

## Library Developments

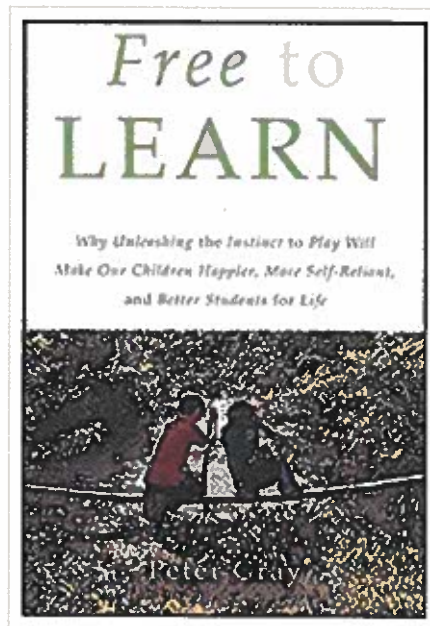
Program news & information from the Library Development & Networking Division

---

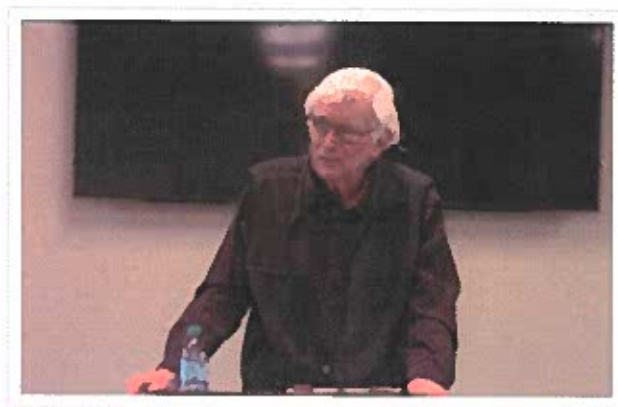
# A Place to Just Play: A New, Vital Role for Public Libraries, Part 1

Posted on [September 4, 2018](#) by [Henry Stokes](#)

Back in the spring, I attended a talk by a visiting lecturer at my local library. [Peter Gray](#), a psychology professor at Boston College and author of the book, *Free to Learn*, was there to speak on the topic of "Play Deficit Disorder: A National Crisis and How to Solve It Locally". I was to discover from the talk that one way to solve the problem of the "play deficit" locally is... the public library itself.



In his talk, Gray defined what he meant by “play”, its extreme importance to all humans’ development, how school-aged kids were now being deprived of it, the cost of that deprivation, and what to do about it.



— Source: Youtube video of Peter Gray’s talk (Westbank Library)

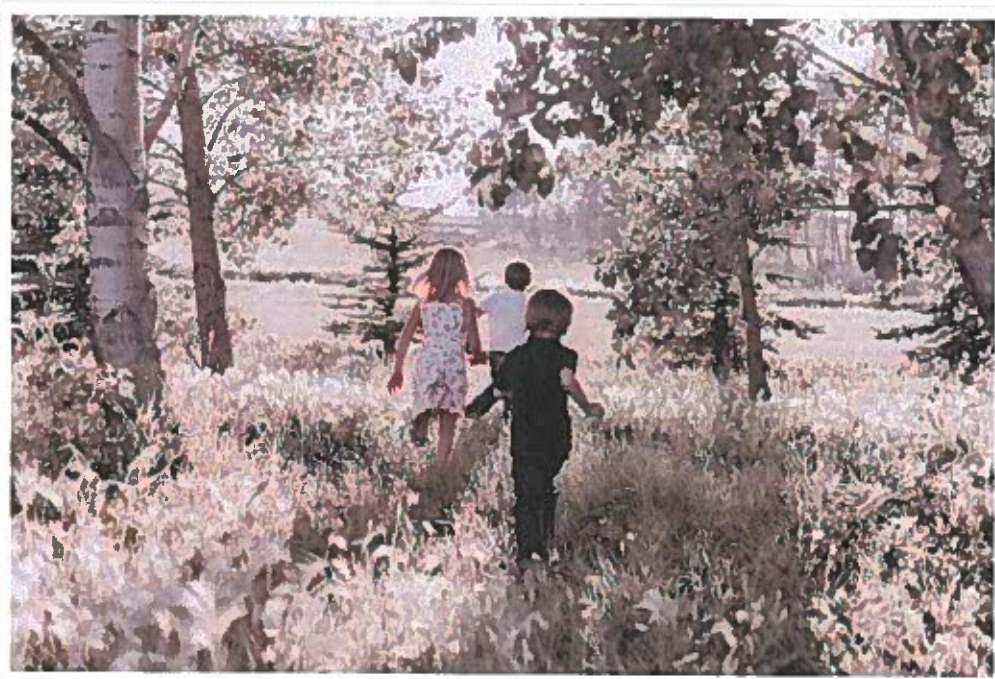
You may be wondering as I was about this “play deficit” – what is that? Gray explained that, over the last 60 years, our society has increasingly taken children’s freedom to play away from them. It’s been gradual enough that we may not have even noticed it. What was once normal, accepted practice throughout human history: allowing children to go out and play by themselves with other children – is now regarded as negligence. From one generation to the next, the number of hours children play outside unaccompanied has been cut in half. And the range of play, the kinds of play activities, and where they can play, have all been severely limited. School hours during the day have increased, and recesses have been reduced or removed altogether from the schedule. Outside of school, many children have had their “free” time after school heavily scheduled with non-play-oriented activities. They no longer have time and space to go out and be by themselves with other children to make and direct their own games and activities. It’s during play, Gray explains, that children are able to develop the basic life skills they must acquire in order to grow up, be successful, and have a meaningful life.





