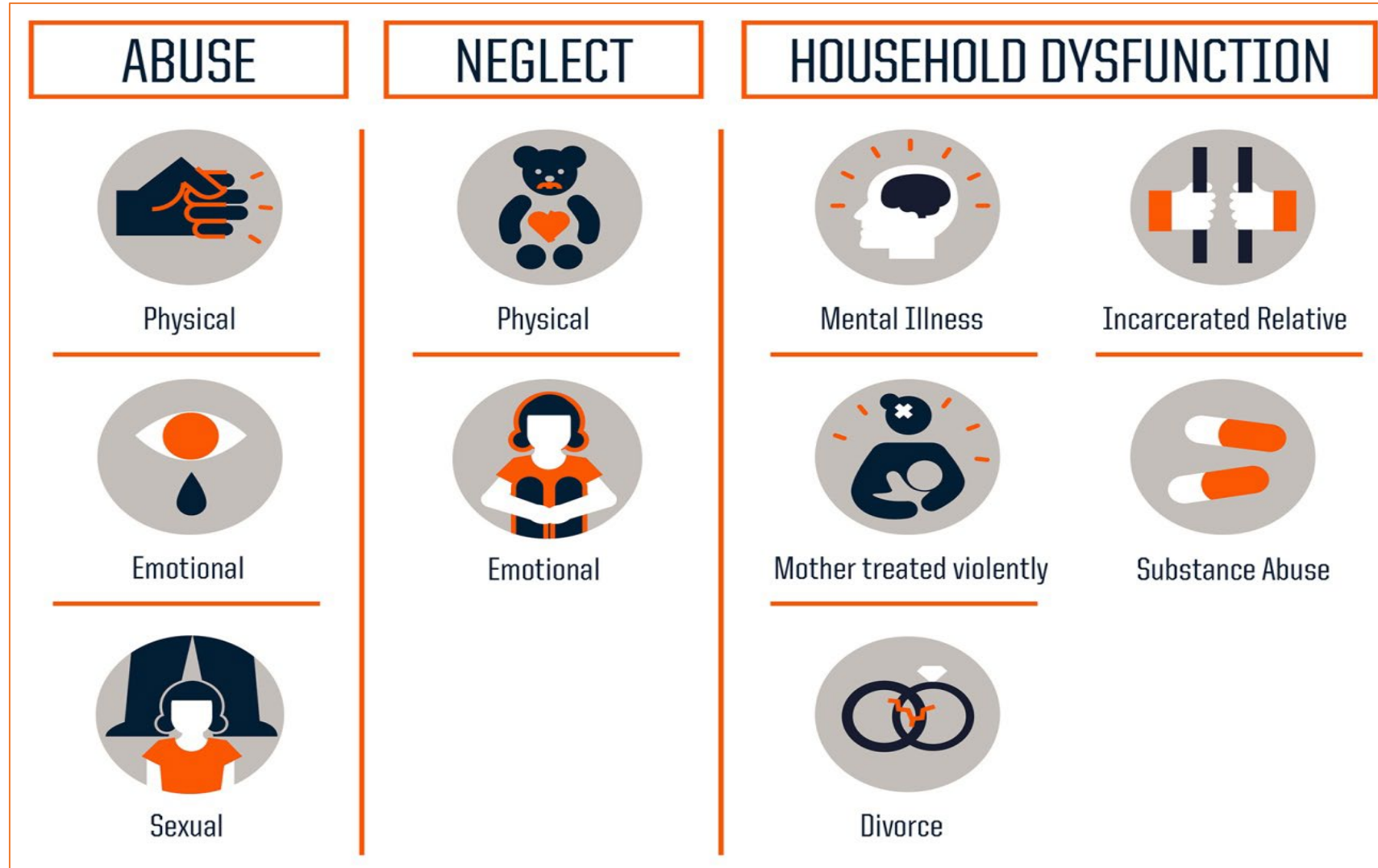
# The Bad News

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Children's mental health in America is getting worse.

