Free Play and Teens: A Path to SEL Development

How one library in Texas supports teen SEL through play activities geared to children and families.

Leah Tatgenhorst, Autumn Solomon, and Mary Jo Finch

Imagine a room full of games, toys, art supplies, and "odd bits" (empty boxes, cardboard tubes, scarves, bubbles, pool noodles, rope, clothes pins, and other miscellanea). Children are rolling on the floor, building obstacle courses and castles, and inventing elaborate stories. Older kids are helping delighted toddlers stack block towers higher than they could ever hope to build on their own. Teens are immersed in LEGO creations and explaining board game rules for kids who can't yet read.

On the sidelines, parents are reading for pleasure, catching up on emails, or sharing coffee and stories with one another. Library staff and volunteers are greeting families and joyfully engaging in another round of a much-loved card game. The adults are stepping back and letting kids connect with one another, resolve their own disputes, and play for the sake of playing.

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.

A Seed Is Planted

In our 2014–2018 strategic plan, Westbank Libraries began shifting our library programming to a platform model,[1] inviting the community to create programming of their own in our spaces. Amongst a wide range of new programs that people brought us were two new book clubs. The first was an educational psychology book club that was created by Antonio Buehler, the founder of a self-directed education center in our neighborhood and a frequent educational speaker at the library. The second? A YA book club, dreamed up by 11-year-old Marissa (now 13) who was eager to find like-minded readers.

At the time, there really wasn't any connection between these two programs other than the fact that both were having a difficult time getting off the ground. Attendance was low—often it was just the group's creator and one librarian discussing the book each month. Fortunately, libraries don't measure success just by numbers of attendees.

The YA book club allowed a staff member to increase her YA readers' advisory skills, to learn from one of our community members, and to collaborate and co-create with a willing almost-teen! Whether it was just Marissa and a librarian or a small group of teens and tweens, the YA book club was a place for participants to explore beyond their own interests and preferences, to select books from a wider range of genres, to listen, and to discuss differences of opinions. After the book talk and over a snack, kids bonded over their tiredness, their stress over grades, and their busy extracurricular schedules. Eventually the conversation would veer into silliness as they would dance, sing, laugh, and occasionally even cry. They let loose, and we were proud to give them a safe space for this.

Antonio's education book group also took time to build, but with a strong reading list it eventually found its audience of interested parents and educators. We now have a steady attendance of about eight to ten attendees (and as many as 15) coming each month to discuss books that

the group now selects themselves. The readings are a continuous source of study for some of our library staff as we tussle with ways to create programming that supports self-directed learning, where people connect with one another and explore interests on their own terms. The discussions that have ensued when the book club meets have been equally enlightening, as parents and educators express concerns about the stress that schooling and the college admissions process puts on children and families in our community.

The parallels were striking. Two books clubs, but the same discussion topic: kids in our community are stressed. This planted a seed that led to the development of Free Play and the eventual inclusion of teens at Free Play.

Free Play and Open-Ended Exploration

One of the most influential books we read in the education book club was *Free to Learn* by Dr. Peter Gray. It focuses on the importance of play in childhood development. According to Dr. Gray, "Playing with other children, away from adults, is how children learn to make their own decisions, control their emotions and impulses, see from others' perspectives, negotiate differences with others, and make friends. In short, play is how children learn to take control of their lives."[2] Dr. Gray came to speak at our library, and interested staff, including everyone on our programs team, attended the program titled "Play Deficit Disorder: A National Crisis and How to Solve It Locally."[3]

> We provide opportunities through open-ended exploration and play that help grow SEL skills and enrich our kids' lives, as a strong and necessary complement to traditional school offerings.

Based on our new understanding of play, we worked with Antonio Buehler to develop our Free Play program, an open-ended exploration program focusing on play. It utilizes an expanded time frame (about three hours) for families to come and go at their convenience. The environment is immersive and stimulus rich, and it is geared for inter-age activity where parents are encouraged to let go of their kids.

