**The Power of Play: Unlocking Your Child’s Potential S6|2**

If you are thinking about how to best harness your child's potential, then today's podcast is for you. Today we're talking about something that brings us all so much joy, and that is play. And joining me for this amazing podcast is Lara Schoenfeldt.

Our conversation is packed with exciting takeaways that will revolutionize the way that you think about playtime with your little ones. One of the most fascinating insights that we covered today is the intrinsic link between play and curiosity. Now, it's no secret that children are naturally curious, and their curious minds are actually the most powerful tool that we can harness.

But how do we tap into that curiosity, and how do we take advantage of it? Lara and I also explored how parents play differently with kids. So some of us like more sedentary play, and some of us are more social or messy. And we look at how we can use these unique strengths to bring out the best in our little ones.

It's not about being the perfect parent or the perfect player, but it's about embracing your own individual style and making that really meaningful for both you and your child. But what I loved most about our conversation today is that it was really a perfect balance between the scientific rationale behind play and practical tips. So you're going to walk away with a really deep understanding of why play is so important, but most importantly, really actionable advice on how to make the most of playtime.

So let's get started and discover the transformative power of play. Welcome to Sense by Meg Fora, the podcast that's brought to you by ParentSense, the app that takes guesswork out of parenting. If you're a new parent, then you are in good company.

Your host, Meg Fora, is a well-known OT, infant specialist, and the author of eight parenting books. Each week, we're going to spend time with new mums and dads, just like you, to chat about the week's wins, the challenges, and the questions of the moment. Subscribe to the podcast, download the ParentSense app, and catch Meg here every week to make the most of that first year of your little one's life.

And now, meet your host. Welcome back, mums and dads. Lovely to have you join me here today on Sense by Meg Fora.

I'm Meg Fora, your host. And today's a special episode because we have got Lara Schoenfeldt with me. Lara is the co-founder of PlaySense, and her and I are both occupational therapists.

So we share a lot of very common interests. And I think if I had to summarize what it is that we're both most passionate about when it comes to little ones, it would have to be the topic of today, which is play, because we both feel that play is so critically important in the development of the human being. So Lara, I'm really excited to be having a conversation about play with you today.

Me too, Meg. Thanks so much. Lara is also the mum to three very busy boys, and she's in that primary school stage of life, which I found to be the most busy.

I think when you're a mum of a toddler, you think it can't get worse, but actually it does, it gets busier. And she lives in the Lower Felt in South Africa. And she also is the founder of Nanny and Me.

So she's a serial entrepreneur and a passionate play, kind of proponent of play, I would say. So we're going to dive straight into play, Lara. And I think the first place to start is that play gets a fairly bad rap and people don't take it very seriously.

And what do you think the most common misconceptions about play are and its role in child development? So Meg, thanks for that intro. And I don't know, I think the place, these years of schooling, you are sleeping. So I must say, although they're busy schedules, at least I'm getting a full night's sleep.

So, you know what? I think people think that play is just for fun or to keep children busy. That's true. And really it is the primary way that children learn.

And we know that in studies where children have every need satisfied, but they don't have access to play, they actually fail to thrive and can even die. So play is, I call it your child's first love language. I love it.

I really love it. And of course, it's not just about passing time. It really has a very critical role.

It's, you know, it's not just about survival. It's really a critical role in the development of the human brain. So how does play contribute to our child's cognitive, social, emotional growth and so on? Well, just to take a step back, just to explain firstly in the brain, you know, babies are born with more brain cells than we have as adults.

And those first two years of pregnancy, as well as the first two years, those brain cells are learning to make connections. And the way that they do that is through sensory and motor experiences, which play naturally affords for children. And I love to explain to parents the play cycle because it's so simple and yet it explains what's happening at an actual brain chemical level.

So when children are healthily attached and they are, I'm sorry, happily attached and healthy, they are naturally curious, okay? They want to touch everything. They want to be everywhere. And so they explore.

And when they explore, say even putting a little finger in a hole somewhere, you know, they discover and that lights up the brain. So we can see that chemicals such as dopamine, oxytocin, endorphins and serotonin is released in the brain. Now, as humans, when we experience pleasure, we repeat that action.