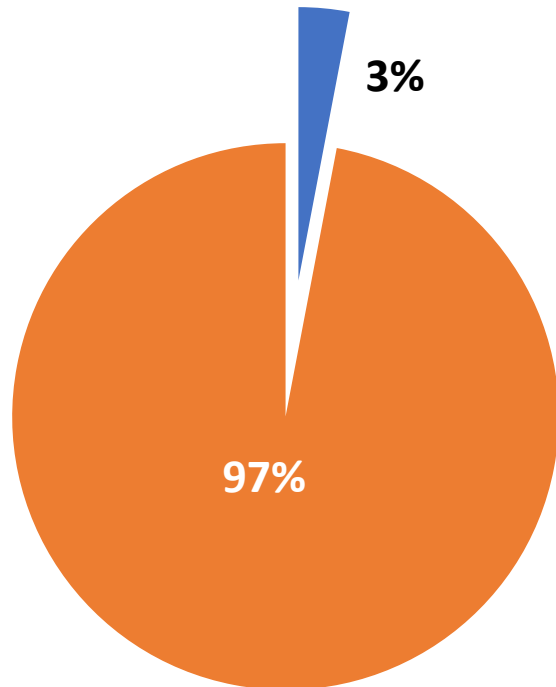
# Adverse Child Experiences (ACEs)

(Felitti et al., 1998)

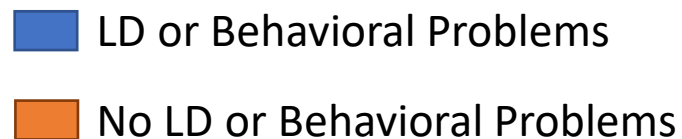
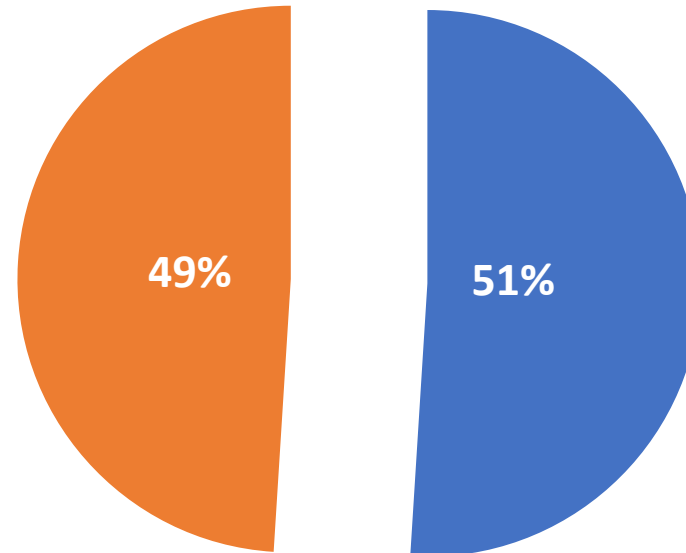


# Impact of ACEs on Behavior

Children with 0 ACEs



Children with 4 or More ACEs



(Burke, et al., 2011)



Almost every child in America now  
starts with an ACES score of 1

# Teenage mental health was getting worse pre-pandemic.

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/newsroom/docs/factsheets/dash-mental-health.pdf>

