

M.O.N.S.T.E.R. – PROOF

Your Child

Methods Of Nicely Silencing The Ego's Roar

Lisa M. Smith, M.S.

M.O.N.S.T.E.R. Proof Your Child
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my most amazing teachers, my children: Stephanie, Kevin, Alexis, Kent and Riley. Without each of you, this book would not have been created. Stephanie, you taught me you are never too old to take a risk, reinvent yourself and dance blissfully! Kevin, you taught me about the process of accepting what “is” with grace and humor. Alexis, you taught me to stand in my own truth and never back down. Kent, you taught me about courage, hard work and determination and that even chores can be fun! Riley, you taught me to set boundaries, to embrace my inner goddess and the importance of fabulous shoes!

To my family: The one I was born into and the ones I have “added” along the way - thank you for your love and support!

***“Life is either a daring adventure
or nothing at all.”***

Helen Keller

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***There's nothing that can help you
understand your beliefs more
than trying to explain them
to an inquisitive child.
~Frank A. Clark***

Introduction

**Parenting...it's not just an adventure... it's a job!
(And a rigorous one at that!)**

It is 0-five hundred hours and you have checked in for your tour of duty. You have shown up fully prepared - with your new haircut, shiny new boots and pressed camouflage. You are in a dark room (where you will remain throughout your duty) and it is announced in a hushed tone (this is a sacred mission, after-all), that you are about to embark on the scariest, life-threatening, sanity-challenging, sleep-deprived, heralding mission of your life.

You will be pushed past your limits, you will need all of your resources (and even some you do not even possess yet), you will need to be able to speak many languages (from infant babble to teenage-hood – which by the way is a language that changes daily and as of yet, has still yet to be clearly defined), navigate through emotional choppy waters, repair wounded flesh and hearts, find innovative solutions to impossible problems at the drop of a hat, be in several places at once, have eyes in the back of your head, and not get your feelings hurt when you are shot at with intense words like “I hate you” and “you’re the *worst*” countless times.

You will be in charge of a helpless being who will vomit on you, pee on you, kick you, possibly bite you and threaten your very sanity at times. You will never get a day off, a vacation, sick time, nor will you be paid for this.

Lastly, there is NO manual. You will safely navigate this terrain with no map, no compass and you *will* be blindfolded.

However, you will gain skills like knowing where every bathroom is within a 10-mile radius of everywhere you go. You will have contents in your purse and/or vehicle that can feed a family of four for a week, maybe longer...a First Aid kit that rivals any decent EMT; will go to any length possible to get that ONE sought after Happy Meal toy and will be able to leap tall buildings in a single bound to remove a “chokable” from your child’s hand before ingestion. You will be able to identify each and every toy your child has just by stepping on it in the middle of the night.

You will learn to negotiate with grace and ease - from the two-year old who is holding the cat in one hand and an open bottle of vegetable oil in the other (over your new carpet) to the teenager wagging YOUR keys in front of YOU offering to go get groceries that YOU do not want nor need. You will learn an entirely new math system, where your money goes out and never comes back.

You will hear yourself say things that you swore would never come out of your mouth and find there are days when you do not even recognize the person staring back at you. You will most likely be referred to as “so-n-so’s mother or father) – yes, you might lose your identify once in a while. You might even announce on occasion that you have to “go to the potty” (in the company of full-fledge adults, who most likely will not notice your vernacular). And it might

only happen once, but most likely you will sound like your very own mother at some point during this adventure.

So, would you sign up for this tour of duty? Come on, who's in?

YOU – you know who you are...we just can't resist – we check the little box that says I know and understand (we have NO clue!), and sign on the dotted line - our former lives away. Yet, in spite of the disclosure - we all jump in blindfolded and all. Although all of the above are applicable, there are so *many* intangible, inexplicable and vast rewards that it makes it all worthwhile and we do it over and over again. Being a parent is the opportunity to allow this being who has come through you, not TO you, to learn from you but also to teach you. The journey I have taken with my children has forced me to examine my *own* fears and “Monsters” more closely. They are my Master teachers and as I have humbly sat at their feet, I learned so much about myself – my True Self.

We are never really prepared for parenthood, because it is a process. It becomes a buried treasure we uncover within our own selves. We read manuals, we take the advice from those who have been there, but ultimately it is a journey we take alone. This book is called “How To M.O.N.S.T.E.R.-Proof Your Child” – where monsters represent the ego. M.O.N.S.T.E.R. is an acronym for Methods Of Nicely Silencing The Ego's Roar. The ego purports that there is something to be afraid of, whether it is in the closet, under the bed or in our heads – it still *feels* very real. As we nurture the mind, body and spirit of our

child, we do so for ourselves, as well. When we bring the monster out of the closet, we expose it in ourselves and this can be a daunting process. We can tell our child there is nothing to be afraid of, but that is not enough. We must show them that they have within their own being a Self, which is greater than anything outside of them. We do this in many ways.