— Photo by Felipe Schiarolli

According to Gray, children appear to be suffering from this deprivation of play. Research shows that school-age teenagers are eight times more depressed and anxious than they were in the 1950s. The suicide rate for children under age 15 has increased six-fold since the 1950s and doubled in the last 10 years. In the same time frame, suicide rate for the middle-aged has not increased at all, and for seniors has actually decreased dramatically. Older folks are doing fine, and the kids are suffering. Gray sees a correlation between the lack of play opportunities among school-age children and these rising rates of their depression and anxiety.



— Photo by Priscilla Du Prez

So how can the public library help? It occurred to me after Gray's talk that libraries are perfectly positioned to address this issue. They are already reliable, established places in the community where self-directed learning and play, unaccompanied by adults, is encouraged. Libraries offer up their books, services, and resources like a playground for



people to engage in – where no one is judged and patrons have the freedom to pursue individual passions. Programs can be provided for school-age children and teens that are outside of, and unrestricted by, the schools. By providing free play opportunities, libraries can carve out the space and time, found lacking in children’s everyday lives, for local kids and teens to play and develop the basic life skills they need. Play is a crucial tool for social and emotional learning, developing creativity, problem solving, and conflict resolution. Libraries can step up and provide this important service to their communities.

After this illuminating talk, I discovered something else surprising: my local public library, [Westbank Community Library](#), the host of Peter Gray’s talk, has already started to step up! They have begun running numerous programs all around the idea of free play inspired by Gray’s book and ideas. I soon started bringing my four-year old twins to the library’s “[Free Play & Food Trucks](#)” every Monday afternoon. I stood in the back of the library with the other parents and library staff, trying desperately to stay inconspicuous and un-involved (not always easy as the impulse is to participate), as all ages of children played, unrestrained, with various toys and games that had been strewn about a large interior and exterior part of the library’s property. There was no set program, theme, or objective – just free play.



— *Free Play Room at Laura’s Library (Photo Credit: Westbank Library)*

I wanted to learn more. Why was the library doing this? What inspired it? How was it going? Any lessons learned? Would other libraries be interested in similar approaches? Check out [Part 2](#) for an interview with Westbank Community Library staff to hear more about their innovative Free Play programming and its impact.

Additional resources:

- Video: [Dr. Peter Gray Play Deficit Disorder: A National Crisis and How to Solve It Locally](#)
- Article: "[Libraries as Centers for Self-Directed Education](#)" – Peter Gray recently posted this article in Psychology Today and cites Westbank (Laura's) specifically

This entry was posted in [Public Libraries](#) by [Henry Stokes](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#) [<https://www.tsl.texas.gov/ld/librarydevelopments/2018/09/04/a-place-to-just-play-a-new-vital-role-for-public-libraries-part-1/>]

1 THOUGHT ON "A PLACE TO JUST PLAY: A NEW, VITAL ROLE FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES, PART 1"

Pingback: [New A Place to Just Play: A New, Vital Role for Public Libraries – Stephen's Lighthouse](#)

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. [Learn how your comment data is processed.](#)

## Library Developments

Program news & information from the Library Development & Networking Division

# A Place to Just Play: A New, Vital Role for Public Libraries, Part 2

Posted on [September 5, 2018](#) by [Henry Stokes](#)



— *Free Play Room at Laura's Library (Credit: Westbank Library)*

Yesterday I [explained](#) how I discovered the innovative free play programming at my local public library in the Austin area. I reached out to the staff responsible at the [Westbank Community Library](#) (Leah Tatgenhorst, Mary Jo Finch, and Autumn Solomon) with some questions I had. Their responses are below.