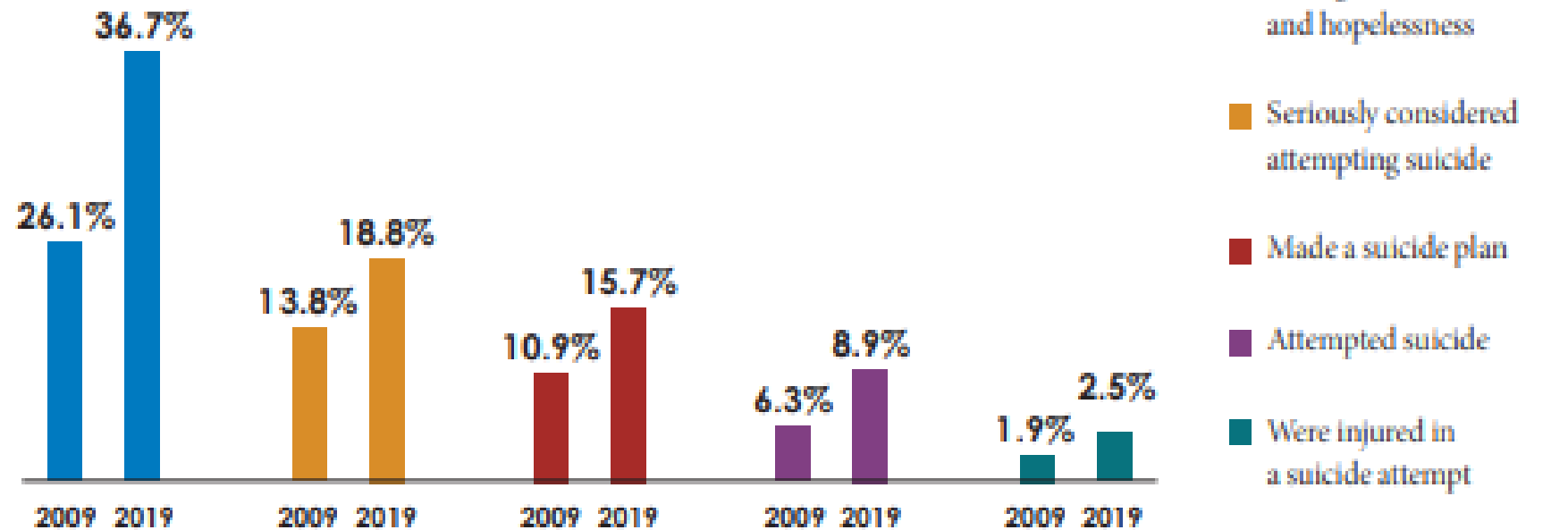
## POOR MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE BEHAVIORS AMONG U.S. HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS ARE INCREASING

Persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness

**INCREASED**

**40%**

between 2009-2019  
for U.S. high school  
students



Source: [CDC YRBS Data Summary & Trends Report: 2009 - 2019](#)

For complete 2009-2019 data on disparities in mental health and suicide-related behaviors among U.S. high school students, [click here](#)

# Mental Health Impact in the United States

(Rosen et al., 2020)

	2018	2020
Internalizing problems (subclinical / clinical )	31.7%	56.7%
Externalizing Problems (subclinical / clinical)	17.4%	56.2%

# Global Prevalence of Anxiety and Depression: Meta-Analysis during the Pandemic

(Racine, McArthur, and Cook, 2021)

- Meta-Analysis of 29 studies, combined  $n = 80,879$
- 1 in 4 youth globally are experiencing clinically elevated depression symptoms,
- 1 in 5 youth are experiencing clinically elevated anxiety symptoms
- This doubled pre-pandemic estimates.
- Moderator analyses revealed that prevalence rates were higher
  - When collected later in the pandemic
  - In older adolescents
  - For girls

# The pandemic had a greater impact upon vulnerable populations

(Hawke et al. 2020)

- pre-existing mental health problems
- physical disabilities
- racial and ethnic minorities
- sexual minorities
- poverty