The first way we do this is connecting to the Higher Self within our *own* being. We cannot give away what we do not possess. We cannot tell our child (at least not convincingly) that there is nothing to be afraid of when we ourselves have our own unquestioned fears. So, what's wrong with being afraid anyway? Well, I suppose nothing, if it serves a purpose (running from a Saber tooth Tiger comes to mind). However, most of what we are generally afraid of has no basis in reality – they are just “monster” thoughts. So, it isn't really serving a purpose (except to keep us and our child up at night wondering, commiserating and well, just awake, which totally stinks!).

Being afraid and operating from *fear* is different. There are many times when we will have fears. It's o.k. It happens. What we hope to do is to parent in such a way that our children can *feel* the fears (and challenge the thoughts that create them) and move throughout their lives anyway. However, they do not base their decisions from a place of fear.

We do this by insulating them. This is accomplished by planting “seeds of awareness” in their growing minds, bodies and spirits. In a busy world and a hectic life, it has

been my experience that the *little* moments are perfect windows of opportunity to do this: riding in the car, bath time, bedtime, making dinner. But, when we are aware of these principles, we parent on purpose. We take the opportunities as they arise to plant seeds.

***Anyone can count the number of seeds in an apple,
but no one knows the number of apples in just one seed.***

Anonymous

Having worked in the field of neurodevelopment, I have had the opportunity to learn a lot about how the brain works and how we as “humans” experience ourselves being human. In my observations I see that how the brain becomes whole is by integrating multiple systems. The eyes “team” together to see, which imprints a picture on the brain, which transfers that image to something the brain can relate to and we say, “Aha...it’s an apple.” When we hear a sound, we correlate it to something that is meaningful (either a voice that is comforting, or a sound that brings fear). An experience becomes more than just what we see, hear, touch or smell. It becomes all of that rolled into one - individual parts, yet one whole experience. A child that experiences sensory deprivation or sensory overload cannot accurately assimilate all of the things coming in and thus shuts down. This was the case with my son who was diagnosed with autism at age 3 ½. His inability to integrate all of these things left him curled in a ball on the floor rocking, trying to somehow keep the world from

continually assaulting him. Slowly and methodically, we brought him back to our world by integrating him and the sensory pieces little by little.

It has been very similar with the other children I have worked with. The integration of life in little bitty pieces allows for the brain to assimilate it. The brain makes changes based on frequency, intensity, duration and consistency. So, a certain activity done for the right amount of time, the right intensity and for the correct number of times consistently will result in a change. If you think about it, it is how we live. We eat like this – not one big meal forever and that’s it. We take in bit by bit, assimilate what we need and well, you know get rid of the rest. If we take in too much or too little, it is unhealthy. The dictionary defines integration as the process of making whole. To live in today’s world and be a parent today requires a lot of integration. In order to do this we can start early and plant little seeds that grow as the child grows.

This is the intention of this book...a little at a time. I call this ***Parenting On Purpose*** using *Conscious Parenting Strategies*. These suggestions and activities help us create an “on purpose” mindfulness about how we engage in activities with our child and what we provide for them to facilitate their growth and learning. My hope is that these ideas spur some of your own that are individualized for you and your child. Happy Planting!

Lisa

*To bring up a child in the way he should go,
travel that way yourself once in a while.
~Josh Billings*

*There are some things you
learn best in calm,
and some in storm.
~Willa Cather*

I Wonder

I gaze into the perfect house,
with the perfect décor
And I wonder....
What would my life be like
without stains on the carpet
Without handprints on the walls
Without mis-matched furniture because I chose
To buy a swing set instead of new furniture.
I wonder how it would feel to sit in a room with
No visible signs of a life because it is immaculate -
A picture in a magazine.
I wonder at night, when I would sit alone
On the couch – how would that feel?
Sometimes, I think it might feel grand –
Like I am a Queen in a castle with perfectly
Arranged furniture and flowers just right
Arranged on a table.
I see the floor and it shines.
I see the pantry and everything is
Perfectly lined up.
I wonder...
Then, I settle back into my worn out couch
And I see pink and purple streaks on the floor
Remnants from a one-of-a-kind art project that
Was created mere moments ago.
I see a shoe that was cast off in a rush
To put on clickety-clack shoes –

After all, the Ball waits for no Princess.
And is that lipstick on the carpet?
Hot pink is my guess...it's the only color
The Princess wears.
And a handprint on the wall from the
Master Chef who made mud pies outside for
A spectacular feast and forgot to wash off her hands
Before pressing against the wall.
She must serve them fresh and hot, of course.
And little wood chips scattered around.
As our little hamster adds his own fragments of color
to the canvas
I call my life.
I wonder...
How could my life ever get any fuller -
Any richer in color than at this VERY moment?
There will never be a day like this, when
I entertained a Princess,
Ate the most magical
Mud pies
and saw a Masterpiece in the making.
I wonder,
At the perfection
In it all.

Lisa Smith
Mother of 5
2012

Play

**Always jump in the puddles!
Always skip alongside the flowers.**

**The only fights worth fighting
are the pillow and food varieties.**

~Terri Guillemets

Chapter 1

The M.A.G.I.C. Of Play!

There is a place where the formlessness of spirit meets the human form. It is a place of wonderment and magic. A place to meet your True Self and know it is You.