And if you'd like to learn more about the topic, the staff there are going to host a professional development program on **Friday, October 12** in Austin for librarians and educators. More on that below the interview, or [jump straight to the workshop details!](#)

### What led you to create free play programming?

The creation of Free Play was serendipitous. Antonio Buehler, who founded a self-directed education center here in Austin ([Abrome](#)), is a frequent educational speaker at the library and leads an education book club for our community. He introduced us to renowned psychologist Dr. Peter Gray, author of *Free to Learn*.



— Westbank Staff with Peter Gray and Antonio Buehler (Credit: Westbank Library)

In his book and his [Psychology Today blog](#), Dr. Gray argues for the importance of play to help children develop decision-making and negotiation skills, become better problem solvers, develop empathy for others, learn how to take and mitigate risks, and of course, have fun. Antonio helped us conceive the program – 3 hours where children engage in mixed-age play and explore materials with little adult interaction.

Over time, children who come to Free Play grow comfortable with their autonomy and develop ownership of the library as a place for them. Their parents support each other in the sometimes difficult process of letting go.

**Why do you think it's a good fit for your library?**

Self-education is at the heart of the public library mission. Beyond that, in conversations with us, our community has expressed a desire for greater community connection, an interest in their children being safe to play in the community, and concerns about school stress and the resulting stresses on busy families. We were eager to create programming with a drop-in time frame to accommodate schedules and offer a chance to connect with neighbors in a relaxing environment with minimal rules. This is Free Play: free choice, free time, stress free, no expectations, no grades, no instruction. It arises spontaneously and when it has run its course, it fades. Its process is discovery, and its only standard of measurement is how much fun it is.

We encourage visitors to:

- create their own games
- develop relationships with people of all ages
- pursue their own interests
- read just for fun
- enjoy unstructured time in a non-homework space

**Do you have a success story to share? Have you seen it make an impact?**

Since we started the program we have had a weekly attendance ranging from 50-100. The numbers have been fantastic, but the real success lies in the connections made. Parents have connected with each other sharing coffee, stories, information and support. Kids are connecting by creating games, sharing materials, and resolving their own disputes. The community is connecting with staff and volunteers by letting us know how much they appreciate a neighborhood place that welcomes joyful noise.



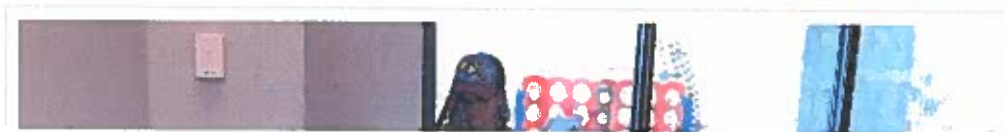


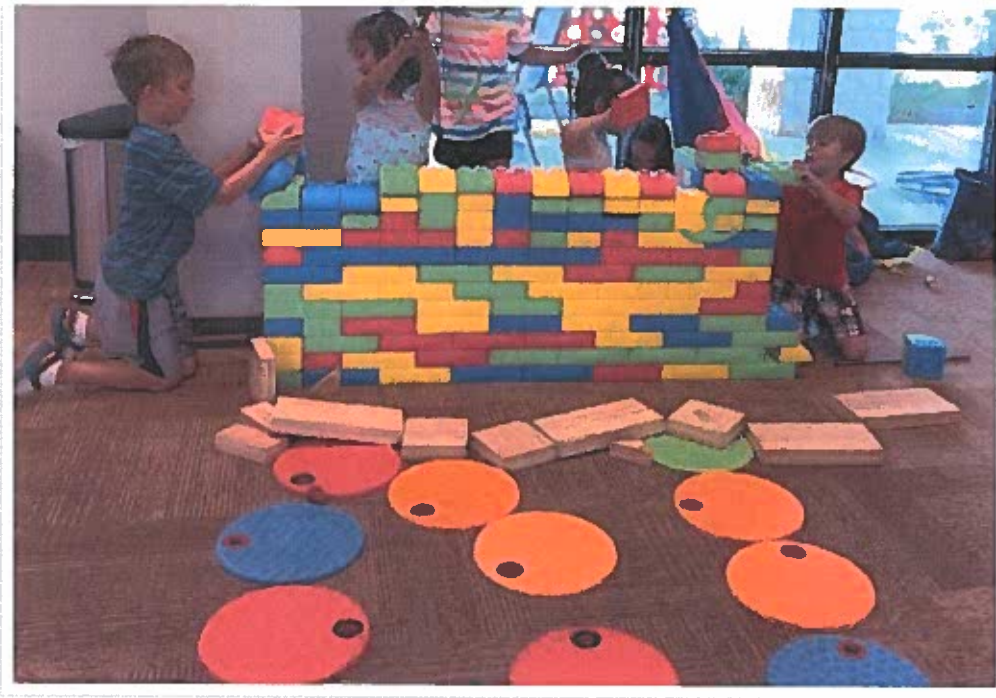
**Any challenges you faced, or lessons learned? Anything you'd do differently?  
Would you do this again?**

The opportunity to begin Free Play arose quickly so we focused on preparing programs staff, but in hindsight would have focused on preparing all staff for this shift in programming. It can be challenging sitting back and waiting to intervene when you see children testing the boundaries of a non-traditional library environment. This is something library school did not prepare us for!

