

THE UNFILTERED

# Voices of play

Insights from a children's conference

*Uski zubaani*

*Jiski kahani...*



# Voices of Play: A Conference led by Children

An online event that was conducted on July 25th

## Kids from all over India took centre stage (literally!)

*A panel of children invited adults to hear what they had to say about play.*

bachpan  
manao  
BADHTE JAO

SPACE 2  
GROW  
Consulting for Good

REACH  
COLLECTIVE

rZamba

shiksharth



swa**taleem**  
aatman ||६३|| academy  
*I've willed it, i'll buiLD it.*

Bhumi

SWATANTRA TALIM

UMOYA SPORTS  
PLAY BEYOND BARRIERS

PROTSAHAN INDIA FOUNDATION  
PROTSAHAN  
India Foundation

VIDHYALAY UDHYAM  
ASSOCIATION



# What is play?

Is Singing play?

Is Rifle shooting play?

Is wandering around without an agenda play?



## Does this look like play to you?

IF YOUR ANSWER IS NO...





THEN THINK ABOUT IT...

# Who decides what is play?

THE ADULT

OR

THE CHILD

NOW THINK ABOUT THIS...

## Who *really* is the expert on play?





# This is what children told us when we asked them - what is play?



*Mere liye gaana hi khelna hai*

*I used to do rifle shooting - **that is how I discovered one of my strengths** which no one could tell me about.*

*I enjoy street theatre and love acting (Nukad Natak) and performing at the Protsahan organization. (In response to what do you like to play)*

*Today we had some play time at school where ma'am played with us. **She was telling us a lot of rules about the game. I did not feel like I was playing.***

*Mere liye khel woh hai jismein main khud niyam banao aur mujhe koi roke yaan toke nahin. Main kuch bhi karoon, kheloon yaan koodon, yaan idhar udhar ochloon. **(I think play is when I make my own rules** and no one interrupts with what is right or wrong. I feel like I am playing when I do what my heart desires - hop, run, jump here and there.)*

***Play helps me get over the fatigue** that comes with studies, tuition etc. When I am playing - at least for those few hours I forget all my worries - whether it is about an exam or anything else.*

*Bas, ek enjoyable game hona chahiye aur saath mein friends hone chahiye toh bohot mazza aata hai.*

*Play feels to me like therapy and **I feel free as a butterfly.***

*I love playing outside since I feel better when I am out and there is fresh air.*



# This is what children told us when we asked them - what is play?

Every day at home, at schools and in anganwadis 'adults' create play opportunities for children.

But do children feel like they played?

Adults can't help being adults and associate 'outcomes' even with play, in a productivity, accomplishment-focused culture.

Play is a <b>unique and subjective experience</b> . What may be play to you may not be play to me.	<i>Mere liye gaana hi khelna hai</i> I enjoy street theatre and love acting (Nukad Natak) and performing at the Protsahan organization. (In response to what do you like to play)	<b>It's a way to be present in the moment</b> and feel content, both of which can boost well-being. Play helps children reset their minds.
To a child play is <b>purposeless, voluntary, and pleasurable</b> .	<i>Today we had some play time at school where ma'am played with us. She was telling us a lot of rules about the game. I did not feel like I was playing.</i>	<i>Play helps me get over the fatigue that comes with studies, tuition etc. When I am playing - at least for those few hours I forget all my worries - whether it is about an exam or anything else.</i>
	<i>Mere liye khel woh hai jismein main khud niyam banao aur mujhe koi roke yaan toke nahin. Main kuch bhi karoon, kheloon yaan koodon, yaan idhar udhar ochloon. (I think play is when I make my own rules and no one interrupts with what is right or wrong. I feel like I am playing when I do what my heart desires - hop, run, jump here and there.)</i>	<i>Bas, ek enjoyable game hona chahiye aur saath mein friends hone chahiye toh bohot mazza aata hai.</i>
<b>PLAY IS A STATE OF BEING.</b> Although we often engage in doing while playing, the experience and state of mind are at the heart of it.	<i>Play feels to me like therapy and I feel free as a butterfly.</i>	<i>I love playing outside since I feel better when I am out and there is fresh air.</i>



*Mujhe school se zyada,  
apni gully mein kehne  
mein mazza aata hai.*

## How often do we ask children their opinions on anything, even PLAY

*First time humse poocha  
gaya - humein kaunsa game  
pasand hai, whether we get  
the time and space to play,  
whether we have any problems,  
what we like. Humein  
nazarandaaz nahin  
kiya Everyone thinks humare  
liye padhai zyada zaroori hai.*

*Dost ke bina khel  
adhura hai*



A silhouette of an adult and a child on a playground structure against a warm sunset background. The adult is standing on the left, leaning over the structure, while the child is sitting on the right. The background is a warm orange and yellow gradient, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The structure is a metal frame with vertical bars.

**Have adults, adulterated play?**

**We have taken  
away the  
simplicity of play  
and reimagined it  
into something  
that makes sense  
to us.**



**What adults & society do not understand about play?**



WHAT ADULTS DO NOT UNDERSTAND ABOUT PLAY

# That children need a safe space to play

BUT HOW CHILD FRIENDLY ARE OUR CITIES?

