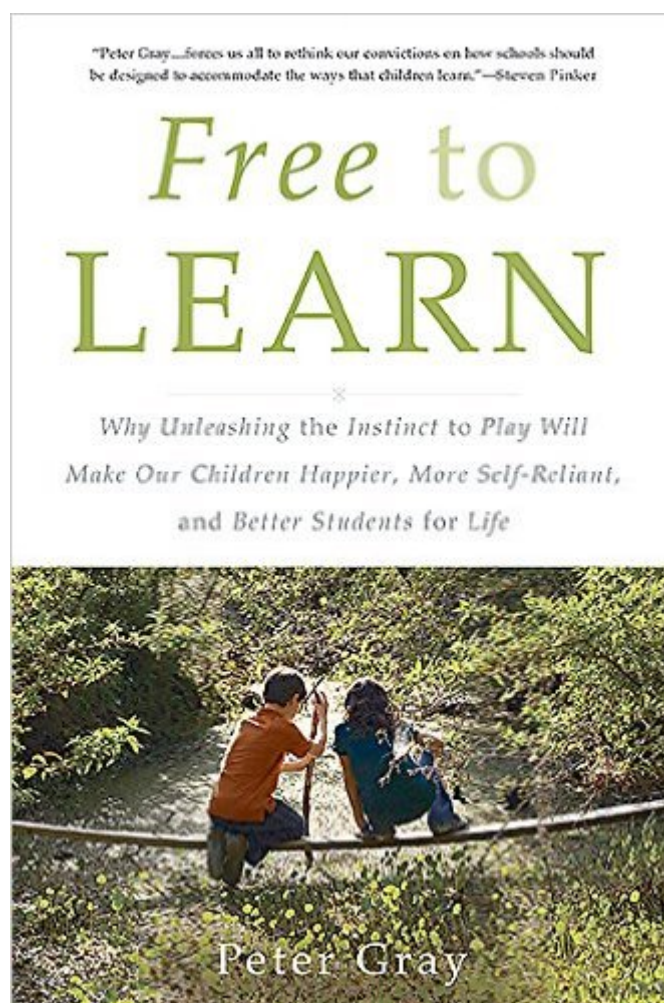


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Free To Learn: Why Unleashing The Instinct To Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, And Better Students For Life



Synopsis

In *Free to Learn*, developmental psychologist Peter Gray argues that in order to foster children who will thrive in today's constantly changing world, we must entrust them to steer their own learning and development. Drawing on evidence from anthropology, psychology, and history, he demonstrates that free play is the primary means by which children learn to control their lives, solve problems, get along with peers, and become emotionally resilient. A brave, counterintuitive proposal for freeing our children from the shackles of the curiosity-killing institution we call school, *Free to Learn* suggests that it's time to stop asking what's wrong with our children, and start asking what's wrong with the system. It shows how we can act—both as parents and as members of society—to improve children's lives and to promote their happiness and learning.

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Customer Reviews

If I had to summarize the first part of Peter Gray's book in a few words, it would be something like the following: "Traditional schools are too authoritarian. Traditional education stifles children's curiosity and desire to learn by telling them what to study and by teaching them to do as they are told." This part of the book, where he presents his understanding of the historical and psychological causes and human impact of traditional schooling (whether public or private), is extraordinarily compelling, and has forever changed my perspective on traditional education. Having read Dr Gray's book, I will no longer take for granted that the use of a standard curriculum for everyone is a good idea, and I am thoroughly convinced that extinguishing a person's natural

desire to learn is at the root of many if not every unmotivated student. Whatever else we do, we must keep our children “ and ourselves “ wanting to learn, which is easy, Dr Gray argues, if we allow everyone to learn what about what interests them. Although equally well-argued, I was less convinced by the second part of his book, his proposal for a solution. Although I am now thoroughly convinced that the student needs to be significantly involved in setting the direction of his learning (I would add, to the extent possible from his age and level of maturity), the specific implementation of this practice I believe needs some further refinement. Essentially, Dr Gray argues for the widespread introduction of “unschooling” environments and specifically schools like the Sudbury Valley schools that encourage each student from a very early age to choose on their own what to study, and how.

According to Peter Gray, he wrote this book in response to the implications and consequences of a school-centric model for childhood development: "The school system has directly and indirectly, often unintentionally, fostered an attitude in society that children learn and progress primarily by doing tasks that are directed and evaluated by adults, and that children's own [informal, self-directed] activities are wasted time...Related to this anti-play attitude is an ever-increasing focus on children's [begin italics] performance [end italics], which can be measured, and decreasing concern for true learning, which is difficult or even impossible to measure. What matters in today's educational world is performance that can be scored and compared across students, across schools, and even across nations to see who is better [who scores higher] and who is worse [who scores lower]. Knowledge that is not part of the school curriculum, even deep knowledge, doesn't count." Credit Gray with brilliant use of sequences to explain the development of a key concept or the steps/stages of a key process. For example, seven reasons why children don't like school; lessons to be learned from exemplary schools (e.g. Sudbury Valley School); universal types of children's play; five of the most valuable lessons to be learned from children's informal, self-directed ways of playing games such as baseball that formal, adult-directed games do not; three primary styles of parenting (i.e. trustful, directive domineering, and directive-protective; reasons for the decline in trustful parenting; and how to become a more trustful parent.

Some books you read and think "Yes! Yes! Yes!" Some others, "No, No, No." This one, for me, had parts of both. The "Yes!" parts: 1) A very insightful critique of traditional education. Peter Gray offers a rare, poignant critique of what is fundamentally wrong with public education in his outline of the seven sins of forced education. As he states, children generally don't like school, and for many good

reasons, the paramount of which is that government schools are forced education:"A prison, according to the common, general definition, is any place of involuntary confinement and restriction of liberty. In school, as in adult prisons, the inmates are told exactly what they must do and are punished for failure to comply. Actually, students in school must spend more time doing exactly what they are told to do than is true of adults in penal institutions. Another difference, of course, is that we put adults in prison, because they have committed a crime, while we put children in school because of their age."Beyond the denial of liberty, Gray also identifies many other real problems of schools:- They interfere with the development of personal responsibility and self-direction.- They undermine intrinsic motivation to learn, and turn learning into work.- They judge students in ways that foster shame, hubris, cynicism, and cheating.- They interfere with the development of cooperation, and encourage bullying (in large part by their forced nature and their strict age-segregation.)- They inhibit critical thinking, because of their focus on getting high marks on very simplistic multiple-choice tests.2) An insightful analysis why and how play and playfulness can foster real learning.

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