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Subject: Jared Dillian's take on the importance of Play - [REDACTED]
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Play

Something fun for the last article before the break. Actually, most of the material for this piece comes from my wife, the anthropologist.

So we are in the car going to the Hunger Games movie, and I don't know why it popped into my head, but I asked her: why do the juveniles of nearly all species of mammals engage in play? It's not obvious why. Clearly it serves some evolutionary purpose.

As it turns out, it does, according to my wife. Play is important to rehearse activities as a youngster that you will be performing as an adult, with no negative consequences. So a kitten that likes to pounce on a toy is learning how to pounce on prey as a cat, but there is nothing at stake: the kitten will still eat if it doesn't catch anything. Baby chimpanzees will learn how to crack nuts with rocks, but generally they are too busy goofing around and throwing rocks at each other. But there are no consequences to doing so--they will still eat, and in goofing around, they will eventually get around to trying to crack nuts. They won't be able to do it, but they will learn how.

So when human children play--like a 5-year-old girl who plays by putting her doll in the toy oven--her mother will respond by telling her that you don't put babies in the oven, and she'll learn, with no consequences. Later in life, she will know not to put her offspring in the oven. That's an extreme example, but still a good example of how children learn through play, without the consequences.

Children learn coordination, how to use their muscles, how to interact with others, and, most crucially, they learn boundaries.

When I was having drinks with my Norwich friends this summer, and they were telling me about how they pretty much force their kids to ride around in circles in the driveway with training wheels and a helmet (even though they innately understood that this was detrimental to their development), my first thought was...well, I didn't really have a first thought, I had to go away and stew on it for a couple of months. But gradually I started to piece together that we, as a society, aren't allowing children to play, for fear of failure, why? Because failure has consequences.

Well, who imposes these consequences? That is really the question. Since when did adults decide to start handing out punishment for failure? Quick story. In high school, I used to run around with a bunch of geeks and nerds, and one of the things that we did for fun was to hack into the school's phone system. We didn't do anything with it, just left a bunch of burps and other bodily functions as outgoing messages on teachers' voice mail, but, technically speaking, we did hack into the system (because few people changed their password from the default "123" or whatever it was), and technically speaking, if I were 16 and did that today, I would almost certainly be arrested. In the end, we got caught, and the school made us do community service. I volunteered at the hospital, where I learned how to make slingshots and water weenies out of surgical tubing.

But I was just a dumb kid! If I were a teenager today, I would almost certainly end up in jail. I cannot even begin to tell you the amount of dumb stuff that I did as a teenager. Like when I TPed my friend's house and emptied a half dozen bags of flour on his front lawn, and his dad turned out to be a paranoid IRS auditor who thought that someone he audited was trying to get back at him. I actually could write ten whole issues about the dumb stuff that I did. But I was playing! And what happens if you eliminate play from children's lives?

That's an easy one: they don't learn how to act as adults, and they don't know how to take risks.

It's all pretty sad, my friends. I mean, what kind of leaders is the next generation going to produce? Thank heavens for Zuckerberg, who gave us one of the world's most valuable companies that started out as a prank. He was playing when he invented the thing, for crying out loud. Stop punishing kids for screwing up when no malicious intent is involved. Somewhere along the line we lost hold of the whole mens rea concept. We, as adults, are smart enough to distinguish goofing around from being bad. Remember the young girl who was hit with felony terrorism charges when her high school chemistry experiment blew up? That kind of nonsense has to stop. If you are an adult, and you do stuff like this, you need to take a look in the mirror.