*All we children want is a big and safe space to play. There are so many parks in the city but many a time we find adults there - sometimes those who have consumed alcohol.*

*I want a park for children where only children are allowed (or maybe an adult accompanied by children). That space should not have any people who are smoking or drinking. Then I would find it safe.*

*We should get a chance to play outside too. Humara shareer bhi develop hona chahiye. When we play outside, we hear a lot of comments from boys. We should ignore that if we want to move ahead and feel confident.*

*I want a big playground, like a cricket field and it should be safe.*

In the primary research done with Mothers living in Metro cities and Tier 2 cities in the past 4-5 years, almost all **mothers mentioned - there was no safe space for their children to play.** They did not find parks close to home and travelling a distance to take the child to the park every day was not possible.

**It is not surprising children are veering towards screens as a means of entertainment.**





WHAT ADULTS DO NOT UNDERSTAND ABOUT PLAY

# Freedom is important while play

WHETHER IT IS THE FREEDOM OF SPACE OR CHOICE ABOUT WHAT TO PLAY

*A park is a public place. There are all sorts of people in a park, of all age groups. So we have to be more careful about our protection and security. **In a ground, there are only players and hence we can play freely.***

*We have started a code club in our school so that girls also learn to make the games they would like to play.*

***For play, there is no limit.** When we play with friends we do not get a sense of time that is why play and play together is important.*



WHAT ADULTS DO NOT UNDERSTAND ABOUT PLAY

# We don't have child friendly public spaces

DESPITE PLAY BEING SO INTEGRAL TO CHILDHOOD.

Children, despite being thoughtful and imaginative, are often overlooked in city planning, resulting in a lack of safe and engaging spaces where they can truly thrive



*Mujhe saaf suthra playground hona chahiye. Ek shade toh hona chahiye hume dhoop se bachane ke liye. Mai chahti hun ki vahan bohot saare fool hon taaki dikhne mai playground accha lage. Peene ke liye paani bhi hona chahiye. Currently, in the area where I live, heavy rainfall causes water to collect and not drain properly in the park. This standing water eventually leads to a bad smell, making the park unusable for everyone. As a result, no one can play there because of the unpleasant odour and unhygienic conditions.*

”



# In a child's mind play and learning are inseparable.

*If I were to become a principal of a school for a day, I would teach students the subjects that they are really interested in and also get play equipment in school.*

*We should get at least half a day to play*

*Agar hum learning aur play ko mila dein, humein poora din seekhne ko mil raha hai. Phir poora din productive ho jayega. Jo concept hum khel ke madhyam se seekhtein hain, usse hum life-time yaad rakh paatein hain. Study aur play ko saath mein mila dein toh poora din bhi kum padega.*

*Bade kehtein hain, padhai zaroori hai, kyonki padhai se job milti hai. Par khelne se energy milti hai aur kuch naya seekhne ko milta hai, yeh bade log bhool jaatein hain.*

*Play is connected with innocence and children are innocent. When we grow up - humari innocence kho jaati hai - isiliye shayad bade kehtein hain - padho - woh samajhdar ho chuke hain.*



***Whether you play or study - the important thing is you learn from it and have fun***

**Adults see play and learning as separate and hence 'ration' play time for children.**

**Adults evaluate everything from the lens of use-worthiness.** However, learning cannot always be overt, immediate and tangible.

The learning process can be subconscious. The mind makes connections in fallow time and play allows children the fallow time to make connections that are vital for the growth of their brain.



For a child, the world of play and learning – are not compartmentalized.

“

*My child is playing on the swing and as she swings she repeats the multiplication table she has learnt.*

Play and learning are inter-twined



“

**Books mein karne ke liye nahin hota hai. With toys – karke dekh sakta hai kaisa hoga.** *They are able to understand easily, learn well.*

A child uses / applies his mind when he interacts with a toy

Arranging rings or putting together pieces of a puzzle – all involves the child using his mind to think. (Lower SEC mom)

“

*These books are meant for play – it has pictures of animals – the kids are supposed to set the picture (implying a simple jig saw puzzle). The animal puzzle has parts that can be removed and then the child has to set it. During the process of piecing it together, the child is thinking of how to set to get it right. (kaisa set karna...mind me soch raha hai)*

*There is another toy, which has steps of different colors. It is meant for younger kids. The kid will learn from this too. The lowest one is the biggest and it keeps decreasing in size. The child has to think of which is small, which is big, and how to place which one where – these are all the things in their mind while playing.*







