



This book accompanies the exhibition *Play Well*, on at Wellcome Collection from 24 October 2019 to 8 March 2020.

*Play Well* makes the case for play as an essential tool, crucial for both children and wider society. Through a wide range of exhibits *Play Well* explores the importance of play in developing and refining character traits, as a central tenet of education, and as a language to express emotions and build empathy. The exhibition examines the ways in which children's play both reflects and adapts to the world around them. Playground games and toys echo shifts in wider society, while opportunities for play are limited by concerns about risk. In light of these influences the exhibition asks: how can we all play well?

## **wellcome collection**

Wellcome Collection is a free museum and library that aims to challenge how we think and feel about health. Inspired by the medical objects collected by Henry Wellcome, it connects science, medicine, life and art. Wellcome Collection exhibitions, events and books explore a diverse range of subjects, including consciousness, forensic medicine, emotions, sexology, identity and death.

Wellcome Collection is part of Wellcome, a global charitable foundation that exists to improve health for everyone by helping great ideas to thrive, funding over 14,000 researchers and projects in more than seventy countries.

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Michael  
Rosen's  
Book of  
PLAY!  


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# Introduction

(Actually, let's not call this an 'introduction', let's call it 'Hello'. I'll start again. Forget that I called it 'Introduction'. That didn't happen.)

## Hello

Hello reader.

I don't know you, but the thing about a book is that it's a kind of game between the writer and the reader. This is how you play it: I sit on my own imagining what kinds of things might interest you. I conjure up books I've read and scan them in my mind for strange, funny, weird, intriguing, sad things. I conjure you up and imagine you opening this book, wondering if there is anything here that will amuse you or get you to think in a new way. Or perhaps you're the kind of person who wants knowledge. Or perhaps you're the person who wants to play.

All that was me playing with the idea of what I'm doing writing this book. Writing is a kind of play.

And if you're still reading, you're playing too. When you sit down to read, you agree to play a game. There aren't exactly what I'd call 'rules'; there's more a set of things we do that are more like the 'how to cook' part of recipe books – how to cook a book, if you like. You cook a book by doing things like picking it up – rather than throw it in the river, say. You open it up – rather than sit on it, say. If you are reading the page to yourself, you pass your eyes along the lines from left to right, rather than round and round, say. If this book was in Arabic or Hebrew, you'd be passing your eyes from right to left. If it was in traditional Chinese, you'd be passing your eyes down and up and down. If you're listening to the book, you've got your ears focused on the sounds of words, rather than on the dog that's barking outside. And as you do these things, your mind is playing. It's playing with meanings. When you read the word 'book', I'm pretty sure a dictionary didn't fly into your mind and there was a definition of 'book' sitting there. What happened was that all the times you've met the word 'book' and you've seen, heard, smelled or read a book rolled into what we might call a 'cloud of meaning'. That's your own cloud of meaning. Quite a bit of your cloud of meaning of 'book' is very similar to millions of other people's. But some of it is your very own special, personal cloud of meaning full of your own memories, feelings and sensations.

So, we're playing. Me and you.

In this book I will ask you questions. But what's the point? In real life, I ask someone a question because I want an answer. If I ask you questions in a book, and you answer them, I won't get to hear the answer. So there must be another point to me asking you questions. What would that be?

Well, I'll leave you to play with that one and I'll get on with the asking. Have you done any playing this week? (I've played 'How much of the dishwasher can I empty without breathing?' This is where I try to clear a whole deck of the dishwasher holding my breath. When I was a boy, my brother and I used to try to get from the loo to the kitchen before the sound of the flushing had stopped while holding our breath.)

Have you done a puzzle? (I tried to do the crossword in the *Times Literary Supplement*. When I do this, I usually get about five clues all by myself, and then I start cheating by using the internet to look up possible answers.)

