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# Adventure Play

**Adam Shaughnessy**

**L**et's talk about fun. Frankly, I think it's underrated.

Fun is often listed as a synonym for frivolity. Fun isn't frivolous—not always, anyway. It's especially not frivolous if we think about it in the context of education.

Before becoming a writer and the author of *The Unbelievable FIB* books, I worked for twenty years as a classroom teacher, summer camp director, and district coordinator for out-of-school-time programs. Perhaps the most important lesson I learned during that time is that children learn best when that learning meets their own needs. And what's one universal need all children share? The need to have fun.

Throughout my career, I've tried to keep that truth at the forefront of my thinking and my practice. I've

tried to craft experiences for young people that are fun. Time and again, my efforts have brought me back to two mainstays of the childhood experience: story and play.

Story and play are important. Stories introduce young people to new ideas, roles, and horizons. Play invites children to explore those new realms of thought and discovery. More importantly, though, story and play are fun. Children delight in both. That delight invests story and play with tremendous power. Together, they're two of the most effective tools young people have to make sense of the world. That makes them invaluable tools for educators.

Over the years I've experimented with many different ways to integrate story and play into the activities I share with children. The most success I've had—and the most

fun!—has been with a brand of programming I call Adventure Play.

I describe Adventure Play as the child of the broader phenomenon of Adventure Programming, an experiential learning model that builds teamwork skills through physical challenges (often involving ropes courses or other environment-based structures). Adventure Play distinguishes itself from Adventure Programming in two ways. First, Adventure Play targets elementary and early middle school-aged children so physical challenges are reimagined as playful and cooperative games and puzzles. Second—and more significantly—Adventure Play places as much emphasis on story as it does on physical activity.

Adventure Play revolves around interactive and sophisticated stories called Adventures, which unfold through a blend of storytelling and



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cooperative games. The games occur in the context of the Adventure, so story and play are wholly integrated. Groups of young people assume the role of heroes in the story and play their way through Adventures.

The programming delivers a bounty of positive outcomes. Some of its benefits are physical. I often launch a new Adventure with the words, "Okay, let's go play a story!" The word choice there is purposeful. Adventures are interactive, with a focus on *active*. They're not stories to be read. While some of the puzzles can include times sitting at a table or a screen, the games at the heart of Adventure Play are running games, sneaking games, hiding games—whatever is appropriate for the space available.

That said, by placing games and puzzles in the context of a sophisticated story, Adventure Play does

also provide opportunities for academic enrichment with a focus on literacy. I create Artifacts for each Adventure—props that are specific to the story and help make each Adventure a more immersive experience. I've created rune stones, treasure maps, even complex models of buildings. Many Artifacts, though, are text-based. They're journals, letters, mock articles from periodicals—items that Adventurers read through and discuss to gather clues and make sense of the story.

One of my happiest discoveries as I began my work with Adventure Play came from observing Adventurers interacting with these text-based Artifacts. They fascinated kids who loved to read. That didn't surprise. But I *was* surprised to discover that even young people who didn't self-identify as readers also loved interacting with the text-based Artifacts. The reason quickly

became apparent. Those kids had been sucked in by the Adventure's overall story or by the associated games. Reading and constructing meaning from text wasn't being presented as an isolated and arbitrary task. It was a means to an end that kids were invested in. Over the years, one of the great joys of Adventure Play for me has been watching reluctant readers get excited about opportunities to read and engage with text.

And yet, another aspect of Adventure Play has been even more rewarding. That aspect relates to the social outcomes I've observed. The cooperative nature of Adventure Play embeds a social curriculum into the programming that offers practical opportunities for children to learn about conflict resolution and team building.

I have a confession to make here.

Despite my belief that educators have an essential role to play in helping children to develop as socially and emotionally healthy individuals, I am skeptical of most character-education programs on the market that claim to help achieve that goal. To be fair, I haven't experienced every such program, so my skepticism is not meant as a blanket criticism. In my experience, though, too many character-education programs succeed in getting young people to parrot a desired behavior in a contrived setting, yet fail to leave children with a commitment to that behavior.

I genuinely feel like Adventure Play is different (though I admit to a

certain bias on the subject). The emotional growth I've observed in participants has seemed more genuine. I wondered about that difference until I came across a quote often attributed to Elie Wiesel: "People become the stories they hear and the stories they tell."

Those words strike me as intensely true and powerful. The statement suggests to me that people become the stories they inhabit. And children inhabit Adventures in a unique way. They're the heroes of the story. My rules for Adventure Play are be kind, be brave, and be wise. In short, be like the heroes in stories. Now, I don't pretend for a moment that every child who participates in an Adventure

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instantly and always becomes kind, brave, and wise! But I have found that through working together, playing together, and assuming the roles of heroes in a story in which they actively participate, children who engage in Adventure Play do experience meaningful and organic opportunities to overcome conflict and better understand the effects of their actions on other people.

That, to me, is a tremendous outcome. And it would not be possible if children were not having fun along the way.

Frivolous? I don't think so.

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**Adam Shaughnessy** is the author of *The Unbelievable FIB books*, published by *Algonquin Young Readers*. His debut novel, *The Trickster's Tale* (formerly titled *The Entirely True Story of the Unbelievable FIB*), was selected for the 2015 *Middle Grade Buzz Panel* at *BookExpo America*, and it was chosen by the *American Booksellers Association* for both the *Indies Introduce* list and the *Indies Next* list. Adam is also an educator with twenty years of experience. He lives in Connecticut with his wife, Jane, his daughter, May, and his cat, Sydney. Adam is represented by Ammi-Joan Paquette at the *Erin Murphy Literary Agency*.

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