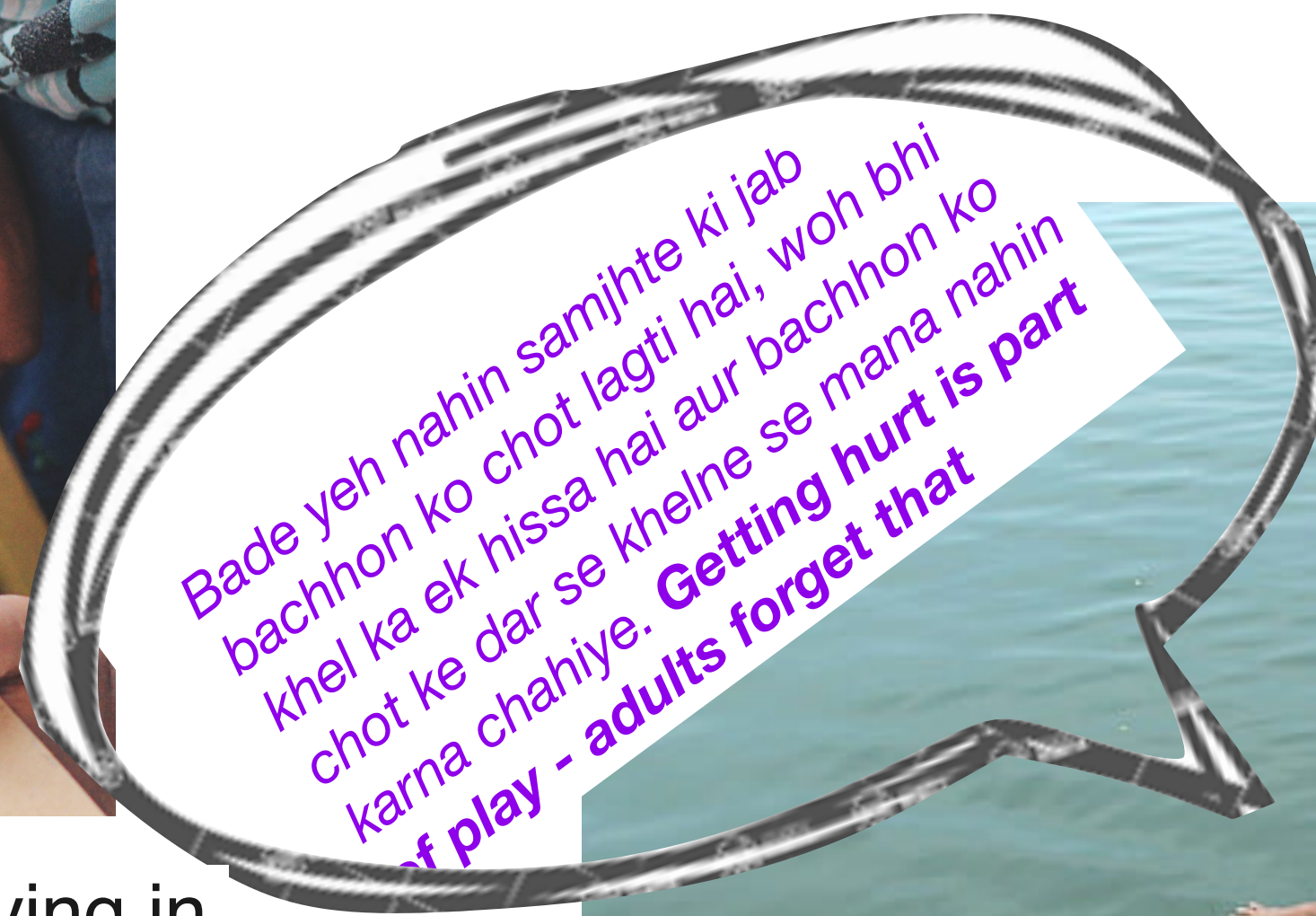
WHAT ADULTS DO NOT UNDERSTAND ABOUT PLAY

# That children think falling is part of play

TILL WE CONDITION THEM TO THINK OTHERWISE



*When I play with my fingers,  
whatever pain is there in my hand,  
goes away.*



In the primary research done with Mothers living in Metro cities and Tier 2 cities in the past 4-5 years, 8 / 10 mothers mentioned - they did not allow their children to go out of the home to play due to the fear that something might go wrong. This meant their children did not play on the street in front of the house or even a neighbour's house.





WHAT ADULTS DO NOT UNDERSTAND ABOUT PLAY

# That children do not associate certain games with certain genders

TILL WE CONDITION THEM TO THINK OTHERWISE

*If there was no gender bias, I would love to play volleyball or football but we do not get a chance to play these things.*

*Even with online games - girls stick to games like Ludo, while boys play games like Freefire.*

*I wish as a girl, I had the opportunity to create this kind of game.*

*We live in the modern world but even in this day and age, a girl feels insecure.*

*If I had to choose between playing Badminton or Football I would choose football since there are two teams and while playing with each other, we also end up making a lot of friends.*

**The way we talk to children become their inner voice**

From a tender age, society conditions girls into gendered play, subtly shaping their aspirations and roles through a lens of stereotypes that limits their boundless potential.