It is where you drop into all that you already are and if only for a moment forget everything you *think* you know about who you are....where the possibilities are endless. You cannot reach this place through your mind, although it is invited to tag along. Nor is it merely a physical experience, although the body joins with its energy and rhythms. It is a place that is still, but not quiet. It is empty, but not devoid. It is powerful but not out of control.

It is the sacred space of play.
Where all of the lines on the page magically disappear leaving nothingness from which all is possible.
It is a safe space we can connect to our Higher Selves
- our own inner giggle.

Love is a better teacher than duty.

Albert Einstein

The M.A.G.I.C. Of Play!

*Kids: they dance before they learn
there is anything that isn't music.*

~William Stafford

The American Academy of Pediatrics published a study highlighting the importance of play. They state that play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being of children. It is so important, as a matter of fact, that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a RIGHT for every child!¹ Wow! That is incredibly powerful.

Yet, how many children “play” today? Statistics from 5 years ago (so imagine how they have changed since then), show that over the past two decades, the hours children have for “unstructured play” and outdoor activities have decreased by eight hours a week and overall free time by a total of twelve hours a week. The number of hours children spend in an organized sport has doubled and the time spent in “passive spectator leisure” (as in not moving!) has increased from thirty minutes to over three hours!² Most children are hurried from one endless stream of activities to more endless streams of activities. We call them “enrichment” programs. But, one has to ask oneself...who is actually getting “rich” from these activities? The staggering statistics show us that free play has dropped dramatically. The days of sitting around making something

out of nothing have all but deteriorated. Parents have a lot of pressure to make sure their child is ready to meet the demands of the world, including preparation for college that begins in elementary school! Many working families have to rely on daycare and there are fewer families that have adult supervision during the workday. We have become incredibly efficient and tend to have task-oriented activities in all that we do, including play. We have turned parenting into a JOB that is complete with “to-dos”, flow charts, quarterly statements and “Am I getting my money’s worth?” mindsets. To get into college, kids are doing some pretty crazy things (some students are “cheating”, tripling their majors or taking multiple athletic and artistic activities to “beef up” their résumés).

This hurried lifestyle has created stress and anxiety that can lead to depression. A survey by the American College Health Association showed that 61% of college students are feeling hopeless. Probably about how you’re feeling right now after reading all of this, huh? I really don’t like this kind of information. In general, I find it negative and unhelpful. But, it *is* necessary to understand why play is so important if we’re going to make it a priority (which means de-prioritizing a lot of other things in our lives). We all have to look at the statistics and facts, if only for a moment so that we understand what we are up against and that it is an issue that we cannot ignore. We all know of the crisis within our country right now surrounding the topic of bullying. Kids are walking around half-full or some of them, plain empty. But, there is hope (ah...I promise).

There is something we can do and it is not going to mean selling all of your worldly possessions and moving out into the forest in a lean-to.

What is the answer? What can we do about this?

The Weber Fechner law is a principle that states that the level of what it is that you can detect or perceive is dependent on the background noise or distraction. The more background noise, the more signal you need.

Or you need to lower the background noise.

We live in a world with a lot of background noise. It is difficult to hear our children's signals, let alone read them. In order to do that, we need to lower the noise. We do this by dropping into a sacred space with our child. We play. Play has been proven to be an incredible way to help children build confidence, master their environment and most importantly, foster a connection with their parents and family, which is essential for creating resilience. This is one incredibly important, efficient, and fun way we "monster-proof" our kids. The study conducted by the American Academy of Pediatrics states that kids who are likely to gain the essential traits of resiliency are those children who come from a home where there is unconditional love and a connection...time together.³

Play facilitates this!

So, what is play anyway? What does it do? Does it serve a purpose at all or is it just something kids do until they “grow up” and learn about the real world? Have you ever watched a child immersed in play? They are not having a playful experience. They ARE the playful experience. It’s like they step into a little portal that takes them into an entirely other world.

I love the Movie *Hook* with Robin Williams and Dustin Hoffman. Peter is all grown up and a high-power executive. He goes back to visit Wendy, who is now elderly. His children are kidnapped by Hook and Peter has to retrieve them. However, he has forgotten his Essence. He does not remember how to play. But his “shadow” – self reminds him of his ability to play, while Tinkerbell shouts the mantra “Believe” and to think of happy thoughts, which make you fly. Peter reclaims his ability to play, thus saving his children (and his family in the process and he “connects” to his son, who he has lost touch with – which is the BEST part of the movie!) His reconnection to his inner Essence, which he finds through play saves his family, oh and him too!

One thing I consistently have talked about with my own children is that we cannot give away what we do not have. We cannot give love, hope, joy, peace, contentment, laughter...etc., if we ourselves are not experiencing them. One issue that we all tend to “grow out of” is our ability to play with life. We become like Peter, with our oh-so-busy-and-consuming lives and forget to play with, through and in our lives. We start out so incredibly intuitive about this. If

you don't believe me, go spend the day with a bunch of 2-5 year olds. They totally rock! In their world, ANYTHING (and everything) is possible and most likely probable. They create out of nothing, move effortlessly from flying in a rocket ship to making scrumptious delights out of mud to rescuing kittens as a fire fighter to making forts with blankets and tents where they attend worlds not yet imagined and they do it over and over again, each experience as joyous and new as the one before.