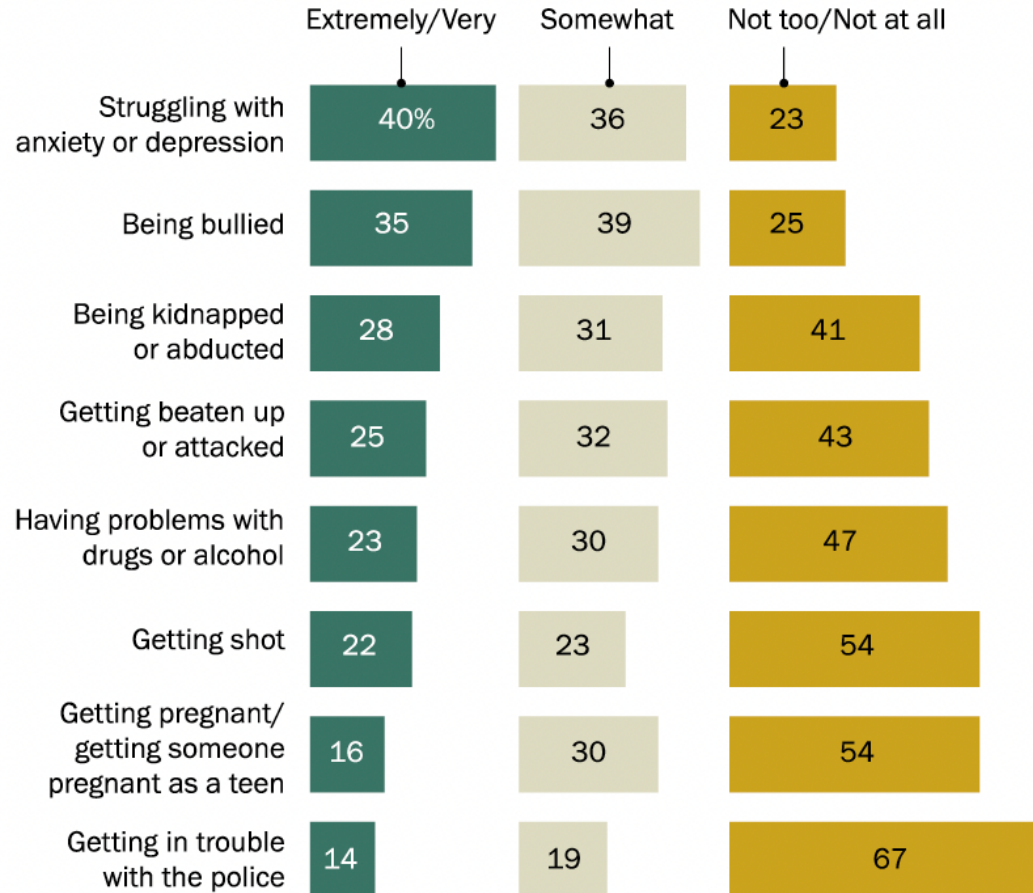
# Is this trend getting better post pandemic?

- Short answer: If the data is out there, I couldn't find it in June.
- In an admittedly weak study, 62% of therapists surveyed believe that student mental health is getting worse in 2024 than it was in 2020-2022 compared to 8% who said it has gotten better <https://b2b.talkspace.com/the-state-of-student-mental-health>

# Mental Health Tops List of Parent Concerns

## Mental health tops the list of parental concerns

*% of parents saying they are \_\_\_\_ worried about each of the following happening to any of their children at some point*





Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. parents conducted Sept. 20-Oct. 2, 2022.

"Parenting in America Today"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

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- In a 2023 survey of more than 130,000 kids and teens ages 9-18
    - 7 out of 10 youths said that when something important goes wrong in their lives, they can't stop worrying about it;
    - 70% rated their ability to cope with challenges as medium to very low. Alvord \*2023
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# How do we heal from the negative impacts of the pandemic?

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HOW DO WE REVERSE TRENDS IN GROWING DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY AMONG CHILDREN THAT WAS OCCURRING PRE-PANDEMIC?

# The power of play

THE NEXT 15 SLIDES ARE GREATLY  
INFLUENCED BY STUART BROWN'S  
BOOK

“PLAY: HOW IT SHAPES THE BRAIN,  
OPENS THE IMAGINATION, AND  
INVIGORATES THE SOUL”



We live in a  
play deprived  
culture.



# Greatly oversimplified view of data

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Since 2003, Americans are spending more time working, sleeping, and watching TV, while play and other leisure has declined (American Time Use Survey, 2018)







What are some cultural factors in America that reduce play?

# Cultural factors that suppress play in children and adults

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Increase in scheduled time for children and adolescents

- They lose the ability to play on their own

Technology

Busyness of culture

Fear of looking immature

Fear of looking non-productive

Use it or lose it. (Lost it)

Safety concerns





The court house is usually not built to be a playful environment.