And so play sets up the cycle of repetition, which is what those little brain cells need to create pathways, okay? So when I've now repeated, repeated, repeated, I've grown in confidence and then I'm naturally curious again. So you can see how this sets up this natural cycle of positive reinforcement. And so what are they learning? Well, as you mentioned, they are learning social things.

So through interactive play, they're learning to take turns. They're learning empathy. Through emotion, emotionally, they are learning to express their emotions.

You know, it's so important that we as parents don't label emotions as good or bad, but we help to name the emotion and then show that there's an appropriate response. That is something I come across so often, that we're scared of these so-called bad emotions. But play offers natural frustration for a child.

And then we can guide them through that, right? And then in terms of cognitive growth, we've got skills such as creativity, problem solving, memory, judgment, and that's all happening. You know, when I pour water into a tub and the water overflows, I realize, oh, there's more water than there is tub. You know, it's a constant experimentation.

That's what play is. And so we need to provide our children with, if they are naturally curious and they want to explore, they need a safe environment. They need opportunities to play.

So we will get into that a bit more. And then they need caregivers who are in tune and who are sort of promoting their experimentation and their exploration and not always saying, no, stop that, or you're going to make a mess, or let's do something else that's safer. Sometimes our children actually even need risky play to develop that confidence and mastery.

Yeah, absolutely. And I think what happens is that for many parents, they're really tired. And so, you know, setting up a play environment is actually just like another thing, another box they have to tick.

And one of the trends that we've seen over years is that parents are less playful with their children. And that probably has a lot to do with the pressures of daily life, that the world is busy, that I'm trying to catch up on emails, so I just want my child to stay quiet and stay still so it's easier to just put on TV for them. And it's also possibly got to do with the fact that maybe we're less playful ourselves as adults and we've forgotten how to play.

And I think a lot of parents listening to this are maybe thinking, yeah, no, I can see, play is really important, it's developing these brain cells, it's fostering creativity, there's this enjoyment, there's these connections, and it's got all these developmental outcomes. But actually, it's like just another box that I've got to tick in my busy day. And I think that's hard on parents, you know? So I think what would be quite useful is to get a little bit practical now and to maybe help parents to understand really practical ways that they can incorporate play into their daily routine, even when they are feeling completely overstretched.

Great question, Meg. And I'm really passionate, especially about the working mother and the guilt she often feels that she can't be everything to everyone or she's so busy trying to be everything to everyone, right? So the first thing is to just explain the concept of serve and return from the neuroscience. And that means that babies naturally express, they want interaction through their body language, before they can even speak, through little squeaks and excited gestures.

And as a parent, if we just tune into those moments and return the serve, that's the science from Harvard, we're actually building those brain connections. And I think the biggest blockage I see here is the fact that we are always on devices. So even when we are with our children, we're still looking at those WhatsApps or emails or the schedule.

And so I really encourage parents to make the most of the time that they are with their little ones and to make eye contact, to just copy that gesture or imitation. You might feel silly squeaking back at your baby, but you're actually building those brain circuits. So serve and return, we can do that on the go, wherever we are, in the car, whatever we're doing, even if we're cooking a meal and baby's playing at our feet on the floor, we can do that.

Then secondly, from there, is building play into the routine. So, you know, instead of just changing the nappy, we could have a song set up that we always play when we change the nappy with a little rhyme. And we, you know, through that, we're making that eye contact, we're laughing, we're smiling.

And to all the parents listening, I want to say how we are with our children is more important than what we do with our children. So if they're constantly reading stress and anxiety and rush, rush, rush, those are actually translated into experiences and memories in that little developing brain. So how we are is more important than what we do.

Then things like picking your baby up off the change mat or the floor and doing a silly little jig for five seconds. You're developing their balance and vestibular system. You're being silly.

I think we've forgotten how to be silly. When you're cooking, you know, give them a pot and a pan and some scoops from your baking drawer. Reading before bed.

So just to share with parents, my boys are 14, 12 and seven, and daddy still reads to the 14 and 12 year old every single night. And I read to the seven year old. And you know, one day your parents, your children are not going to want you.

It's a very intense season now, but they don't want, my 14 and 12 year old don't really want me to play with them anymore. But those are the moments where they actually open up about their day, where they tell you what's really bugging them. So reading before bed is such a powerful habit that you can start now that will continue into those teen years.

