



## What Is Your Play Personality?

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I have a confession to make. I don't like parents who are good at playing with their kids. I could have stated my feelings about these 'playful parents' in stronger terms, but I don't want you to think I've gone mad.

When I see fun-loving moms and dads who are seemingly naturally gifted at playing with their kids, it gets under my skin a bit. I see them and their kids both having tons of fun, and I get a little green with envy. They are good at play and being playful with their kids, and I am not. Play and fun seems easy for them, and for me it is anything but.

I wish this confession left me feeling better, but it really doesn't. My real issue is that I simply don't consider myself to be all that fun-loving or good at being silly. Maybe that's because I didn't play much as a child, other than in the context of sports. Maybe it's because my parents weren't very playful themselves, which is likely because their parents weren't all that playful. Maybe it's because of how I am wired and where I focus my attention. Whatever, the reasons I'm still on the outside looking in when it comes to play. And I am not the only one. Turns out there are many parents like me. But there is good news for all of us.

When it comes to play and playful engagement there are many wrong assumptions and misconceptions. For example, it's easy to assume that play is at best unimportant and optional, and at worst a complete waste of time. Yet the research is clear – play is essential for optimal child development. In fact, there is an undeniable need to be able and willing to engage your child playfully in order to both connect and correct. (For more insight about the importance of play, watch [Give Your Child Playfulness](#) by Dr. Karyn Purvis and the TED Talk by Dr. Stuart Brown entitled [Play is More Than Fun](#) (videos found on [www.empoweredtoconnect.com](http://www.empoweredtoconnect.com))

In addition, parents often mistakenly believe that play necessarily equates to being "silly", and being much too mature or uncomfortable to be silly, they readily assume that engaging in play and being playful is beyond their reach. However, there are many different ways to play, and "silly" is not required.

I first discovered this when I read Dr. Stuart Brown's amazing book entitled [Play – How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul](#). In his book, Dr. Brown talks about what he calls "play personalities." Discovering my play personality has been a useful tool to help me develop a more accurate understanding of play and how I can engage in it. These play personalities are not meant to be limiting but rather help parents understand the different ways in which they may be wired to play and engage their children playfully. In fact, it is clear that many parents have elements of more than one type of play personality.

The play personalities that Dr. Brown highlights are described and briefly illustrated below (in the context of the parent-child relationship). So now that you know about the importance of play and that there is more than one way to play, let's start discovering your play personality and start playing!





### **The Joker**

The “joker” play personality represents the most obvious and often the most extreme style of playful parent. It is an inherently fun, silly, nonsensical style of play, and can even be sometimes outrageous. It starts when children are very young, with parents engaging children in ‘baby talk’ and other forms of childishness, and graduates through the years to include the ‘class clown’ and those who enjoy practical jokes and even acting downright foolish. For example, a parent can invent a silly personality that comes “alive” not only in times of calm and connectedness, but also in situations where you he knows his child is likely to become agitated or dysregulated.

### **The Kinesthete**

The focus of this play personality is movement. This includes athletes and also those who are most alive when they are on the move walking, running, swimming, hiking, dancing, etc. For those with this play personality, the focus is not so much on winning or losing a game, but simply being engaged in physical activity. For example, a parent can engage in physical activity by going for a walk or jog, swinging her child on a swing, jumping on the trampoline, swimming in the pool, or going for a bike ride. The added benefit of this type of play is that these activities are great for the child’s brain and can often provide much needed sensory inputs.

### **The Explorer**

Exploring is the preferred means of play for those with this play personality. Exploring can be physical (as in going to new places) or it can be intellectual (discovering new ideas or information), relational (meeting new people), or emotional (searching for a new response to music, art, or a story). For example, a parent can take his child on a hike through the woods looking for animals or a place to build a new fort, set up a trip to the local art or children’s museum, or begin a nightly routine of reading through an adventure series together. The key when exploring is to do the activity together and to share in the experience together.

### **The Competitor**

This play personality enters the world of play through engaging in competitive games with the object of winning. This can be done in a small group setting (i.e., one-on-one with your child) or as part of a larger group (i.e., team sports/games). Those with this type of play personality like to keep score and typically they like to finish on top. However, it is important that the focus remain on the play and the resulting fun, not the winning and losing. For example, a parent can play any number of sports with her child. The parent can also take up a board game (e.g., family game night) or on a limited basis play the child’s favorite video or online game with him or her. Parents can also organize a family game in backyard or even in the car. Again, if the primary objective remains the play and engaging together in the play (as opposed to determining a winner and a loser), virtually any type of competition can be healthy and connecting.





### **The Director**

Planning, organizing, and orchestrating scenes and events are what marks this play personality. Homemade movies, amateur music recordings, planning a party, cooking a large meal for the holidays, and so much more. For this play personality, the world is but a puppet and the parent holds the strings. For example, a mom with a large family can recruit all of the willing (and even some of the semi-willing) kids to star in the family's own production of *The Sound of Music*. But it can be much simpler too – such as a dad organizing the kids' roles in pulling off the family barbeque or a mom delegating and orchestrating the preparation of the Sunday meal.

### **The Collector**

This play personality is all about assembling and/or maintaining a collection of interesting objects or experiences. Collecting can be done all alone or with others who have similar interests. For example, a parent can engage in play with his child by becoming interested in collecting whatever is popular with kids at the time, or inviting his child to become interested in (and help him expanded) his collection of sports trading cards, Star Wars figures, etc. Likewise, a parent can engage in this style of play with a child that is fascinated in animals and decide to embrace that interest by taking his child to zoos all over the country...or even around the world.

### **The Artist/Creator**

Making things is the focus and source of joy for this play personality. Think arts and crafts of virtually any kind as well as inventing, designing, decorating, and constructing. These creations can be functional, artistic, or simply playful. Whatever the purpose, the point is to create something. For example, a mom can set aside time to help her children draw, paint or design. A dad can invite his child into the garage to help him design, plan, and build play house or toy box. One family has an annual playful tradition of helping each child decorate their own gingerbread house during the holidays. In turn, each child engages mom and dad to uniquely express themselves while enjoying the playfulness of making quite a mess.

### **The Storyteller**

This play personality focuses on imagination. It may be the predominant personality for those who love to read, write, draw cartoons, or watch movies. Those with this play personality are able to create an imaginative world that can permeate almost any activity or context. For example, the dad who plays basketball with his son in the driveway but rather than focusing on the score or the outcome of the game, transforms the game into a one-on-one contest of Larry Bird vs. Magic Johnson. In his best announcer's voice, he narrates a game filled with astounding plays, tense moments, and heroic last-second shots. Or a mom that is quick to offer a story – often in a humorous way – around the dinner table or in the car.