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Every week, parents spend almost as much quality time with their child (2 hours, 41 minutes) as they do one on one time with their phone (2 hours 17 minutes)







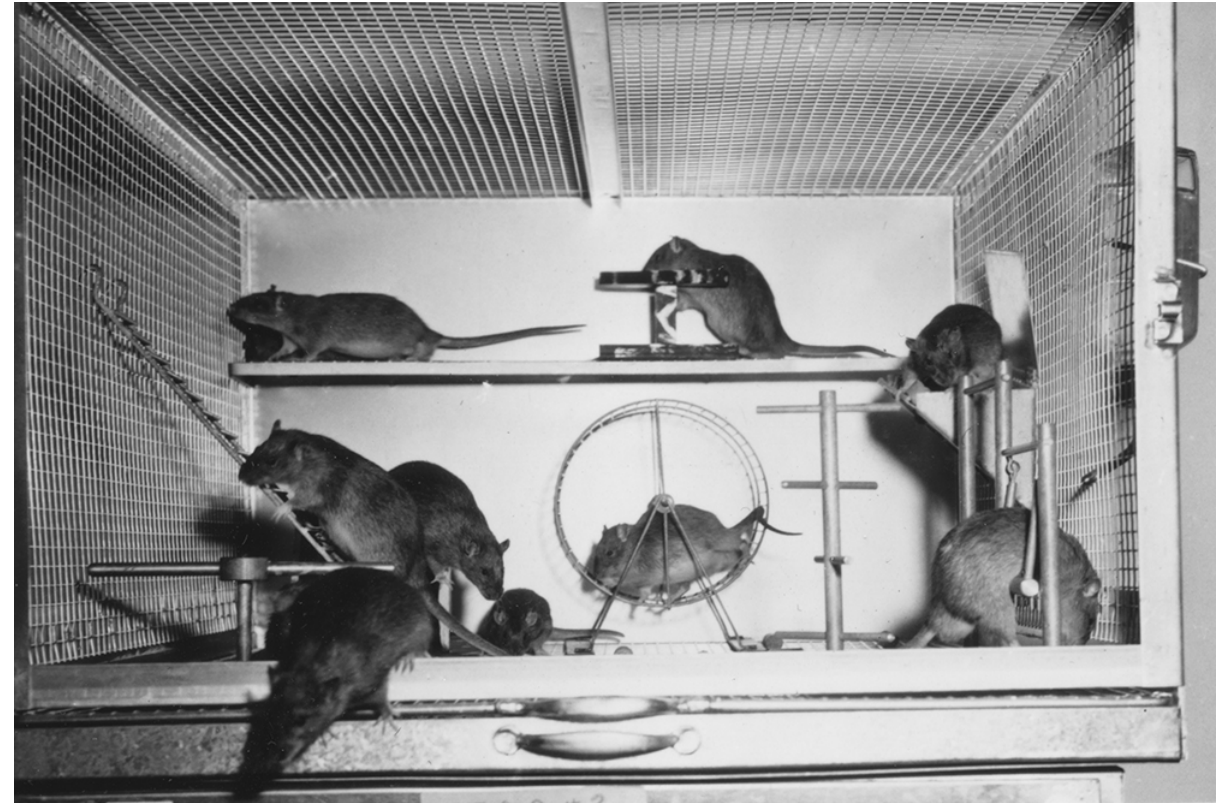
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Play is so important to optimal child development that “it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child” (Ginsburg, 2007).

# Classic Study: Playful rats (Diamond et. al 1964)

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Rats raised in more playful, “enriched” environments had heavier brains and more complicated neural connections.