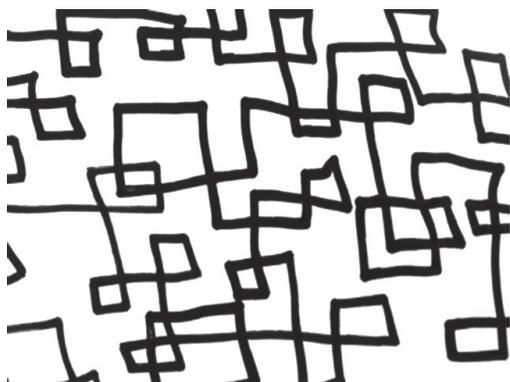
Have you done some kind of exercise thing – star jumps, riding a bike, going for a walk – where you started off doing it by the rules but then you began to make up your own?

(I've started using the step-counter on my phone because someone told me that I'm supposed to walk 10,000 steps a day. In the middle of doing one thing, I now do crazy little walking journeys to and fro across a room. Or, in the middle of my son's 'Megs' game, I suddenly walk off, go round and round five times and come back to 'Megs'. He's not well pleased by that.)

Have you been clearing out an old room, or clearing a shelf, and found an old game and decided that you'd stop doing what you were supposed to be doing so that you could play your old game for a while? I've just moved office and I found an old 'bagatelle' board (it's a bit like pinball without any of the electric automatic stuff). I stood there flicking the marbles round the board. Actually, it made me sad. It reminded me of playing the game with Eddie, my son who died. Then I remembered that games and play are not only what you do right now, but that we each have histories of play in our minds. Layers and layers of it, sitting there, memories of great times messing about, winning, losing, arguing, trying things out – and this all feeds into the kind of person we are, how we think of what's around us. Is the world we meet something we can play with, or something that we take as a thing that's given to us?

Have you picked up a pen or pencil or felt-tip at any time this week and doodled? I doodle.

Here is a doodle that I did on Tuesday. What do you think?



Most of my doodles are variations on this pattern. I draw repeated right angles and parallel lines till I make a pattern of different-sized rectangles and lines. Over my life I must have done thousands of these. I never keep them. I doodle away for a few minutes and then put it to one side. I sometimes do these doodles when I'm thinking of something else: such as waiting for the right word to turn up in a poem I'm writing. I've never really thought why I do them. I just know that I do.

I like my own made-up little rules that I've imposed on myself: I mustn't do curves, or diagonals; I mustn't take my pen off the page. I like the mix of order and chaos that results from my doodles. They look higgledy-piggledy, the rectangles are never made up of perfect right angles, but I can see a hidden order in them, created from the rules that I created. In a way, as I draw them, I create little problems for myself: where can I go next that will set up a new space to make a rectangle?

You could doodle all over my doodle if you like.

Have you got any felt-tips? You could colour in some of the spaces. You could make up some rules about which spaces you're allowed to colour in and which ones you can't. Or you could do tiny pictures in some of the spaces as if they are windows, perhaps.

Actually, while I'm suggesting that you could doodle on my doodle, let me suggest you could think of this whole book as a doodle. Whenever you think of something as you're reading it, you could draw or write on the book. That's a way of using play to make a book your own. Instead of treating it as a book of

instructions or of knowledge that you must learn, you can treat it as something you're *having a conversation* with. If you were to write 'I disagree' or 'What about crocodiles?' in the margin, it wouldn't be rude, because I won't ever get to see it. Make the book yours by playing with it. I've been putting notes and arrows and little faces all over my books (not other people's!) for years. It's part of how I learn and remember things.

As well as playing with pen and paper, on Thursday my son got me out into our garden to play football. I've always found it fascinating that when we say that word – 'football' – it means so many different things. There are, of course, the highly organised, rule-given matches, as played by professional and amateur eleven-person teams in leagues and in schools. Aside from these, millions of people take a ball on their own, or in pairs, or in groups, or in crowds, and kick it about according to the rules that they make up to suit the place, the number, age and skills of the people. In my time, I've played one-a-side, a game we made up called 'football tennis', competing for numbers of 'keepy-uppies', 'three goals and in', games that use the wall of the playground to cannon off and so on. I've played on beaches, in parks, on playgrounds, in fields, in living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, tents. I've played blow football on tables using a straw and ping-pong ball, with goals made out of books. I've played flick football with peas on the table until Mum shouted at me for covering the floor with peas and treading them flat. With my son, we mostly play a game where I stand with my back to a goal and he has to get past me with the ball at his feet. If I get the ball off him, I try to turn and shoot into the goal behind me. He tries to dive in and block me. If he kicks the ball between my legs, he shouts 'Megs!'

