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by Mariana Alessandri

# Be a winner, not a whiner



Some five-year-olds play chess competitively, including mine. This alone makes me queasy. But it's the environment, the chess culture, that propels me into nausea. Modelled on Texas football culture, the Texas chess circuit teaches children that it's OK to break the standard rules, like no eating chips at 9am and no running in the hallways, provided they crush the competition. As the children make their way to the gym to compete, the coach yells: "*Go out there and win!*" As they return from their games – winners and losers exiting the same doors wearing opposite expressions – they are met by a sea of parents and coaches asking: "*How'd it go?*" Their ears correct for this ambiguous question in time for their mouths to announce whether they won or lost. The winners get embraced physically and

dismissed linguistically as the adult in their life tells them, "*I knew it.*" The losers get denied hugs but are told that they still have time to make it up. In time, kids learn to be disappointed in themselves.

Younger players, like my son, are asked an even more disturbing question: "*Did you win or did you learn?*" Few notice that in that phrase, learning is linguistically equated with losing. That is, learning happens when you don't put enough effort in, when you screw up. Also problematic is the implication that you don't learn from winning. The goal of this dystopic linguistic universe is to lose (and learn) as little as possible. No wonder my son would rather win half a point by default if his opponent fails to show than play and lose. One night after a seven-hour tournament, I asked what his favourite part of the day was. It wasn't chess. He only enjoys chess when he wins, he said, and that day was full of losses. I told him that I believe that learning and having fun are more important than winning, even if the coaches don't. My son surprised me by saying that the coaches don't care that much about winning. "What do they care about?" I asked. "Losing," he replied. I recalled a sign posted in the

high school classroom we squatted in that day: "Be a winner, not a whiner."

Mister Rogers, whose fiftieth anniversary on television is this year, did not think that losing (or winning) was the most important part of playing, and I doubt that he would call what goes on in a chess tournament 'play'. If he were to ask my son how his game went, he would not expect a thumbs-up or thumbs-down. He might mean, "Did you have fun?" Or, "Was your partner nice?" Or, at most, perhaps, "Did you castle?". He didn't believe that losers magically learned, and he wouldn't support the goal to win-so-much-you-never-have-to-learn-again. Surely, he would disapprove of the increasingly competitive nature of children's activities. I recently complained that I was tired from a dance party I'd had with friends, and my son asked me if I'd won. It turns out that at his school dance parties they pick a winner.

My distaste for chess culture goes deeper than competition. The fault lies in the line we draw, early on, between play and work. Rogers referred to what goes on in preschool as 'play', and he believed that play is how children learn. We learn from winning, losing, and from non-competitive



games. Like bear cubs wrestling, it's impossible to distinguish playing from learning. It's adults who draw a line between them, and who inadvertently use it to teach kids that work is drudgery and play is useless. There are enough studies from Scandinavia on the soft skills learned from socialisation to argue, for example, for the inherent value of recess, but since administrators in the US deem play to be educationally useless, schools routinely cut it in favour of whatever they consider more academically rigorous. In my son's case, it's the computer.

The line between work and play leaves us philosophically impoverished, especially when we believe that one serves the other. Those who 'work for the weekend' learn to hate work. Aristotle started it: he called it childish to work for the sake of playing. He believed that only the opposite – play for the sake of working – could lead to happiness. Since happiness comes from the serious life committed to virtuous activity, for Aristotle, we should play in order that we might double down on our virtue-work. This sounds like Alex Soojung-Kim Pang's equally misguided advice in his 2016 book *Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less* – rest (or play) now so you can be more productive later. When one serves the other, we devalue both.

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My preschooler has not yet learned to hate homework: out of excitement he does it the night he gets it even though it's not due until five days later. My kindergartener, in contrast, already knows that's it's 'work', so he hates it. But he still loves the phonics workbooks that I buy him, because he hasn't realised that they're work too. Work is what I *have* to do, and play is what I do for fun. As a rule, nobody has to play anything, but when kids get pressured into winning, they start to think of play as work. At this rate, chess will soon become work for my son, and if it loses all trace of play, of fun, I predict he will quit.

Fast forward to adulthood. "I have to work," I recently told a stranger when he asked why my daily walk had ended. Why didn't I say, "I have to play"? Technically I belong to a group said to do knowledge-work, but it's also said

that we play with ideas. Last summer, I planned my classes from a pool floatie. The truth is, my work sometimes feels like play, but unless I complain about it, I won't be respected. I stopped telling my husband that I loved nursing my infant son when I sensed that it was registering to him like play rather than work. Calling work 'play' diminishes its value in the US, where working hard and hating work belong to the same breath. But what if we launched a play-revolution, and put Mister Rogers in charge? By blurring the line between work and play, we could finally get serious about play (a thing Kierkegaard noticed that kids do naturally). We could start by removing the sign telling kids to quit whining and start winning and replace it with a photo of wrestling bear cubs. One indication we've made progress would be re-experiencing chores as fun. ■