And I'm sure you have a similar story about that, Meg, you know, that is laying the groundwork for having a good relationship with our teens is that creating that space where they feel safe. So you can imagine from being a baby or a toddler on mommy or daddy's lap feeling safe, having these bonding moments that are literally just one or two books before bed, that's laying a foundation for future conversations. I always say to busy parents, if you can give the first 15 minutes as you walk into the door to your child, you put that device away, you can even set a timer and you can teach your child that we are going to have special time.

Just these first 15 minutes. And that actually, it fills their lap tank. It's so, it actually goes so quickly.

And the minute that timer goes, they'll learn, okay, now we go on to the next thing. Mommy's going to cook a meal, we're going to bath or whatever. And they anticipate it.

So just get down on the floor, make eye contact, give them cuddles and do whatever they want to do. Then bringing play into chores. So, you know, I've mentioned making dinner, but even when you're in the car or in the shops playing I spy or counting things, little things like that can create moments of connection.

And then it doesn't all depend on us. So setting up independent play areas. So independent play is kind of the same as unstructured play or replay.

We do want to teach our children to be able to play and have us nearby. So I would encourage parents to set up like a little quiet corner with some books and some nice snuggly things, big cushion, some sensory experiences. So a sandpit outside or the garden, a messy play area, a secret space, so a little tent or a hidey space, a movement space where they can kick the ball and you don't keep saying, oh, you're going to break a window.

And then a manipulative space where there's things to build with or like Lego Duplo. And then a creative space where they can paint. So that might be outside, it might be in an enclosed outdoor room, something that they can make a mess because I think another refrain we hear from our little ones at nanny and me and at play scenes is messy, messy, and they hold up their hands and they don't want to be messy.

And as OTs, we know how important being able to make a mess is and to, we need to learn to clean up and all of that, but it's so critical that they explore materials. And then the last one is a dramatic space. So pretend play, a little dress up corner or a few hats or scarves or old shoes and encourage that kind of play.

Wow, Lara, that is just a wealth of information, just such practical tips. And I think a lot of parents will be able to relate to at least one or two of those. Like, yes, I can read to my child every single day or yes, an art space, I'll set that up and that can permanently be there for them or dress up space.

So I really love the practicalities behind everything that you've mentioned there. You mentioned a word unstructured and structured play and it sounds to me almost in some ways that by setting up these zones, you almost are structuring their play in some respects. What is the difference between structured and unstructured play and what are the benefits of each? This episode is brought to us by Parents Sense, the all-in-one baby and parenting app that help you make the most of your baby's first year.

Don't you wish someone would just tell you everything you need to know about caring for your baby? When to feed them, how to wean them and why they won't sleep? Parents Sense app is like having a baby expert on your phone guiding you to parent with confidence. Get a flexible routine, daily tips and advice personalized for you and your little one. Download Parents Sense app now from your app store and take the guesswork out of parenting.

What is the difference between structured and unstructured play and what are the benefits of each? So make unstructured is free play. It's when we allow the child to make their own decisions and choices and we want obviously safe materials for them to do that. But it's where the parent is not giving directive instructions.

So yes, we set up the play area because we want it safe. But actually it's where they can just do whatever they would like to do. Structured play is where the parent is involved or the carer or even a sibling.

And that is where they are also things like instructions or a one way to do things. So free play, no rules, structured play, some rules. Okay, and both are really important for our children's development.

I think there's a big move on social media to just talk about free play, free play, free play. But I want parents to imagine a child playing on the floor. Let's say a child is crawling and they have a red ball and they're playing with this red ball.

If we just are nearby and they are exploring the ball, that would be free play. But what I want parents to think about is do they even know that it's called a ball if there isn't you guiding them a little bit? So anytime there's a little bit of guidance, that's when we get into structured play territory. And I think structured play has got a bad rap because actually an in-tune caregiver who says, are you playing with the ball? It's a red ball.

It's round. There's one of those balls. Oh, look at the soccer ball.

The soccer ball is bigger than the red ball. You can never learn that through free play. You cannot, we need language.

Language is a tool of the mind. And so we don't wanna constantly be talking or giving instructions. That's why these independent play areas are so great.

But we do want to be able to comment on what they're playing. And the second thing we do is something called scaffolding. Just as when a building goes up, there's those supports on the side so people can build each layer.

Well, we are the scaffolding. The caregivers in our children's labs are the scaffolding. And we know what our children can do.