*Though we play football, cricket and volleyball - the boys play separately. They think girls are physically weak. **Ladkiyon ko kamzor samjha jata hai. Unko aisa lagta hai.***

*I am very curious to know why certain games are associated with a specific gender and hence would like to play football to try it out.*





# That protecting girls does not keep them safe but makes them weak.

And shrinks their arena for not just games but for everything else too)

*Mere colony mai, hume log  
gandi nazar se dekhte hain.  
Raat mai toh bilkul bhi ghar se  
jaana mana hai.*

*Girls can also play the online game Freefire though that is a game that warrants skill and time and girls do have household responsibilities too. Hence they have time restrictions. But If given a chance, we can also make our presence felt. These days online games also have international competitions. Humein chance diya jaye toh.*

*Ladkiyon ko bahar jaake khelne ki permission nahin milti hai. Poochna padta hai. Boys waise hi nikal jaatein hain.*

*My parents frequently remind me that I am growing up, so I can't play in public spaces like parks or streets. They tell me the neighbours would find it inappropriate for an older girl to play outside.*

*I can play whenever I want, as there are no barriers or restrictions. I can go to the playground far from home. (Boy)*

*My parents also don't allow me to play that often because they have a constant fear that someone will kidnap me, our society is not safe.*

Gender and permission are seemingly inseparable



*Girls are also calm and hence like games like Ludo and board games and boys tend to be more aggressive and hence like games that involve shooting. (Though there is some truth in this, this is a stereotype).*

Since girls are discouraged from playing due to lack of permission or expectation of housework, **they are out of touch with play and even when they find opportunities once in a way, their stamina and physical energy do not support them.**

There is a societal stigma against grown-up girls playing, rooted in the taboo of worrying about what men or boys might say about them.

Many girls are still confined within the 'Lakshman Rekha' of tradition and societal expectations, limiting their freedom and opportunities despite their growing aspirations.

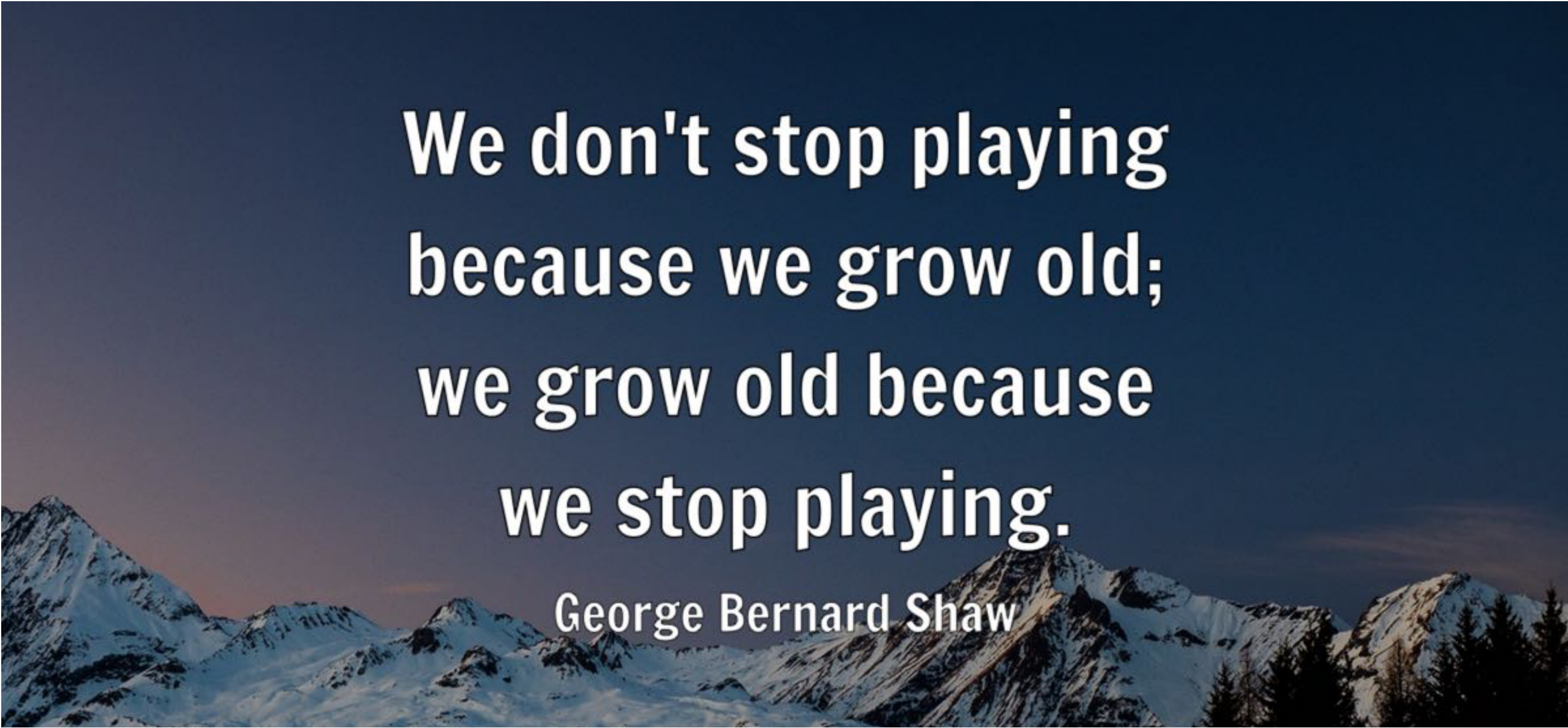


WHAT ADULTS DO NOT UNDERSTAND ABOUT PLAY

# That even children in high school are children. All children enjoy playing.

*After such a long time we have discussed play, as we are currently in high school and have lots of study pressure. this discussion brushes up my memories. not only mine but also with my parents and the smile that comes on their faces brighten up my day...!*