When is the last time you let your "inner play" out?

Another great movie I enjoyed while doing research is *Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium*, where play is the order of the day...where the magic and wonder is not just reserved for those who "can't see over the counter yet." Now, a lot of people will say, "Well, I golf – that's play" (or something of the sort). That may or may not be true, but generally, for most people when you do anything that "keeps score" it stops being play. It happens. There are different types of play. Authentic play has no rules, does not keep score and allows you to wiggle around boundless!

Do you know that statistically a child's self-esteem is the highest in pre-school and declines when they start school? This ironically starts the process of "keeping score." Now, I'm not impugning team sports or recreational activities such as golf. They're great and have their place in the world. But real play does not keep score.

We have to stop and take a look and see exactly what is it that our child is learning about play, competition and “winning.” When my daughter was 5, she tried out playing soccer (and when I mean tried out, I mean it didn’t fit – but, we made it through the season by playing in the dirt in the goalie box!) After our first game, the coach told them the “score” and she asked me what it meant. I told her it was the number of times each team kicked the ball into the goal. Another child heard me and chimed in, “Yea, and the team with the most points at the end wins – we won!” The kids erupted in cheer and Riley says, “Oh, I thought we were just having fun.” Yea, me too- kid. Welcome to the world of keeping score! They learn so early that there is a winner and a loser and in order to survive, well, you know what side you need to be on. Research tells us that when winning is the goal, learning is not happening. It would probably be a whole other book to discuss the topic in full, but suffice it to say our children learn about play from us. It becomes a conundrum to discuss the concept of “unity” and “we are all one” when clearly our society would indicate that we do “take sides” and compete.

Real play or “original play” has an integral place in our lives and in our children’s lives. Focusing on what we want to expand in our children becomes the focus of our definition of play. There are many definitions for the word play. I prefer this one: *Play refers to a range of voluntary, intrinsically, motivated activities that are normally associated with pleasure and enjoyment* (if you’re not giggling, at least inside, it’s probably not play!)

One quality of play is that it involves movement - because energy moves...how many hours in the day are we not moving (driving, sitting at a desk, sitting down in front of the TV)? Think about it. And I don't mean movement for the purpose of going from A to B – or running on a treadmill to get your exercise. Genuine Play is not movement so much for the sake of getting somewhere but of *being* somewhere...being fully present with your inner giggle. Yes, I just made that up. But, it expresses exactly what play is. I read this delicious quote that said, “Laughter is a smile that bursts!” I love it! An inner giggle is laughter that embodies your entire being.

So, before we can understand it outside of ourselves as in recognize and nurture it within our children we have to see what it is inside of us. If you're not sure, check out the movie *BIG* with Tom Hanks, or *Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium* or *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* or just go jump on a trampoline or swing at the park – find the part of you, (if you have lost touch with it) that still giggles at bathroom noise (come on, they're funny) and finds wonder sitting under a home-made tent in the living room or that can still make something out of nothing.

Or just do the hokey pokey! Yes, you heard me...put your right hand in and shake it all about!

What if the hokey-poke is what it's all about?

Think of the magic in this song. You put your “right” hand in – which, according to energy medicine is the side

of your body that “actualizes” what it is going to create in the world, the “left” hand in (which is the side of your body that receives) and you put your head in (filled with thoughts, beliefs and ideas that you have assimilated over a lifetime which according to research may or may not even be true!) and then your whole self in and “shake it all about” which is to say – you question it – you shake things up a bit...then you turn yourself around (go in an entirely new direction) and what do you say??

Hokey Pokey – which is like “Hocus Pocus!” The word used for Magic...**M.A.G.I.C.** (And I love to make acronyms – they help me to remember concepts – so, here’s one -- **MANIFESTING AWARENESS (M.A.) INNER CONNECTEDNESS (I.C.) WITH GOD RIGHT THERE IN THE MIDDLE!**) that’s what I’m talking about! Let’s make some magic...in ourselves and in our children! For play IS magic...it’s Alice in Wonderland meets Buddha! Peacefully surrendering, letting go and dropping into the magical proverbial hole (whole?) of bliss where *anything* is possible.

Once we connect to that Inner Essence within ourselves, we can connect with the Essence in our children. If you’re not sure, just begin...you cannot get wet from the “word” water – you just have to jump in and guess what? I bet your kids will be more than happy to teach you how to play...really play! Just ask them!

Now, we’re ready to play!

“Unlikely adventures require unlikely tools.”
(Mr. Magorium in Mr. Magorium’s Wonder Emporium)

Dr. Stuart Brown is the founder of the National Institute For Play and has studied the qualities and effects of play for over twenty years. It is not just an important biological process but it has an incredible impact on the brain and its development. He has studied the animal kingdom and even animals on the lower end of the food chain play. He has discovered that the animals that play more have the best survival rate. Why? Play serves a purpose by allowing animals to pretend and practice the skills that are necessary for survival. In play, animals get to “try out” their skills in a non-threatening way. A study was conducted and those species who played less had smaller brains (this was all relative to size). But not only do they learn how to hone their skills, they learn how to harness and regulate them as well.⁴ Why spend more energy than necessary?

