

# The Secret to Your Child's Academic Success

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So begins a National Public Radio interview with neuroscientist Sergio Pellis on the importance of free play — play that is not organized by an adult.

The experience of play actually changes the connections of the neurons at the front end of the brain, the part where kids are building up their "executive control center."

So even though play may look like the opposite of self-control — kids are running around! Goofing off! — they are actually learning planning, problem-solving and self regulation. "Without play," says Pellis, "those neurons aren't changed."

**Free play is not the same as Little League** or any other structured, adult-led activity, no matter how fun. That's because when adults run the show, the kids are just kids. But when KIDS run the show, THEY must be the adults. This one independent experience has enormous repercussions:

They must come up with something to do. That's creativity! They must decide how the game is played. Negotiation! Was the ball in or out? That involves compromise. And how do

you make the teams fair? How do you decide who's "It"? How do you change the rules if they're too easy, or hard? How do you keep the little kids involved, or the big kids from getting bored?

These are the social skills kids need to learn, especially for the challenging economy ahead. If robots are going to take most of the jobs, the only people who'll end up succeeding will be the ones who aren't robots. The ones with the best human skills. (See above.)

**But... but... what about academics?**

Boston College Psychology Prof. Peter Gray notes that when Piaget studied children playing marbles, he found that children acquired a higher understanding of the rules when they played amongst themselves, than when adults helped them. It's like the difference between driving somewhere or being driven. In play, kids are the drivers. They're not passive. Their brains learn to learn.

The skills associated with self-directed play ultimately lead to better grades. In one study, researchers found that the best predictor of academic performance in 8th grade was a child's social skills in 3rd grade.

Play is not a substitute for learning, it IS learning. (That just happens to be fun.)