*As we grow older, we have a higher study load and hence we tend to play less. We are also a little wary of others infiltrating our space and that too dissuades girls from playing. Baraf-paani mein logo galat tareeke se touch kartein hain.*

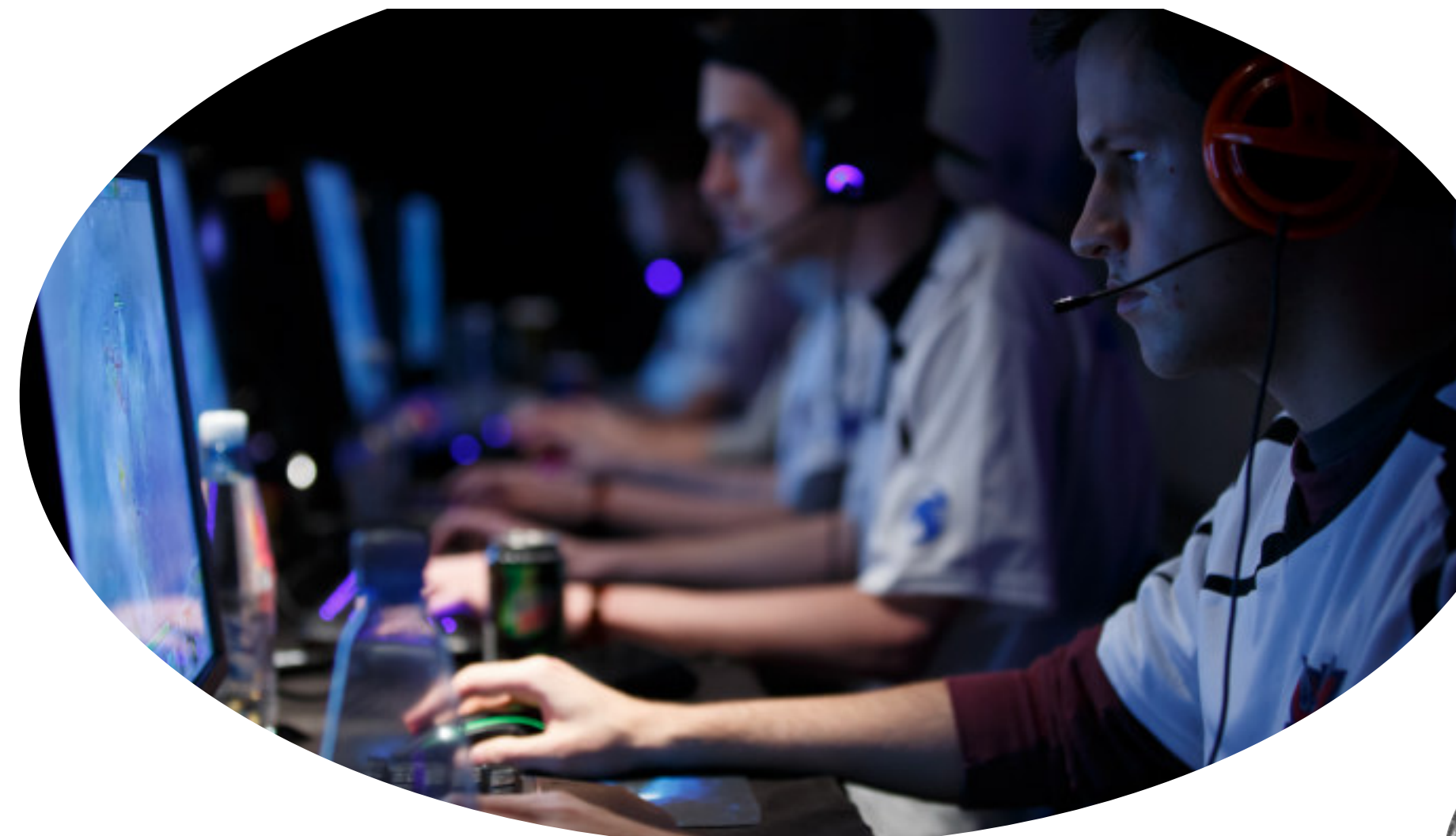
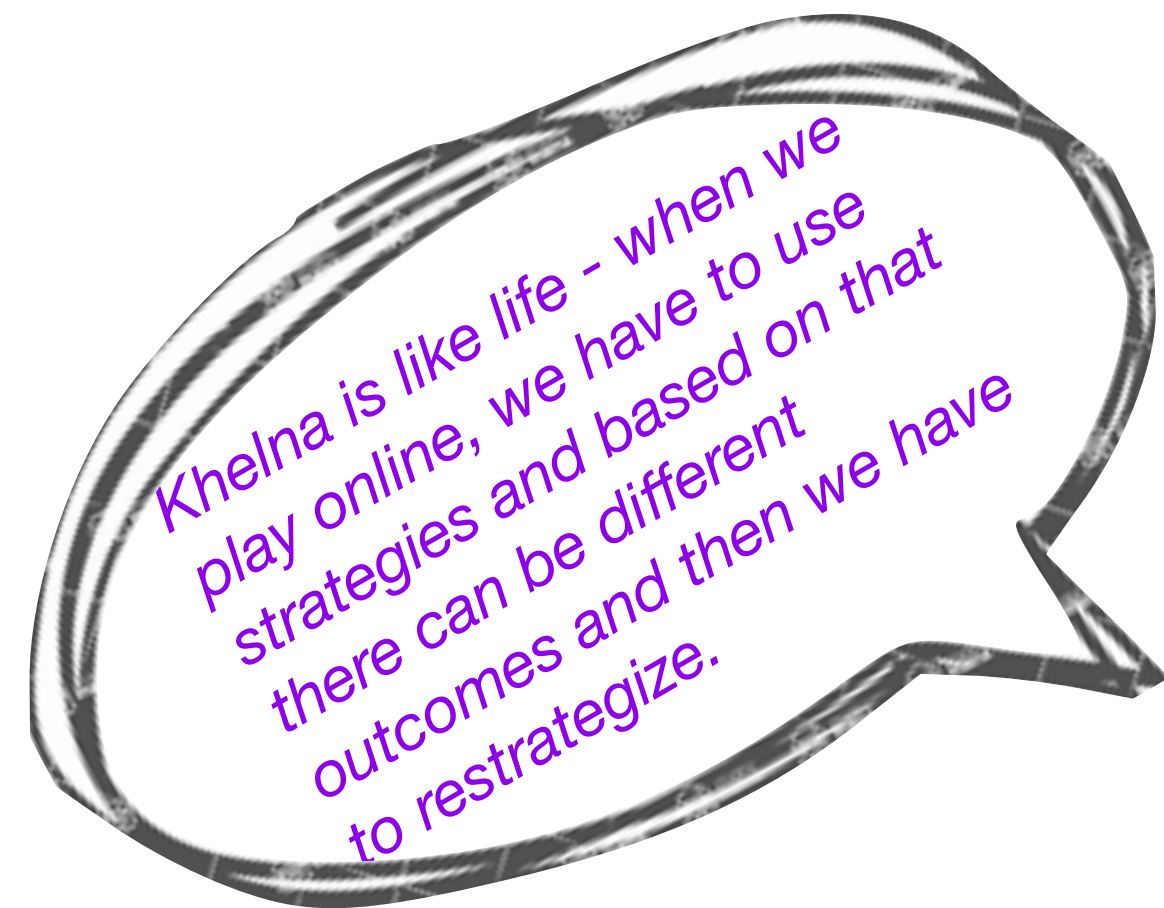
A rectangular image with a dark blue sky and snow-capped mountain peaks at the bottom. The quote is written in white, bold, sans-serif font, centered in the upper half of the image.