What is so great is that kids know this innately. When my son was diagnosed with autism, this system short-circuited and my son no longer played. He manipulated things, but the essence, the joy behind the wonderment of play had vanished. In its place was a boy who didn’t seem capable of enjoying life. As he was able to assimilate life back into his world a little at a time, the joy returned. He is at 19 one of the most playful young men I have known (although you would not know it from his quiet and serious demeanor). But, I love watching him do chores –

everything is a game. He has found the secret to life.
Being happy is a state of being. A state you find in play.

Original Play

*God sleeps in the stories,
Dreams in the plants,
Stirs in the animals,
Awakens in humanity
And plays in us all.
Anonymous*

There are studies out of the University of Washington that indicate that parents spending **15 minutes a day** in this **state of play with their child** have **substantially decreased a wide range of behavioral problems**. It's not just about teaching our children how to play. It is about embracing the essence of ourselves that is free of judgment and attachment. Then we can connect *that* part of ourselves to the part of our child that already and inherently knows this. Fred Donaldson has been watching and learning from children for years. In his book, *Playing By Heart: The Vision and Practice of Belonging*, he discusses his twenty plus years of research in this area. He says that when we play we are actually creating the possibility of a new "we" out of "you" and "I."⁵ Our connection with something greater than ourselves starts in this moment. When we are able to connect on this profoundly deep level, I'm pretty sure that there is nothing else that will come up during childhood that cannot be handled.

*I tried to teach my child with books,
He gave me only puzzled looks.
I tried to teach my child with words,
They passed him by, often unheard.
Despairingly, I turned aside,
“How shall I teach this child?” I cried.
“Come,” he said, “Play with me.”*
Anonymous

The beauty of play is that there really is no objective...you don't have to have any rules and certainly do not need to accomplish anything. As a matter of fact, if you do – it is most likely *not* play. Striving for play is like screaming for silence – it's an oxymoron. Play is a coming together in this space where there is emptiness but not nothingness. Play gently manifests from the stillness. Like the silence between the notes that creates music, the stillness or emptiness provides the space for something to come forth. Here we create something BECAUSE of the lack of something else. And that something else (or lots of “somethings” – are rules, expectations, thoughts about what we should or should not do, preconceived notions and pretty much all of the baggage we haul around each and every day. Here, in this place it is all dropped – suspended in a moment of pure essence and P.L.A.Y. (perpetually laughing at your “self” (the smallest part of you that IS the baggage).

**If you haven't time to respond to a
tug at your pants leg,
your schedule is too crowded.
~Robert Brault**

I have formulated what I call the Qualities of Play, which are like Rules, except they're not.... they're more like guidelines – because there really are no rules in play (can I emphasize this enough? ☺).

- ❖ There is a sense of wonderment coupled with a lack of fear.
- ❖ What “we know” is set aside.
- ❖ There are no limits – time, space – the possibilities are endless.
- ❖ It perpetuates joy & laughter so much that you might actually lose yourself.
- ❖ It creates a sense of oneness.

Play – it is not something you do – it is something that you become. Donaldson says, “Like the wood of Gepetto, our bodies, minds and hearts are touched in play until all that is unnecessary is removed. This is practicing; it is how we become playmates.”⁶

Observe your child in play. Look at their eyes and their very beings as they drop all that they know about reality

and become completely immersed in the new reality they are creating. I imagine if we were able to connect them and look at their brains during this time, all of the neurons firing and wiring together would rival any good Fourth of July show. Children embody, act out and bring to life stories. They *are* the storytellers. Play is the place where we can sit at the feet of (or if we're really lucky, wrestle around with) these storytellers and learn.

Play allows a child to communicate and process. They innately understand that there is an inner being, a higher Self that witnesses all that goes on. This is something that takes most of us our entire adult life to "re-member". When children play, they *become* the witness and "play out" their life dramas as though they were playing a part. How smart is that? If we could all play with our life dramas that way, the world would be, well, more playful and most likely more peaceful.

My eight-year old and my 19-year old have a playful ritual they engage in each night. Kent is endlessly patient with Riley, who can be quite demanding at times. Sometimes, this playtime lead to tears, for no apparent reason. Well, at least not apparent to me. But, yet, it seems like a "playful dance" both necessary and therapeutic, so I do not intervene. One night, after a playful time that ended in tears, I was holding Riley and she told me why she cried. She said, "Sometimes, at school when so-and-so says mean things to me, I cannot cry. I really want to, but she will call me a crybaby. So, at night all of those cries want to come out and this lets me get them out." Wow! I was amazed at

her insight and her “knowingness” that this play served a very important purpose for her.

If I had intervened (because, it seemed like she was not enjoying it, as it ended in tears), I would have robbed her of some very good self-induced therapy! Sometimes “bad” feelings come up during play. It’s o.k. We need to let it flow because it is incredibly therapeutic for getting all of the stressors of the day (and our kids are inundated with them today!) out. Once she became aware of this, we worked with other ways for her to cope with this situation at the time it happens. But if it were not for the safe space of play, she would not have discovered it in the first place.