And we know what's just outside of what they can do. And we can naturally challenge them. We can naturally support through words, through holding their hand if they're struggling to say, put that Duplo block on the other Duplo block or balance the tower or whatever they're doing.

They need a little bit of support. So free play is not going to provide that support. So we need both types of play.

Structured play helps children with skills and unstructured play helps them with that. Just that desire to be free, creative, explore, make their own rules and both develop a sense of independence. And kind of what's shining for me in this conversation is that parents have a very, very important role to play, even if it is in free play because it's just setting up an environment or structure, a space in which your child can go and play on a certain thing.

You're still setting it up. You've still got a role. And I know one of the things we say in play sense is that you can also be the person who kind of inspires your child to play by saying things like, what can we do with this? Or what do you think the outcome of that will be? And this is one of the things I often say to parents is that sometimes you have to expend quite a bit of effort for three or four minutes to get your child going on something, but you'll buy yourself half an hour of free time because they'll then just go with it.

And I certainly used to find that with my kids that we'd pull out the dress up box and my photograph albums are absolutely full of pictures of my children dressed up. And what we used to do is kind of, who are you going to be today? And here's the box, set them up, take five minutes out of my life to actually set them up and get them on their way. And the next thing I look up and it's half an hour later and they're deep in an imaginary play game.

So it is about being an active participant in your child's play space and in their play life. Part of that, when I think about it, and you've mentioned quite a few activities just now, things like reading to your child and setting up a messy play space and tolerating the mess so that they will engage with it. But that type of thing speaks to parents differently.

So I'm sure that there's some moms who are listening to this and going, okay, no, I can do that. I can read to my child. I can definitely do that.

And then there'll be moms, and maybe it's the same mom going, but they are not making an art mess in my beautiful white flat or whatever it is. And so we do have different parts, I think, of play that excite us as parents and other parts which just are a complete nightmare. Like I don't want to play that particular game.

And I mean, for me, one of the ones that I did not enjoy was ball sports. Like I didn't go and kick a ball in the garden with my kids. I didn't go and throw a million balls to them.

I didn't let them bowl to me. I just didn't. And that's probably why my kids, none of them have excelled in the ball sports space because I didn't play with them.

I didn't give them that opportunity. But it kind of does speak to the fact that we all come to play with a different lens. And so we have different passions and skill sets and kind of almost capacities.

And you have mentioned, I know you've mentioned to me that you have a quiz that parents can do to actually find out a little bit more about their parenting play style. Can you just talk to us a little bit about what parenting play styles are and then what this quiz is all about? Thanks, Meag. And you know, isn't it interesting how you instantly blame yourself? We do that all the time as parents.

And just hearing you speak, you know, I had such an aha moment recently. I love in the workspace with my team, giving them these personality quizzes or your work style. And I just had this aha one day when I was looking at some Instagram pictures of their moms with the sensory boards or all these things they're creating for their children and thought, sure, I'm not like that, which we do all the time.

We compare ourselves and we think we have to be good at everything. But why is it in the workspace that we can accept? Actually, I'm really good at numbers and pattern and structure, not so creative. Or I'm really good with people, et cetera, et cetera.

And so I thought, well, let me take some of these, you know, they all work around the same four sort of profiles in terms of personalities as adults. And let me adapt that to play. And let's help moms and dads to literally play to their strengths, kind of intended.

So to know your strengths, just as you've explained, I know you quite well and I know what profile you probably end up as on this style. And it definitely isn't the one with ball sports. So because they're too boring, they're too structured.

I think you are bright and energetic and full of ideas. You like spontaneity and creativity. And so you would be drawn to more messy, creative, imaginative play.

Play you're not scared of having surprises, where there's another mom profile, parent profile, which is like, I don't want surprises. Nothing must surprise me. I do not want to do messy play.

I do not want to come up with play scenarios where I'm having to be creative, right? And then you'll have the mom who's just like, let's get out the house. I just, you know, that's your more extroverted mom. She's just, let's get out the house.

We need to be with others. So she's always organizing play dates. Okay, so I called her the rainbow.

You're the star. The one who loves stretches the shell. And then the son is the person who's very grounded, like the natural mom, you know, they love routine and comfort and safety.

They're quite good at supporting their children in challenges, but they like slower types of play. So your rainbow would probably prefer the ball games and your shell even because it's a sport that has rules. So yeah, I really encourage parents to go take the quiz and then play to your strengths.