We don't stop playing  
because we grow old;  
we grow old because  
we stop playing.

George Bernard Shaw

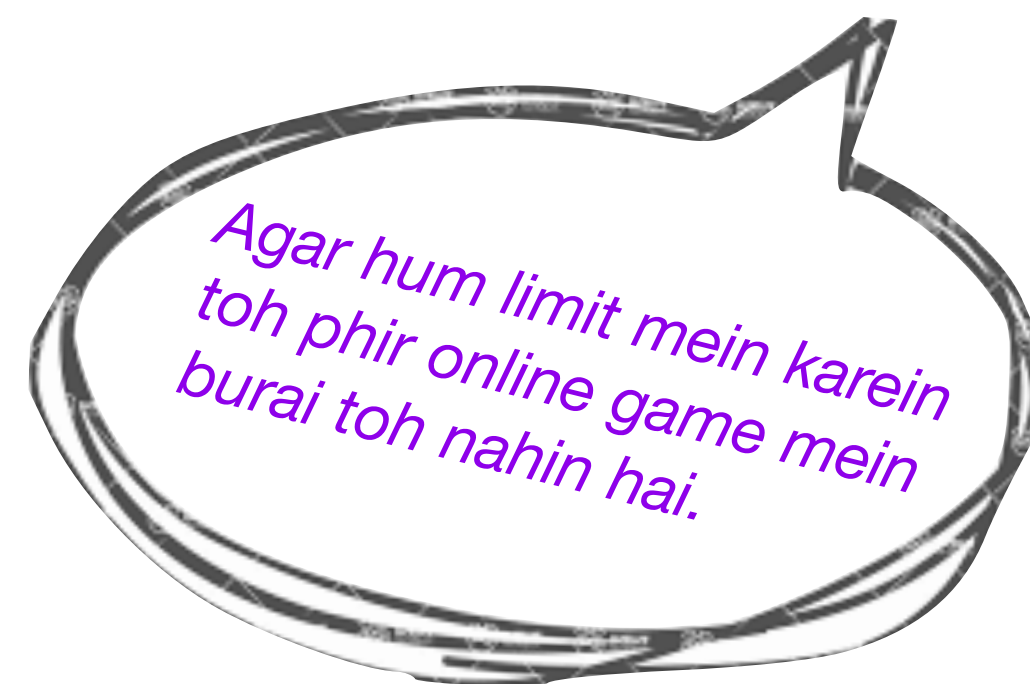


# That online games are not a complete waste of time

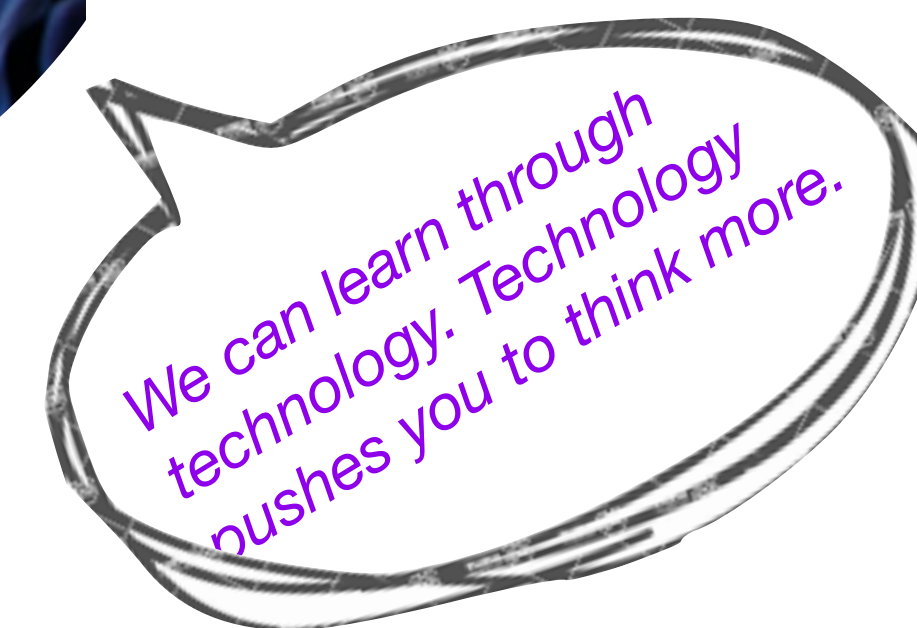


The e-sports industry is growing. It is a new normal - games, sports and a way in which children play.

When we **look at e-sports from the lens of 'children and physical disabilities'**, it could help build confidence and more importantly **be themselves and still have access to play** and the benefits that come along with it.



*Pokemon requires you to strategise - since different challenges can come your way. You have also to build a team of six to become a champion of your specific region.*



*E-sport is not easy. Playing e-sports is not bad. It involves a thinking process. It awakens your mind.*

*I love online games since I meet children from other countries and also get to learn and know a bit about their culture. At school or home, I have a limited circle but while playing online games, I am able to break out of that circle.*



Children learning by themselves  
always associated with positive  
emotions



**There is no power  
struggle when the child  
is learning on his own  
through a game. Kids  
very often visualize the  
characters in the games  
as their alter-ego.  
Learning via an authority  
figure creates resistance.**



*At school he is made to learn v/s through games he is learning on his own. At school – whether he pays attention, listens to his teacher – is his choice – he may / may not exercise it. When learning through games – he ends up following it / listening without realizing.*



# The media, through which knowledge is acquired, are not watertight.

Kids see / observe things using one medium and are inspired to learn about / make those things through other media.



*Whenever she watches videos she opts only for play-doh videos where she sees them making shapes and mixing colors. Whenever she views a video on the same day she wants to try doing that herself. She will not give up till she has made it. Once she sees the video – that is enough. She will not see the video again. She makes objects and imagines them to be what they show on the video.*





WHAT ADULTS DO NOT UNDERSTAND ABOUT PLAY

# The energy of every child flows towards play

Why are all children attracted to play and sports? **Even those with physical disability overcome their limitations and play in whatever way possible.**

Play is an **experience during which their mind is free** and not burdened.

When sports people show sportsmanship, **the space becomes non judgemental and accepting.** It is a space where they can do something to make their parents proud which is the desire of every child.

*My challenge is that I am a very short person and people tease me a lot about it. I was not able to play with my friends for this reason. They would not accept me. I took to shooting - since in that game - you don't need height or anything. You just need to focus. It was very easy for me to go there and play. I am a pistol shooter and have played till the national level. Every day I spent two hours shooting.*

*I have some academic challenges as well. I cannot read and write well. I had a problem filling out forms and that's when my father and mother helped me. My father introduced me to shooting. At first, I tried rifle shooting but that requires a lot of strength and hence my coach suggested pistol shooting. **Even with pistol shooting, I had challenges. I had to shoot with my left hand and I couldn't do that because of my thumb. Then I started to shoot using my right hand and left hand in combination.** That was also very difficult but I have managed to do it. (Girl child)*

*When I could not run, friends would tease me, 'You are not able to run.' I have cerebral palsy and I feel weak in my left leg. **Then I took to Carrom.** I play with my brother. At school, I take part in all the Carrom tournaments and also win a lot of those.*



# **When adults ask children - what do you learn from play?**

IS THIS AN ADULT BIAS?