Think about yourself when you have a bad day or stressful day. I’ll bet you have some coping mechanism in place, if only to soak in a tub, conversation with a spouse or a good friend, or going for a walk. But, children do not have access to coping mechanisms, so we need to teach them ways to cope with these things that happen during the day and the feelings that come up. Play provides a natural forum for the excavation of thoughts and feelings. Having those feelings all tangled up inside can make a child very, very sad (depression) or very, very angry (aggressive/bully). Feelings need to be processed. Play is the perfect foreground for that.

So, what does play have to do with eliminating fear (as in “monster-proofing” your child)? Fear, the opposite of love, acts as a gateway by which doubt for what we really know in Essence comes through. It comes through by way of thoughts. All of these thoughts are based on a lack of

connectedness. When *we* connect to God or a higher source ourselves (which we do inherently in play) and pass that connection on by way of example or during play to our children we create a different foundation of thought that is based in truth. Research shows that children learn through imitation and they actually adopt our beliefs up until about age 6 or 7. Neuroscience shows that kids from ages 2-6 spend most of their time in theta brain wave frequencies. This is the brain wave frequency that hypnotherapists try to evoke when utilizing hypnosis.⁷ In other words, our kids are assimilating a lot of information subconsciously at this time! We want to playfully and “on purpose” foster beliefs of resiliency, which will “monster-proof” them for life! When we convey a sense of connectedness to a higher source, our children feel that and can imitate that. This connection begins with us and play fosters and nurtures that connection. We get to play around with ideas, thoughts and even imaginary parts of ourselves. Kids get to test out how strong they are and different aspects of themselves. The creativity and bursting imagination that play facilitates is unparalleled.

I watch how children do this everyday. They play store or restaurant and if there are no cups available, something else becomes the cup. They are unattached to “form” – things do not have to come in a certain package to work. In the world of play, anything and everything is possible. Stuffed animals come to life, become dressed up and join tea parties as if they are royalty. You can put on a costume and transform yourself into someone completely different.

You can fly, leap across rainbows, and experience a life filled with wonder, joy and bliss and completely free of fear. When you play you *become* the experience – you are one with it.

An amazing and wonderful healing tool used with children is play therapy. It allows them to play-out their fears and concerns and even traumas that have happened to them. When my daughter was experiencing a bully issue at school, we used play to solve it. She was safe to act out her feelings in play, which allowed her to transfer it into reality. I'm pretty sure that is a formula for success right there!

So, how do you play, really play with your child? The best way I know how it to connect to a part of yourself and something you really enjoy and share that experience with your child. I do not particularly like to play Barbies. I never have. I used to force myself to do it. However, this was not lost on my older daughter. So, one day, I decided maybe I could play something else. What!? Seriously, it does not have to be drudgery? Yes, that's the point – if you are not having fun, most likely, neither is your child.

So, I found things I enjoyed doing and we made those our wonderful play moments. I would still play Barbies on occasion and would try to find ways in which I could play authentically (my Barbies usually sang or did wild, feminist-like things!) but, the point is, we played it out. One moment we have enjoyed together is taking baths together and drawing on each other's backs and making "silly" drinks in the bathtub, getting out and setting up a tea

party on my bed and coloring together. I love baths and I love coloring! Sharing this experience together has become an amazing experience for both of us. I love to sing, so we put music on in our house and dance around the house singing. While making dinner, I have been known to pick up a cucumber and dance around the kitchen to delightful squeals and giggles. It's fun! Almost each night, we have a nightly wrestling ritual. It only lasts 5 minutes (I don't have *that* much energy by nighttime!), but it is enough to allow us to connect, playfully and for my daughter to feel strong and resilient when she pins me to the bed!

Dr. Lawrence Cohen in *Playful Parenting* (a book I highly recommend!) talks about kids as having cups and they need to continually have their cups replenished.⁸ This is accomplished through play. Kids want so much to connect with us that this allows us all to drop our guards (I mean, seriously, Mom is so much more approachable when you have seen her singing love songs to a cucumber!) and allow ourselves to play with life and our children. The beautiful thing about nurturing this within ourselves and our homes is that it provides a "safe space" forever. What I mean by that is, as your children grow, you have all of these strung-together moments of shared laughter and joy. It bonds you so that when things get sticky, there is something to fall back on. When the "not-so-warm-and-fuzzy" feelings come up, you have a forum to release them and process them. You have created a friendly, "cease-fire" zone where all who enter feel safe and free to be themselves and are unconditionally loved and accepted

there. Wow! That's a place anyone would want to be, don't you think?