(That means a ‘nutmeg’ – rhyming slang for ‘leg’ – itself a way of playing with words!) There are no scores, and no end point – apart from my tiredness. He keeps improvising new tricks while I try to keep up with them. I cheat and grab hold of him. He becomes indignant. I tell him that he’ll face worse in a real game. And on it goes. We adopt and adapt clichés from TV commentaries as we play: ‘great counter’, ‘think of every ball as an opportunity’, ‘come back for the second phase’, we say. We call out some of the football chants we hear on the terraces. We have fun, we yell, we pant. There is no fixed outcome, no winners or losers – though one of us may claim to have won 183-nil.

These are two very different forms of play – on my own with pen and paper, or in the garden with my son, getting sweaty and out of breath.

So, I’m thinking that maybe it would help to define play a bit. I want you to look away from the book for a moment again. Say the word ‘play’ and close your eyes (out loud if you’re not somewhere it would sound too weird). What immediately springs to mind?

I expect a lot of you will have come up with very different ideas – because ‘play’ is incredibly hard to define. One problem here is that we use the word ‘play’ to mean very different things: we go to see ‘plays’ in a theatre, highly trained, highly paid sportspeople ‘play’ matches according to elaborate rules overseen by referees, we ‘play’ commercial games like Monopoly, we ‘play’ computer games and with older technologies we used to ‘play’ records, CDs and DVDs.

The kind of play I'm going to talk about in this book is more informal and free-form than that, for the most part. There will be fewer (or no) rules handed down to the players (that's you). The kind of play we're going to embark on will be giving you, the reader, the player, opportunities to invent, improvise, adapt, be creative with the world around you and with the world inside your own head. Our play will not be about competition; there will be no winners or losers, though I will admit there are times when, just for fun, you can be a teeny bit competitive, just for laughs. (If you like, you can think of this as a failing in me. Some people have said to me, 'Yeah, yeah, Mike, you say you like all this free play stuff, but actually you are quite competitive.' And I say, 'No, I'm not,' and then go away and think, Mmm, maybe they're right. That's been quite painful admitting that to you in public. Well, writing this book is supposed to be play, so that was me playing with the idea of whether it's OK to make free play a bit of a contest. Sometimes.)

Anyway, on with the book. The key thing is that you cannot fail at this type of play, although you can succeed. You can't fail, but you can succeed. That's what people call a 'saying' or an 'aphorism'. I like words like 'aphorism'. Aphphphph ... or ... ism.

With this aphorism in mind, I want to define the kind of play in this book largely as 'trial and error with no fear of failure'. By 'trial and error' I mean that not only do we not know what's going to happen ('the outcome') but the outcome doesn't really matter very much. It's the play that's important, not the result. In fact, there may well not be a result, or it may be something entirely unexpected ... or the result is something

you can't measure and yet it goes into your mind and helps you become the person you are. Mysterious?

Over the next 270-odd pages (it's OK, you don't have to read every page and I promise I'm not setting you a test to find out what you've read), we are going to delve down into the deep history of play – as far back as our caveman ancestors, the spectacular and strange wonders of Ancient Egypt, the bizarre world of Surrealism, right up to the modern day – and how we can bring this rich history to bear on how we play today. We will explore several different types of play – and you, the reader, are going to get plenty of chances to be involved. Each chapter will include a handful of prompts and ideas for how you could get an extra dollop of play in your life.

Will it be fun, I hear you say? Clearly, a central point to all this is pleasure. Without pleasure we don't play. When we get fed up, annoyed, distressed or bored by play, we stop. That's because somehow when there's no pleasure, it's stopped being play. It's become something else, like a 'duty' or simply 'boring'. I think this pleasure aspect is central to play, but in saying this, I'm not saying that play is not important. Too often we think of things that make us laugh, or which are fun to do, as being not very significant or having very little value. But in this book I'm going to make the case that play, while enjoyable, is far from trivial.