# There is a deep pool of research on the effect of play upon developing children.

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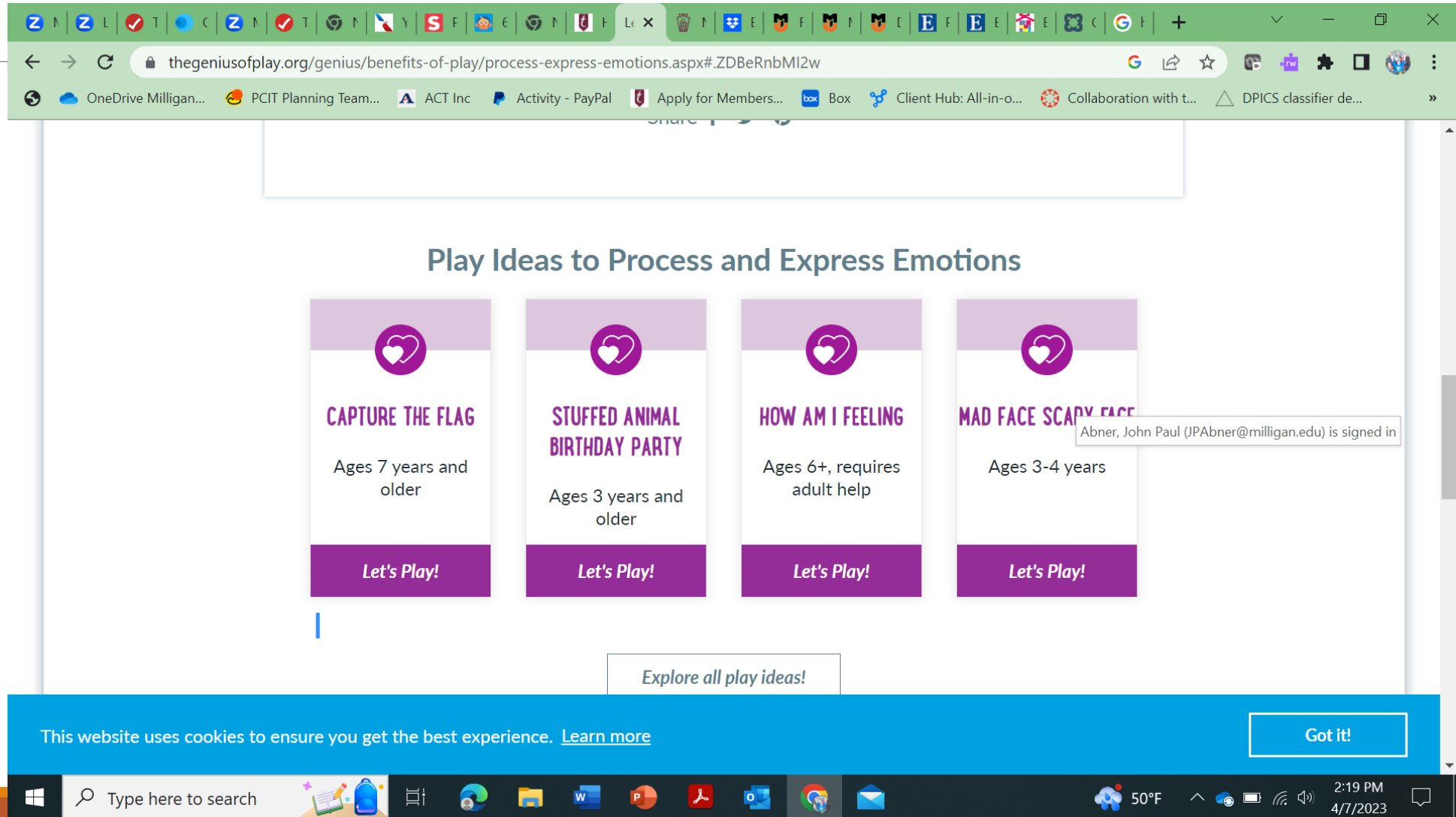
Play is good for the developing brain. It improves cognitive, physical, social, and emotional **development**. Ginsburg and the Committee on Communications, and the Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2007

Studies report that kids who engage in frequent, pretend play have stronger selfregulation skills. (Lillard, 2017)

Play increased divergent problem-solving ability (Wyver and Spence 1999).

## Play and playfulness is a mental health protective factor.

The next six slides are stolen from  
thegeniusofplay.org







# Play has positive physical effects.

<https://www.thegeniusofplay.org/tgop/benefits/genius/benefits-of-play/benefits-of-play-home.aspx?hkey=75c664db-cb16-4004-8756-03ba00ba381e>

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It improves:

Balance

Motor skills

Coordination

Eating habits

Sleeping habits



# Emotional Development

Learn to cope with emotions in a situation they control

Practice empathy

Improve self-regulation





# Social Development

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Negotiate group dynamics

Collaborate

Compromise

Deal with Other's feelings

Share



# Cognitive benefits

Think

Read

Remember

Reason

Attentional

Critical Thinking



# Story from Stuart Brown's book

## Cal Tech Jet Propulsion Lab

- Put man on the moon
- Built robotic probes to explore solar system
- In the 90's their engineers were retiring.
- Hired the best grads but
  - Lacking in problem solving ability
- What did they start including in their interviews to predict success?







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Children with limited resources also have limited access to play options.

One of the possible contributing factors for the disparity in education levels between advantaged and disadvantaged children is more opportunities for play.