Dr. Cohen says, "It takes a village idiot to raise a child!"⁹ It is probably one of my favorite things he says in his great book (did I mention it was great, I promise, I'm not getting a kick-back...I just love it when great books are written about playful parenting!) What he means by this is, don't be afraid to play the fool, be a goof-ball. I mean think of *you* from your child's perspective. You've got it all going on. You have the money, the keys to the car, the right to buy (or not buy) any food, clothes, or toys YOU want. You pick out everything, make the rules and on and on. The power is definitely in our favor as parents. Not only that, adding insult to injury – we tend to know a whole lot more than our kids, just by nature of having lived through our mis-haps already. Of course, if you ask a teenager, we're dumb as dirt – but, you know what I mean! The point of this for me, join them...where they are in a place of play. Wherever that is, on the floor, wrestling matches, bubble baths, Barbies (yikes!), their music, their movies, their coffee drinks...it's magical and the illusion of being separate melts away!

***“No matter what they tell you,
you don't have to color inside the lines.”
(Mr. Magorium in Mr. Magorium's magic emporium)***

Play and the Brain

My daughter, at 5 years old asked me for a DS. The request was followed by the question, “What’s a DS?” (Note to self, if she doesn’t know quite what it is, she’s probably not ready for it.) So, I asked her why she wanted one. Well, because so-and-so has one, of course. “Hmm...” I pondered. “I’ll think about that one when your birthday comes up, but part of me is saying it is not a good idea right now.” And I left it at that. About 10 minutes later, she came out of her room. She had ripped the pages out of an old diary that was approximately DS size and made her own. It had stickers, and she had written all kinds of things on it. She had created in fantasy what she could not have in reality! And oh, the neuron connections she had made – woohoo! She also had made an iPod. I was talking to her and she said, “Hold on, I need to pause my music.” She hit the “pause” button on this little iPod she had made, talked to me, hit the pause button again and proceeded to “sing” the song that was playing! The neurodevelopmental specialist in me was jumping up and down! I could almost see the connections being made right in front of my eyes! You cannot buy this kind of brain development at the toy store!

Now, it would have been easy to get her DS – and I’m not saying that at some point I won’t. My son has a PSP that he got at age 15. We do not have any other gaming stations at our house (his father has a Wii, which is totally awesome!) and I am not against technology but to some

degree it can inhibit creative play. However, in moderation, these things can be a nice treat to augment the oh-so-heartly “Meal” of play. Kind of like how sweets and deserts are to eating. Eaten sparingly and with great gusto, they can be super, duper fun! However, when they become the “main course,” we’re headed for trouble and serious deficiencies.

One important part of play is the propensity for endless possibilities. However, if it has already been created, what’s the point? For example, toys that come with just one thing to do (usually those with an on/off switch) are highly unimaginative. However, give a kid a box of blocks, dress-up stuff, crayons, glue, a miscellaneous assortment of art supplies, blank canvases, old boxes (you are probably getting the picture), and we have masterpieces just waiting to happen (and a whole lot of neuron firings taking place!) I am not against toys. At our house, we have a bunch and are continually getting more. We have a rule, though – when we get something new, we give something away. We are constantly recycling things in the garage to “take turns” with new things. But, when we are planting seeds of awareness, we want to have a child who can think outside the box (inside and all around it too!).

We cannot talk about play without talking about video games, technology and the Internet. Not that these things are bad but recent research has shown us that the plasticity of our brains (the ability to make changes), lasts up until about the time we die. We literally have the ability to change our brains. This is good news AND bad

news...given the “wrong conditions” by which they can be changed. Currently there are no long-term studies that show the affects technology has on the brain. We are in a serious gray area and we just need to be conscious of that.

Now, granted, I get why we give our kids things to keep them quiet...trust me. I have a child that came out of the womb talking. While working in the field of neuroscience, we brought my daughter in to do a brainmap. While doing this, we do a Cognitive Ability’s test (like an IQ test). After completing the test, my colleague said to me, “she’s linguistically gifted” – really!? Is that what you’re calling it – please, sometimes I think my head just might explode – she even talks in her sleep! Now, granted, in her defense, she gets it naturally. Her mother and father are talkers. My dad would laugh when he would recall the story of me talking incessantly to this little girl I met while we were camping at age 6. Her parents came over to thank my parents because the little girl didn’t have a lot of friends and also, to let them know that she was deaf! That did not stop me! Actually, it probably encouraged me!

So, I understand why we do it, sometimes. We just have to have a clear understanding of what it is doing to our child’s growing and developing self so that we don’t “over do” it. We are traversing into gray areas of technology. There are so many wonderful benefits to online access, yet children have access to information that they might not be ready for.

Here are a few facts from the media clearing house and the Nielson’s 2012 Social Media Report¹⁰. Over half of

teenagers 12 and over have a profile page. 72% of middle school students spend over 3 hours per day in front of a computer, on a phone or in front of a TV. Compared to 2004 when less than half of teenagers owned a cell phone, in 2008 the percentage went up to 72% (ages 12-17). An article in the Chronicle showed that 51% of teenagers check the status of their profile page more than once a day and 39% have posted something they regret later. 18% of children under the age of 7 go online. Kids as young as age 2 can use a mouse! There are critics who are concerned that early access to computers can greatly interfere with a child's ability to interact socially and can "change the brain" – but not in a good way.