Let's flip this on its head. I have another question for you.

Have you ever been bored?

If the answer is no, I say to you ‘Congratulations’ (or in Yiddish, one of the languages of my parents – and a language I love playing with – ‘Mazeltov’ (pronounced ‘muzzle toff’). If you have never been bored, you are most probably utterly unique in the entire history of the human race.

Most of us experience, fairly often, that moment of ‘stasis’, a moment-in-between, a blankness that has an end but no exact time limit for that end. Boredom, in other words.

In our modern world we fight against boredom – after all, we have so many tools at our disposal to fend it off: the ever-present phone, the limitless landscapes of the internet, the million and one channels on TV. The time ‘in between’ is called ‘liminal’, and I believe that this ‘liminal’ space and time for boredom are crucial for developing our ability to experience the world in its full, Technicolor glory. It is in the moments of boredom that play is born; these are the all-important, empty, in-between times when our basic needs take a back seat, allowing a space in which we can experiment and develop creatively. As both adults and children, do you think we allow ourselves less and less of this open, ‘pointless’ time? I think so, and yet it is in this time that the mind can freewheel, new connections are made, new ideas are born.

So next time you’re bored, rather than reaching for your phone, take a moment, lift your head and look for potential in the objects and words you see. Boredom breeds inspiration – and ‘inspiration’, literally, means to breathe in. So take a moment and breathe in the world around you and think of the world as something that you can play with.

(Hey, imagine for a moment that you could breathe in the world. I wonder if there's an ancient myth where a crazy malevolent god or giant breathes in the world and all the other gods complain, 'Hey, man, look what you've done!' So this giant god, says sorry and blows the world out his nose ...)

You may be a bit afraid that you have 'forgotten how to play'. I promise you, you have not. Play does not require you to be a creative genius (although it may help you become one); this book will look at how we use the world around us (which, again, I promise you, is an even more limitless resource than the internet) to encourage play.

(If you're getting cross that I keep promising you things, just cross out 'I promise'.)

Over the course of the book we will be building a tool kit to help us engage with the world in exciting, innovative and playful ways. The materials are already there at our fingertips. This book will not necessarily tell you 'what to do', but will help you develop new mindsets that give you a fresh take on the world and how you can interact with it.

We will also be looking inwards, to our vast and private inner landscapes, and discussing how we can access these in playful ways. I'm pretty keen on this idea of our inner landscapes. Why should we leave it to others to tell us what's there? We can think of ourselves as explorers of the mind, or archaeologists of our memories, picking up stuff in there, turning it over, playing with what it's there for and what we can do with it.

So, why do we do play? How does it work? What constitutes play? Play often uses objects in unexpected ways: toys, balls, bats, bikes, along with found 'stuff' like stones, twigs, bags, old clothes, plants, food, utensils, tools. Then, play often uses bits of this stuff in improvised games, little dramas and make-believe situations. Play can focus on any part of the body – and that includes our voices and how we make sounds, how the body can move, stretch, jump, crouch, lie down, spring up and the like. Play can ask our bodies to move to rhythms, pulses and any sound we find or change or play with. Play can be part of complicated processes that are part of life: cooking, cleaning, sorting, gardening, using computers and tablets. Play can be part of education, where it can enable learning to take place. Play can rehearse or 'play out' our psychodramas, the big emotional events of our lives, love, bereavement, loss, anger, rivalry, envy, death and many, many more.

One argument is that play helps us cope with change and learn flexibility. No one individual is in charge of their destiny, and a playful outlook can be very helpful with this. Our lives, our 'fates', are always wrapped up with the fates of others, whose lives are constantly changing too. We are in a continual state of flux, and the one and only certain thing about us is that we change! Our bodies are changing all the time, as are the bodies of those around us. Events and inventions are happening around us – near or far. The organisations we live, play and work in are changing. The social order that we slot into (or kick against or resist) changes. Our well-being in our living space, the amount of money that we have or don't have, the amount and kind of food we have, are all constantly changing. Where

we live and who we live with, or near, changes. New people are born. People we know and love die.