It took us a few weeks to determine the layout of the space, which includes a fenced backyard, and to encourage parents to step back and let kids explore freely. We place staff near the entrance to greet families and to make sure no one runs out the front door into the parking lot, but the main goal is to model a hands-off approach while we engage in free play and conversation as adults. We have band aids and ice packs at the ready, but have not had to use them often.

At the outset we envisioned Free Play going from Spring-Summer, but because of the success we have made it a regular program. We are building on the idea by incorporating aspects of Free Play into programming across the board. So short answer, yes we would absolutely do this again. We also are eager to help other librarians embrace Free Play. We will be offering a professional development opportunity for all library staff and educators on Friday, October 12th from 9am-noon at [Laura's Library](#).





— Constructive play (Credit: Westbank Library)

**Did you find it was more or less successful with different age groups?**

Our biggest success was with younger kids and their parents, but we are starting to see grandparents and older siblings attend. We are still exploring ways to engage older kids and teens. We had a teen volunteer over the summer and that was a tremendous help. We observed that teens navigate relationships with kids and adults in unique ways, leading to social and emotional learning on all parts. We intend to develop this aspect further.

**Did you have to educate people to explain the purpose/benefits?**

Staff members chat with parents about the importance of self-directed play as a means to learn. We also have a bookmark we hand out which highlights the purpose of Free Play. Parents who stay during Free Play enjoy the camaraderie of other parents and support each other in letting go of their kids for a bit, thereby reducing parental anxieties.

We have also been fortunate that Antonio agreed to facilitate when we started the program to help answer education questions that caretakers inevitably had and to

reassure them it's okay to play! We consciously have made minimal rules to allow children freedom to work out issues on their own without adult intervention. Our simple rules are stay safe, respect others, respect the space, have fun!



— *Free Play Clean Up (Credit: Westbank Library)*

I want to thank the staff at Westbank Community Library for answering my questions and sharing their photos and videos!

If you can make it, be sure to attend their October 12 workshop. Here's more information about it:

**Upcoming Workshop:**

**FREE PLAY: PREPARING LIBRARIES AND COMMUNITIES FOR AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE**

Where: Westbank Library, [Laura Bush Community Branch](#)

When: October 12th 9am-noon

Who: Speakers include Mary Jo Finch, Director, Leah Tatgenhorst, Programs Manager, Autumn Solomon, Associate Director, Antonio Buehler, education partner. All librarians and educators are welcome to attend! This talk will be of particular interest to program, children & teen librarians, and management.

Play is how children learn to take control of their lives.

*-Dr. Peter Gray. Free to Learn*

Self-education is at the heart of library missions. Westbank Libraries worked with Dr. Gray to better understand how play helps children develop decision-making and negotiation skills, become better problem solvers, develop empathy for others, and learn how to take and mitigate risks.

The self-directed learning movement, which has free play at its core, is an engaging and simple way to bring your community together. Play is an essential part of childhood, and libraries are a natural partner to offer programs that support discovery through open-ended, child-directed play. Westbank Libraries created Free Play, a 3-hour weekly program that welcomes joyful noise and encourages parents to sit back while their kids explore and discover together.

Topics of this presentation will include: becoming antifragile, the importance of play and child-directed learning, logistics of free play and open ended programming and how to adapt it to your library. A light breakfast will be served, doors open at 8:30am. Come and get your questions answered, and engage in some free play of your own!

To register, please email [programs@westbanklibrary.com](mailto:programs@westbanklibrary.com) with your name, library and how many will attend. Registration is not mandatory, but helpful for planning.

Additional resources:

- Video: [Dr. Peter Gray Play Deficit Disorder: A National Crisis and How to Solve It Locally](#)
- Article: "[Libraries as Centers for Self-Directed Education](#)" – Peter Gray recently posted this article in Psychology Today and cites Westbank (Laura's) specifically

This entry was posted in [Public Libraries](#) by [Henry Stokes](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#) [<https://www.tsl.texas.gov/ld/librarydevelopments/2018/09/05/a-place-to-just-play-a-new-vital-role-for-public-libraries-part-2/>].

1 THOUGHT ON "A PLACE TO JUST PLAY: A NEW, VITAL ROLE FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES, PART 2"



**Jeanette McCoy**

on September 27, 2018 at 10:35 pm said:

Any chance that this will be recorded? I'm in the middle of a Family Place series and can't be there.

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. [Learn how your comment data is processed.](#)