Public schools in America provide a very structured educational experience—regimented schedule, state curriculum requirements, age segregation, standardized testing and grades, and adult direction. Free Play provides the opposite. Kids choose what they want to play, how they want to play, who they want to play with, and when they want to quit. Younger kids learn from older kids, while older kids develop empathy, collaboration, and leadership skills as they model behavior for younger kids. Kids can fight over a toy and resolve it themselves. They can take their shoes off. They can make noise. They can get messy.

We were pleasantly surprised by an immediate positive response to the program. Families were craving a safe, loosely structured space to connect. They appreciated having a come-and-go program they could enjoy at a time that worked for them. They liked that they could bring kids of varying ages to the same program. Parents welcomed getting to chat with other parents. Sometimes we managed to get a food truck to come so they could have an easy dinner while everyone played!

Parents didn't instantly grasp the part about letting their kids play on their own, but we passed out bookmarks listing the goals of Free Play, and Antonio and library staff members chatted with newcomer parents to help them understand the importance of play and the importance of letting kids have adult-free decision-making space.

The transformation has been remarkable. Parents look to each other for social cues, and often the helicoptering parent style is borne of being around other parents who hover. As

Learn More About Play

Free Play: Preparing Libraries and Communities for an Uncertain Future
http://bit.ly/westbank_play

Free Play YouTube Playlist
http://bit.ly/westbank_play_youtube

Free Play Time Lapse Video
https://youtu.be/HwppdMlyNNg

Libraries as Centers for Self-Directed Education
http://bit.ly/psych2day_libs_sefldirect-ed_ed

A Place to Just Play
https://www.tsl.texas.gov/ld/librarydevelopments/?p=23528

more and more parents sit at tables at one side of the room during Free Play, chatting, playing games with each other, reading, or knitting, and generally ignoring their kids, parents who are new to Free Play take their cue and join the other parents. They relax, and so do their kids.

Fortuitously, our YA book club founder, Marissa, turned 13 just about the time we launched Free Play, and 13 is the age when you can officially volunteer at the library. Marissa spent much of the summer with us helping at Free Play and other open-ended exploration programs. She has logged 400 hours of volunteer time this year, much of it side-by-side with our education book club leader, Antonio.

Other open-ended exploration programs have focused on art and video games, and future programs may include coding, science, writing, and music. The formula for each is the same: stimulus-rich environment, extended time frame, inter-age participants, and parents on the sideline. Our next strategic plan has connected, learning, and play in its vision and will allow for considerable growth in this new programming direction.

Free Play and SEL

Last spring our local school district called community leaders together to talk about social emotional learning (SEL). District administrators were asking the community to come together to support SEL development in our students, at all grade levels but especially in the high school. A recent article in our local newspaper highlighted the issue in our school district and a similar, neighboring school district. Surveys of high school students indicated a 31 percent rate of depression, with 17 percent reporting that they have seriously considered suicide. 70 percent of the students said the stress of school was too much, 47 percent felt they were "not good enough," and 47 percent reported missing school because of stress-related health or emotional problems. Students also reported getting an average of six and a half hours of sleep per night, about three hours less than recommended.[4] A 2016 study by the National Institute of Mental Health estimates that 3.1 million adolescents aged 12 to 17 (12.8 percent) had at least one major depressive episode during that year.[5]

SEL competencies include social awareness, empathy, self-awareness, reflection, responsible decision-making, self-management, resiliency, relationship skills, and collaboration. What Peter Gray teaches us is that these are not things we learn in a structured environment like school. "Play is nature's way of teaching children how to solve their own problems, control their impulses, modulate their emotions, see from other's perspectives, negotiate differences, and get along with others as equals. There is no substitute for play as a means of learning these skills. They can't be taught in school."[6] Structured environments promote obedience, not independent thinking. Class rankings teach competition, not collaboration. For socioemotional learning, agency is needed.

Public libraries bring a tremendous value to our communities by offering low-structure high-agency programs that our schools simply can't. We provide opportunities through open-ended exploration and play that help grow SEL skills and enrich our kids' lives, as a strong and necessary complement to traditional school offerings.

But how do we get teens, who need play the most, to join in?