# Creative

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Creative problem solving

Form Unique ideas





# Communication

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Exchange thoughts

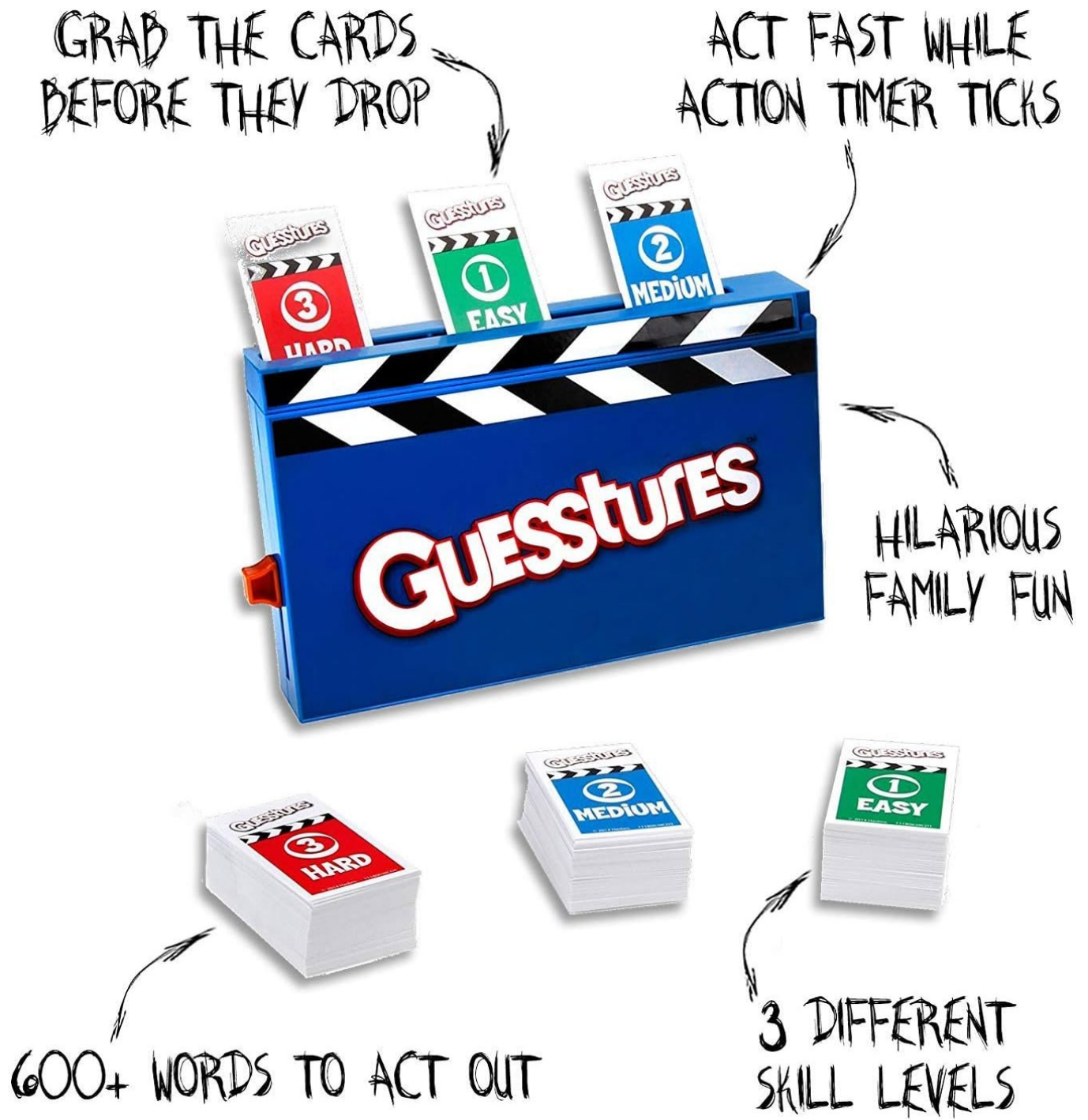
Information

Messages

Signals



# Guesstures: Speed Charades



Identify what areas of development were tapped into in the game we just played.