Games on the Internet encourage short-attention spans by using sounds and lights to capture attention and provide instant gratification. Children who spend a great deal of time playing the computer can and are literally changing their brains. In addition, kids are getting a cyberspace social network, which may not be in their best interest. Also, children growing and developing should be physically active. Some experts suggest that children under the age of 7 not even be on the computer at all.¹¹

When our children spend a lot of time sitting, either playing a computer game, or video game or anything that keeps them sedentary, the energy that they are building up (and you know they are by the mouth noises they make when they don't get to the next level on the game they're playing), builds up inside their bodies. They have no outlet for that. What we do know is that when children are

engaged in video games, watch their eyes glaze over and they manifest stress-like symptoms in their bodies. They are creating a lot of energy inside of their bodies and not letting it out because they are sitting still. In a study that was conducted, it was noted that as soon as the TV was turned on, kids consistently stopped playing.

Not to mention, they are spending a great deal of time *sitting* (as in not moving) during school, now and with many schools having cut P.E. and diminished recess time, our kids (especially more active and kinesthetic learners, have no outlet for all of this energy). Could there be a correlation between that and the onslaught of ADD/ADHD? While reading Dr. Brown's book, *Play* and after the first chapter it hit me – children have stopped playing and we have an increase in ADD/ADHD over the past twenty years. Wow! I sat in silence for a few moments absorbing this thought. Well, a few chapters later Dr. Brown makes the same assertion, so it was not an original thought, but it is an alarming one. Research shows us that play – *real* play affects the brain's frontal cortex and our ability to think. It also affects the cerebellum, which is responsible for rhythm and children with ADD/ADHD struggle with timing – like their pace-setter is not set appropriately. Play shapes the brain. Sitting still does not. It's just that simple.

It seems that times are changing more rapidly than we think. Having worked with many children with Asperger's syndrome, which manifests a lot as deficiencies in language and social interactions, I know what this "looks like" in

children. I am increasingly disturbed at the number of typically developing kids today who do not interact socially (as in face-to-face) very much. Kids can be in the same car, texting to one another. Texting and Facebooking is the new social forum by which kids ask each other out and even break up with one another. It's such an issue that on a popular television program, *Modern Family*, the family tried to go a week without technology and the parents had just as hard of time as the kids! I am not proposing an all or nothing scenario. I just want to create awareness around this topic. We need to be aware and conscious of the time our children (and ourselves?) spend using technology.

One problem with texting and "Facebooking" is the lack of personal contact. The issue is that it is devoid of emotion and does not require that the person making the statement observe or take into account, the reactions of the person receiving the information. This "face-to-face" (not "face-to-Facebook") interaction is incredibly important to the social development of a child, not to mention a conscience. Emotional Intelligence is something we want to foster in our children. We want them to be able to have empathy and understanding. This does not happen without human interaction. One area or skill that cannot be developed without human interaction is the ability to read facial expressions, body language and non-verbal cues. If one says something that hurts the feelings of another, seeing that reaction is a lot more difficult to take in and then subsequently say more hurtful things. Children can become desensitized to the emotions of others without this

“human” interaction. Remember on 7% of communication is the words we use. Our tone and body language comprise most of our communication.

Parents are still the single most important factor in play. We are still the “gatekeepers” of what is played, when it’s played and how it is played. We set up opportunities and influence either directly or indirectly a child’s perception about play and their ability to engage in play.

One way to investigate the quality of play your child is having is a “Play Journal” – how many hours during the week and weekend is your child playfully playing? Keep a journal for a week. How many hours is your child: watching TV, playing the computer, playing a video game, texting, listening to an iPod or anything with an on/off switch? How many hours do they use their large muscles in play? How often does your child “make something out of nothing?” How many hours of “free time” does your child get on a weekly basis to just sit, ponder and create? How many hours is your child engaged in a “structured” (as in rules made by someone else) activity versus “unstructured” activity? (See journal at the end of this chapter).

Based on the research of what a child needs, the following is a “play pyramid.” It works like the old food pyramid we memorized as a child. What we want is more of the types of play on the bottom, and less of the play that is on the top. “Sweets” (in referencing the food pyramid) are not forbidden, they are just limited and we are selective

about what, when and how much. It would serve us and our children well to think about play in a similar fashion.

¹ Milteer, R., Ginsburg, K., 2011. *The Importance of Play In Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bond: Focus on Children in Poverty*, 2011. Elk Grove Village, IL: Council on Communications and Media Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health.

² Hofferth, S.L. 1999. *Changes in American Children's Time, 1981-1997*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

³ Milteer, R., Ginsburg, K., 2011. *The Importance of Play In Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bond: Focus on Children in Poverty*, 2011. Elk Grove Village, IL: Council on Communications and Media Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health.

⁴ Brown, S., 2009. *Play*. NY: Avery.

⁵ Donaldson, O. 1993. *Playing By Heart*, Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc.

⁶ Donaldson, O. 1993. *Playing By Heart*, Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc.

⁷ brainwave frequency of children

⁸ Cohen, L., 2012. *Playful Parenting*, NY: Ballantine Books

⁹ Cohen, L., 2012. *Playful Parenting*, NY: Ballantine Books.

¹⁰ Nielsen's 2012 Social Media Report. 2012. www.frankwbaker.com/mediause.htm

¹¹ kids and technology