We have to deal with this quite mind-boggling level of change every single day – and while for the most part we are very good at it, there are times when it feels overwhelming, we feel stress or anxiety, or even fear. How do we learn to cope with this? There is no subject at school called ‘Change’ (Hey! Why not?!), where we could study, play, improvise and think about change. We are expected to learn how to cope with change as we go along, or – apparently – we are supposed to amass enough knowledge from school and college to enable us to survive and flourish through all the changes going on in the world. This is a big ask. Do chunks of formal knowledge help us cope with, say, the death of a loved one? Does it help us cope with a nearby block of flats, with people we know inside, burning down? Does it help us cope with new technologies that revolutionise how we communicate with each other and all the sudden problems that arise from that? Does it help us cope with a new social movement that overturns everything we thought we knew about male and female identity? Does it help us cope with bullying? Does it help us deal with a stranger who suddenly comes into our lives and seems to have power over us? Does it help us deal with that sense that we are never good enough? Or those times when, as the song says, ‘sometimes I feel like a motherless child?’ Does it help us if we find – whether as a result of an accident, illness or our genetic make-up – that there are things we can’t do or can’t do as well: see, hear, walk, run, lift or bend? Or with a new job, moving to another country or meeting a new partner?

One argument for play, then, is that it teaches a flexibility to face up to and deal with the things on that list – or, at the very least, helps us live with change, to enjoy it and use it, to have an overall more fulfilling experience. Being in play, being in the state of mind that says, ‘I wonder what might happen if I tried this’ and then not worrying or being afraid of the outcome, is a state of mind that can cope with the unexpected.

It can also teach us that we can change the rules. We may not even recognise that rules are things that other humans, just like ourselves, make up. We may not know that tomorrow and the day after, and the day after that, contain within them moments that are full of possibilities. Tomorrow is not a fixed, permanent staging post. Nor is Tuesday. Nor is next Friday. Nothing is fixed, and everything is full of potential.

I realise that this runs totally counter to the way we are told that the world works.

What I’m saying here, you see, is that play can create new order. ‘Order’ is structure, organisation, pattern, a classification. It’s the opposite of chaos. When we describe play using words like ‘free’ or ‘improvisation’ or ‘experiment’, it hides how through inventiveness we often create, develop, use and adapt order – breaking down the existing structures of knowledge or skill, the sequences that hang together or make some kind of sense – and re-shape them into new structures. So play gives us both adaptability and order. Through play we may discover that an object, an activity, a relationship, a situation or a social circumstance can be changed, reorganised or reordered.

Does that sound promising? Tempting? I hope so.

To talk of play with the one word (as I have here) also hides the incredible diversity of play around the world, across cultures, across time and across ages of people. Play is a part of how we develop as a society – and in this we can learn from our ancestors, some of whom we will be visiting in these pages. In my own lifetime I've seen games that I played for hours and hours – like five stones, shove halfpenny and hula-hoop – decline while other crazes and games have risen.

How come? Why do some things stay the same and other things change?

These variations and differences tell us that play is part of culture. What is culture? Culture is, in short hand, 'how we do things' – like how we sing, dress, eat, dance, do our hair, gesture and, of course, how we speak and write. Play sits in and among these things, as part of how we define ourselves, how we take part in society. By exploring it and understanding it we get an insight into what kind of people we are.

Our concept of play in the West is often bound up with the idea that play is inseparably connected to childhood, while adulthood is connected to seriousness and responsibility. Yes, we change as we grow older and develop – but all that this means is that how we play should change and develop with us. In fact, I believe play is key to helping us develop and reach our full potential. So, I don't care how old you are, you might be seven or seventeen or seventy or 170. What I do know is that

however old you are, you are not too old to play. And you are not too old (or too young) for this book.\*



\* I'm imagining someone aged 170 picking up this book and saying, 'Hey, this looks interesting.'

Do you think one day people will live to 170? If it happens, one of the reasons will be because scientists and doctors used their knowledge and played with genes, blood, bones, brains and cells and found ways to make them work in new ways. Just saying.