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Communication

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Creative

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Cognitive

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Physical

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Emotional

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Social Development

Yes, but can increased  
play reduce child  
maltreatment?

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# Play is associated with higher parental self-efficacy

Román-Oyola, Reynolds, Soto-Feliciano, Cabrera-Mercader, Vega-Santana, 2017

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Insecurely attached parents are more likely to raise insecurely attached children. (Bahmani, et al. 2023)

Parents with insecure attachment are more likely to abuse and neglect their children. (Lo et al, 2019)

# Evidence

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Engaging in effective play with children who have experienced trauma can decrease externalizing behaviors and increase attachment (Griffin & Parson, 2023)

High **play** quality is associated with father–child **attachment**. (Tueful and Anhert, 2022)

Mental health issues are a known risk factor for child maltreatment and most primary and secondary prevention programs improve parental and child mental health. (Waid, Cho, & Marsalis, 2022)

# Impact of Early Intervention

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At age three, **children** in Early Head Start

- were more attentive and engaged in **play** with their parents
- had higher scores on cognitive development assessments compared to controls

These outcomes were similarly associated with long-term reductions in the likelihood of **child maltreatment** by successfully decreasing family conflict and stress and supporting positive, emotionally responsive parenting. (Green et. al 2020)

# Oxytocin

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When parents play with their child, the hormone, oxytocin, is released.

Oxytocin is associated with

- trust
- relationship building.

Oxytocin also counteracts the effects of stress, reducing blood pressure, anxiety, and fear (Dewar, 2019).

# Parent Child Interaction Therapy prevents child maltreatment recidivism

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Named one of two “well-supported and efficacious treatments for child abuse

- Named by US Department of Justice as one of two “well supported and efficacious treatments for child abuse.”
- Abusive parents completing PCIT had a 19% re-report for physical abuse compared with 49% of parents assigned to a standard community group (Chaffin, et al., 2004)
- Compared to community-based parenting group
- PCIT showed fewer drop-outs

# PCIT as a preventive for child abuse

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In a randomized controlled trial, the effectiveness of Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) and correlates of maltreatment outcomes were examined.

After 12 weeks and compared to waitlist, PCIT mothers were observed to

- have improved parent-child interactions
- reported better child behavior
- decreased stress.
- PCIT completers were less likely to be notified to child welfare than noncompleters.
- reductions in child abuse potential and improvements d. (Thomas & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2011)

# The opposite of play is not work.

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THE OPPOSITE OF PLAY IS DEPRESSION. (STUART BROWN, M.D.)

THE OPPOSITE OF PLAY IS THE ABSENCE OF JOY (PAM ABNER, SLP)



# Playfulness can infuse work.

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# Discussion Burst: How can we incorporate play and playfulness into our work with kids and systems?

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# Tips for increasing play and playfulness with children in the legal setting.

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Be prepared

Let the child lead in play interactions.

Create opportunities for play and playfulness

Be intentionally playful

Be vulnerable enough to be silly

Bounce or throw a ball

Smile and laugh more

Dress for play readiness

Invite clients into play and playfulness

# Impact of play on adults (Brown and Vaughn, 2010)

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Imaginative play gives us chances to imagine possibilities and test them against the real world.

Results in greater cognitive skills

Stimulates some of the same areas as sleep

- In other words, play stabilizes body and social development

Some research suggests that just as you can have a sleep deficit, you can have a play deficit.



# Playfulness is positively related to physical fitness.

Broyer, R. T., Gander, F., Bertenshaw, E. J., & Brauer, K. (2018).



# Adults who are more playful report being happier.

Yue, X. D., Leung, C.-L., & Hiranandani, N. A. (2016).

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# Sharing positive events brings couples together

(Gable, 2006)

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Play refreshes and revives.



# Tips on recovering playfulness as an individual

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Commit to becoming more playful

Try something new

Recover an old favorite

Play with your kids

Use your vacation time

Lunch – N – Play

Express yourself through writing, art, playing music

Sing and Dance

Create unstructured time focused on being playful.

Be an instigator

Thankfulness

Reclaim the weekend

# Time to commit

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What are you going to do tonight to be more playful?

What are you going to do next week to be more playful?

What are your long term playfulness goals.



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