# They expect to hear tangible learning outcomes

**Kids perhaps they say things the adults want to hear**

*This play teaches us ginti*

*The game teaches us friendship, playing with discipline and sportsmanship*

*Is game se humara dhyaan ek jagah rehta hai.*

*I think we learn more about team spirit and social skills ,empathy, harmony ,strategy.*

**Children innately understand that learning and play are intertwined, yet for them, this connection remains subtle and implicit; they engage in play not with a predetermined learning outcome but with a pure, instinctive curiosity that fosters growth organically.**

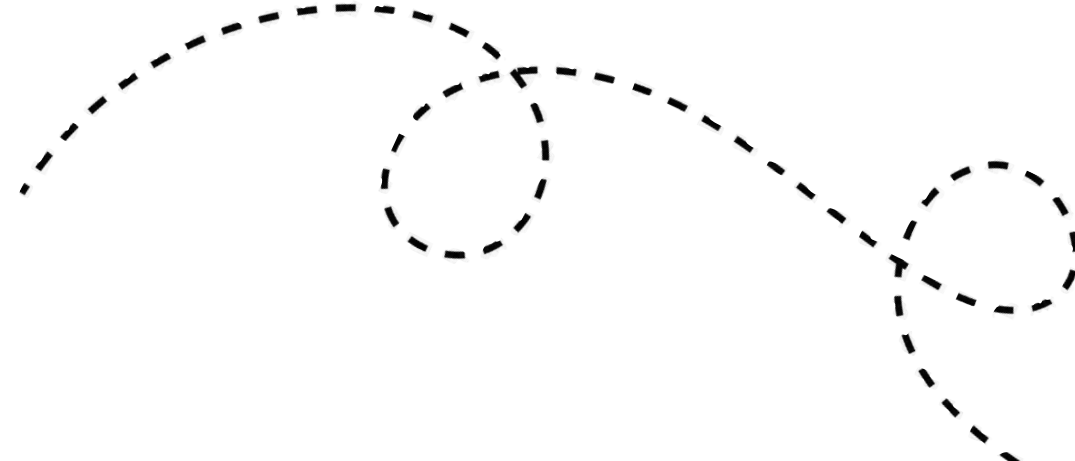
**Do adults know how to engage with kids?**

**Do children really use their voice in the presence of adults ?**



# Anyone who has been with a child would be all too familiar with their demand for 5 minutes - panch minute

HAVE YOU WONDERED WHY?

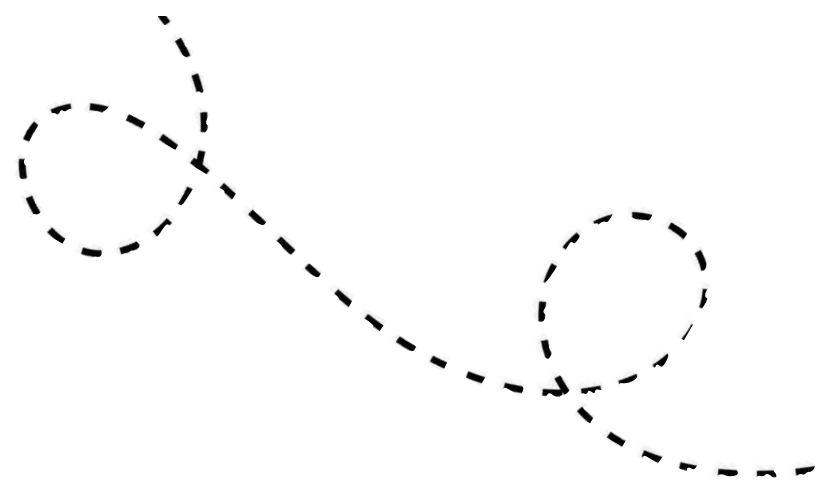


The reason they ask for the 5 minutes is that **5 minutes is a transit space between their world and ours**. The world of innocence and the world of reality.

What is **commendable** is how easily they can traverse that distance between that **imaginary world and the real world** in just 5 mins and that too several times a day.



**But what about adults?**



**How many years does it take for an adult to enter a child's world and really understand it?** For some it takes a lifetime, for others, it never happens.



# Listening to the unfiltered voices of children

REMINDS US ONCE AGAIN THAT

Children embody the seeds of their future selves, and in their innocence and wisdom, they often reveal insights that surpass the understanding of adults, showing that true wisdom often starts with them.

IT IS NO WONDER

**The child is the father of the man and  
Little girls are indeed wiser than men.**





AND HENCE

**What children suggest to the  
adults & society that do not understand play?**



# Come...play **with me**

bachpan  
manao   
BADHTE JAO

Before adults question us about why we are playing, for how long etc. they should try playing the game with us. They should start learning about what we enjoy. I want adults to understand why we enjoy play.





**Compiled by**