Don't try and be everything because the likelihood is your partner or your nanny or granny or grandpa or auntie will be another profile and your child will be stimulated. And then remember what I said, it's more about how we are with our children than what we do. And if I'm really enjoying this play because it's according to my style, your child's going to see you light up and delight in them.

And according to the neuroscience, that's far more important that children feel delighted in, loved and safe than their parents who's like, oh no, are you really making me play with slime? So where would a mom actually find this if she wanted to go and do this parenting play style quiz, where would she find it? She just types in parentplaystyle.scoreapp.com. Parentplaystyle, one word, .scoreapp.com. Okay, excellent. All right, that sounds super interesting and definitely, I mean, it's quite interesting. I see myself in a few of those scenarios, so I think I probably overlap.

I certainly loved, I'm definitely outgoing and extrovert and loved play dates. I did quite a few play dates for my kids. I was, as you say, very comfortable with imaginary play.

I think that was definitely my, that was my default, and my kids, interestingly, that became their default as well. So that when I say that there was more pictures of our kids dressed up than anything else, I mean, that was how they played every day. They really did.

And what's really interesting about it is that my children, and that was my two older children were very much more in imaginary play. My youngest was as well, but certainly the older two were, and they've both ended up being entrepreneurs. And I think that kind of imaginary play is so vital for really developing imagination, creativity, open-ended thinking, divergent thinking, problem solving.

So, and that's probably, I mean, I often look back on their lives as little ones, and I think they had a very slow childhood. I just wasn't one of those moms who sweated school and marks when they were in primary school. I did in high school because I knew that there was an exit that was coming into university and they need to achieve the marks to get in there.

But in primary school, it was like the bare minimum of work. Sometimes homework didn't get done and they did a lot of playing. And I think that does reflect.

So very interesting. I mean, I kind of think about them as children dressed up and I'm thinking about my primary school kids age or even kind of, I suppose four onwards. So there are different ways that play actually evolves and changes as they grow and develop.

Can you give us, for the mom, because I mean, most of our moms who are listening are probably moms of babies and toddlers. How does play grow with the child? And how do we then have to meet those needs as they grow up? So in the first two years, we, the children engage in sensory motor play. And I love that word because it really conveys what it is.

It's exploring with the senses. So see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and then also balance and then the movement scene. So just, they really are learning to use their bodies against gravity and they need to play in different positions.

They need to explore all those senses. So how do we help them as busy parents? Well, giving them access to those safe environments, safe objects, all different textures, things that make sounds, things that have cause and effect. So mirrors playing peekaboo, just as I mentioned earlier, that serve and return.

You really don't have to switch. As you see here, just that serve and return, that social interaction builds the foundation for other play and developments. And then from two onwards, children actually, that's when they, it's more towards three where they really want to play mates.

But between two and three, you've got an explosion of language and language then develops cognition. So if you imagine, if I say the word to you, ball, like I said earlier, you immediately got a picture of a ball in your head without seeing ball. So language and cognition are very tied together.

We don't understand what three is until we physically handle three things and we learn three. So you can see the sensory exploration of three rocks. Then I learn this is three, and then I understand and I can hold a picture in my brain that this is three.

So they all, it works together. And it's such a great phase of development because of the language explosion. Then you get the why, why, why, why, why, between three and five.

And five-year-olds are just so inquisitive. They think they could be anything in the whole world. They are so divergent, what you're talking about divergent thinking and creativity, you know.

And then unfortunately we enter the school system and that's when even though children's brains are gearing more towards play with rules, unfortunately, I think our school system, you know, it becomes all about the homework. And the tests. And compliance.

And plating. Or outcomes focused. Yes, yeah.

And so, you know, that's the transition. And they still love exploring with their senses and their bodies, but the focus of their development shifts. Very, very interesting as they grow up.

And I think, you know, one of the words that you used very early on, and you used it when you talked about the play cycle is that when you get positive reward, it spurs you on to be more curious. And I think in every single stage, one of the characteristics is actually curiosity. Because, you know, in your sensory motor stage of the little one under two years of age, they are curious about what does this feel like? What happens when I push a ball down in a bucket of water and it pops up? Like it's all curiosity.

It's problem solving in the most basic way, you know, in the sensory motor. And then we go.