Getting Teens to Free Play

The bulk of the attendees at Free Play are younger children. Teens in our community are overscheduled and facing pressure from varying sources (the school, themselves, their parents, their peers, their coaches, and their hoped-for university destination) to create the perfect college application, complete with top grades in AP courses, high SAT and ACT scores, multiple extracurricular activities, and lots of volunteer hours. The group that might benefit the most from the freedom to engage in unstructured play has too many obligations severely limiting their ability to participate.

We decided to meet our teens (and their families) where they are. They need a chance to play, and they need volunteer credits to satisfy college application expectations. Marissa's success and joy at being included in Free Play as a volunteer over the summer was a catalyst for creating a teen drop-in volunteer role at all of our Free Play programs. Teens are invited to join us at Free Play to help with setup and cleanup, but more importantly to model play to younger children and to join in if they are invited. Because of the nature of the work, we can accommodate any number of teens that drop in to earn volunteer hours.

As with our fledgling book clubs, success is less about the number of people who participate than it is about the quality of the experience for everyone involved. Teens come in wearing the weight of the school day, and they are sometimes shy about jumping in, but they leave laughing after rediscovering the delights of playing parachute. They help younger children build amazingly tall towers, lifting them to place the block on top. They join in tea parties when summoned by confident four-year-olds. They sit on the floor amidst a mountain of LEGO blocks, assisting in complicated constructions. They nurture their young playmates, helping them learn new games, demonstrating compromise, and assisting in their skill development. On a recent school holiday, we held a seven-hour-long Free Play, and ten

teens came to volunteer, a few staying the entire day because they were having a blast. It was an added bonus that they started the day as strangers to each other and became friends.

Parents are delighted as well. Parents of younger children are more relaxed knowing there are older kids in the mix, and parents of teens are pleased for their kids to find such a rewarding volunteer job.

What's Next?

Currently Free Play sees attendance of 50 to 100 participants weekly. It minimally requires two to three staff/volunteers. Setup takes 20 to 45 minutes depending on how many people are helping, and cleanup goes by quickly as families pitch in before they leave. We provide snacks for kids and coffee for parents to create a comfortable environment. And now we offer teens a reason to play. So how do we continue to grow our other programming to include teens?

The library offers 100–125 programs per month across our two locations, which presents other opportunities to include teens as volunteers. To this end, we've been looking at what's drawing teens to Free Play: flexible times, minimal rules, connection with others, playfulness, and sometimes the chance to reflect on their own childhood—which to teens was forever ago! We are identifying other programs, children's and adult programs both, that could benefit from adding teens to the mix, where teens will benefit too.

References

1. Lankes, David. 2012. Accessed December 4, 2018. https://davidlankes.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Expect-MoreOpen.pdf.
2. Gray, Peter. *Free to Learn*. Place of Publication Not Identified: Basic Books, 2014. 157.
3. Westbank Library. "Peter Gray – Play Deficit Disorder: A National Crisis and How to Solve It Locally." Peter Gray – Play Deficit Disorder: A National Crisis and How to Solve It Locally. April 26, 2018. Accessed December 4, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-wyEB55nWmo&t=24s.
4. Holtgrieve, Sally Grace. "Local Youth Hurting Under Pressure: The Mental Health of Lake Travis-Westlake Students." *Community Impact Newspaper* (Lake Travis, Westlake), June 13, 2018.
5. "Major Depression." National Institute of Mental Health. Accessed December 4, 2018. https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression.shtml.
6. Gray, 175.

LEAH TATGENHORST, is the Programs Manager, AUTUMN SOLOMON, is the Associate Director, and MARY JO FINCH is the Director of the Westbank Community Library District in Austin, Texas.

Guidelines for Authors

Young Adult Library Services is the official publication of the Young Adult Library Services Association, a division of the American Library Association. *Young Adult Library Services* is a vehicle for continuing education of librarians working with young adults (ages twelve through eighteen) that showcases current research and practice relating to teen services and spotlights significant activities and programs of the division.

For submission and author guidelines, please visit http://yalsa.ala.org/blog/yals/submissions/.

Index to Advertisers

Disney-Hyperion Books.....Cover 4