



Never TOO OLD to play

OLDER AMERICANS MONTH 2012

play /plā/

Verb:

1. Engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose.
2. To act in jest or sport
3. To exercise or employ oneself in diversion, amusement or recreation
4. To take part or engage in a game.
5. To amuse oneself; toy; trifle

I am so pleased the theme this year for “Older Americans Month”, as designated by the Administration on Aging in the Department of Health and Human Services, is “Never Too Old to Play” because I could not agree more!

Play is something we all did as kids growing up. Do you remember when your mom or dad used to say, “Go out and play and be back in time for dinner”? Without knowing it, play was how we explored the world around us; how we learned about working in teams; how we stayed active, fit and healthy. But most of all, we played because it was FUN! Now ask yourself, when was the last time you played? I hope it was today, because as Dr. Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play reminds us, “humans are designed by biology to play throughout their entire life cycle,” and that “denying our need to play can have negative effects on our emotional well-being.”

The play dialogue is often focused on children, but being an active and PLAYful adult is equally as important. Just because we grow up does not mean we outgrow our need for play and fun. Unfortunately, for the current generation of kids, “playing” is sometimes seen as a waste of time, but as you and I know, play was essential to our childhoods and pivotal in our development. I believe as “informed PLAYers,” we can help the current generation of kids rediscover the wonder of play. This has the dual advantage of getting both kids and adults active and engaged because we know play makes us happier, healthier and smarter.

Research shows that “an engaged lifestyle is widely regarded as an important component of successful aging.” To me, an “engaged lifestyle” is one that incorporates play in daily life. We may not always be as physically active as we once were, but even fifteen minutes of walking dramatically reduces the risks associated with osteoarthritis, osteoporosis, high blood pressure and stroke – all afflictions we are more susceptible to as older Americans. Dr. Bernard Griesemer, from Springfield, MO, reminds us “increased frequency and intensity of exercise provides greater benefits across all ages and multiple organ systems.” Physical activity and free play are essential to maintaining a healthy weight and well-being.

Dr. Geoffrey Godbey, professor emeritus from Penn State University and keynote speaker at the 2012 Conference on the Value of Play, spoke on

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“Taking the Benefits of Lifetime Play Seriously.” Some of the highlights of the research he described are:

1. Seniors who participated in play activities once a week for a 20-year period reduced the risk of dementia by 7 percent, and those who engaged in these activities more often reduced their risk even more as much as 63 percent!
2. Dancing may improve older adults’ lower body bone-mineral content and muscle power, as well as reduce the prevalence of falls and cardiovascular health risks.
3. A study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that challenging your brain with mentally stimulating leisure activities (including playing board games or cards, doing crossword puzzles, reading, writing and playing musical instruments) is great for your mind.

And those were just a few!

Current National Park Service Director, Jon Jarvis, has started an initiative called Prescription Parks, which are partnerships between local health care providers and parks and recreation providers. This program is designed to get patients to visit a park for the beneficial health effects of sunshine, fresh air, exercise, reduced blood pressure, and more.



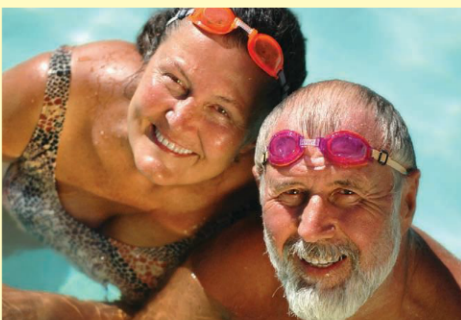
As a senior myself, I helped found the US Play Coalition not only to help our children and grandchildren, but also to help seniors recognize that play is an essential part of their lives too. The US Play Coalition is a partnership to promote the ‘value of play’ throughout life. I know I never would have become Florida State Park Director or National Park Service Director if I had not valued play in my life. In order for me to stay as happy, healthy, and engaged as possible, I know I need to play. Even though I use technology to bridge distances with friends and family, I find the best avenue for us to connect is through play. It has cultivated my passion for the US Play Coalition and I hope you will join me so we can share our success stories and ideas, and always make it clear: we are never too old to play.



I’d like to leave you with a few suggestions for how to get out and get active.

Here are a few suggestions for how to be PLAYful:

- Play is a perception. We can be “at work” and “at play” at the same time. Play is about how we engage in the task at hand. I encourage you to find the play in all your activities. Call this your PLAYful attitude.
- Playful activities outdoors include walking, hiking, bird watching, fishing and sports.
- Visit local parks, state parks, national parks and botanical gardens. These resources are often close and are available at minimal cost.
- Get involved with dancing, singing, theater, county fairs and adult education programs. You can always learn something new and have fun doing it.
- Find an activity that you used to do as a kid and teach it to a young person. Pass on the play experience! It will be a fun time for you both.
- Encourage those around you to become active with you; playfulness and happiness are best when shared
- Join the US Play Coalition of which I chair and stay up-to-date on the most recent news, research, and happenings in the world of play. It’s free to join. The coalition be having its fourth conference on the Value of Play, February 17-20, 2013 and I hope you will join us! Our web address is: <http://usplaycoalition.clemson.edu> (we are on Facebook Twitter, and LinkedIn too!)



About the Author



Fran Mainella is a Visiting Scholar at Clemson University Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management. Previously, Director Mainella served nearly six years as the 16th Director and the first woman to lead the National Park Service. Fran is currently Co-chair of the *US Play Coalition, A Partnership to Promote the Value of Play throughout Life* is made up of individuals and organizations that recognize play as a valuable and necessary part of a healthy and productive life.

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