



PERMISSION

TO

PLAY



The state of adult play in 2026:

What parents really think about
play, enjoyment, and modern life.

JUNE 2026



THE PLAY PROBLEM

Somewhere along the way, life became something to optimise.

Today, almost every aspect of our lives comes with a goal attached. We don't run to clear our heads; we run to improve our VO2 max and appease our followers. We don't walk for the sake of walking; we do it to hit 10,000 steps. We don't read because we're curious; we read to optimise our knowledge. Holidays become content quests. Hobbies become side hustles. Rest becomes recovery.

We're living through the age of optimisation, where every spare moment seems to demand a purpose, a metric, or a measurable return. As economist Charles Goodhart once said, "When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure."

But the findings in our latest report, *Permission to Play*, reveal something rather encouraging. Speaking to child psychologists, Nord Anglia Education experts, and more than 500 parents, we've found that we haven't forgotten the importance of play.



We understand its value, remember the joy it brought us as children, and overwhelmingly recognise its role in wellbeing.

The challenge isn't that we no longer value play.

It's that it has become harder to protect.

Between work, family commitments, and the pressure to always be productive, play increasingly competes for space in our lives.

Children haven't forgotten. They play simply because it brings them joy.

Perhaps that's why play matters more than ever.

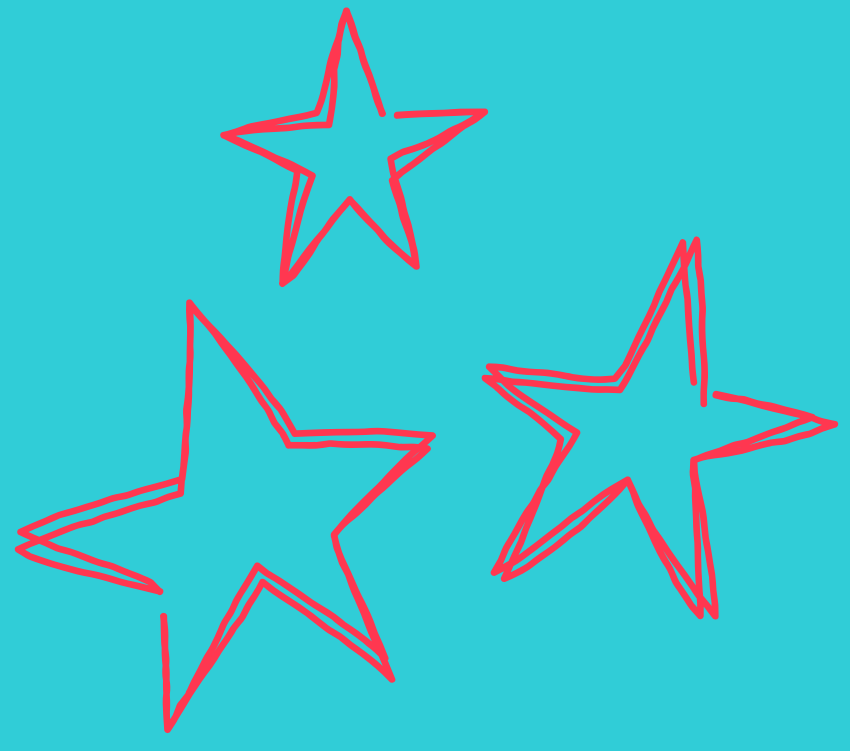
Because maybe the question isn't whether we've forgotten how to play.

Maybe we've simply forgotten to give ourselves permission.

“When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.”

CHARLES GOODHART · ECONOMIST

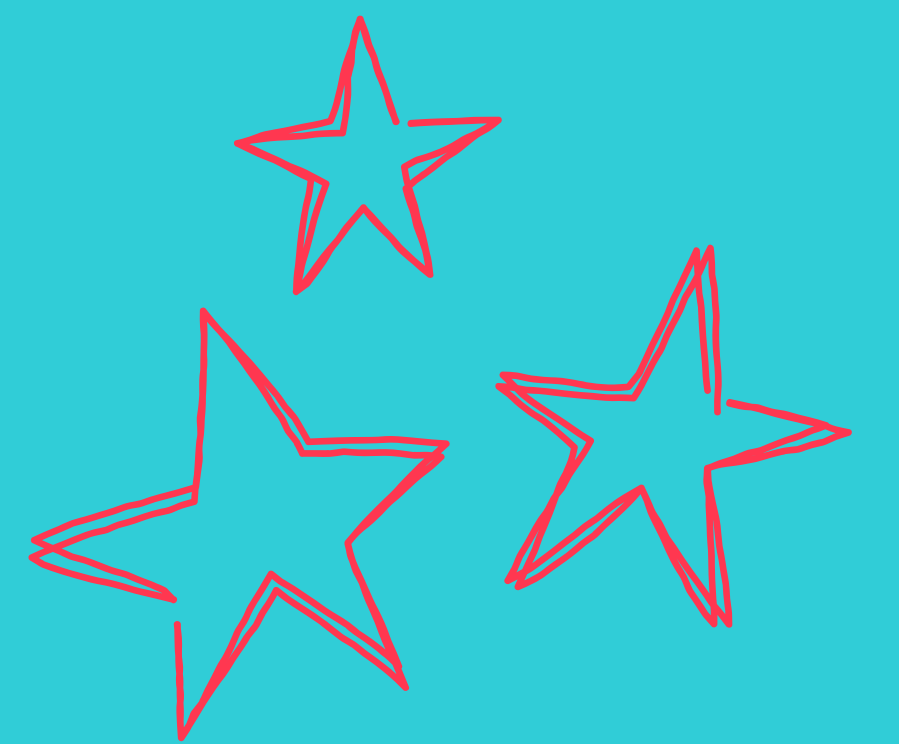




WE HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN HOW TO PLAY

***60% of parents say
they played in the
last week.***

For all the talk of burnout, busyness, and modern pressures, parents haven't abandoned play. In fact, many still make time for activities they enjoy and overwhelmingly recognise the value of play in their lives. The challenge isn't a lack of awareness. It's something more subtle. We know play matters. The question is why it feels increasingly difficult to make space for it.



SO WHY DOES IT FEEL HARDER THAN EVER?

50% +

More than 50% of parents feel guilty spending time on activities purely for enjoyment.

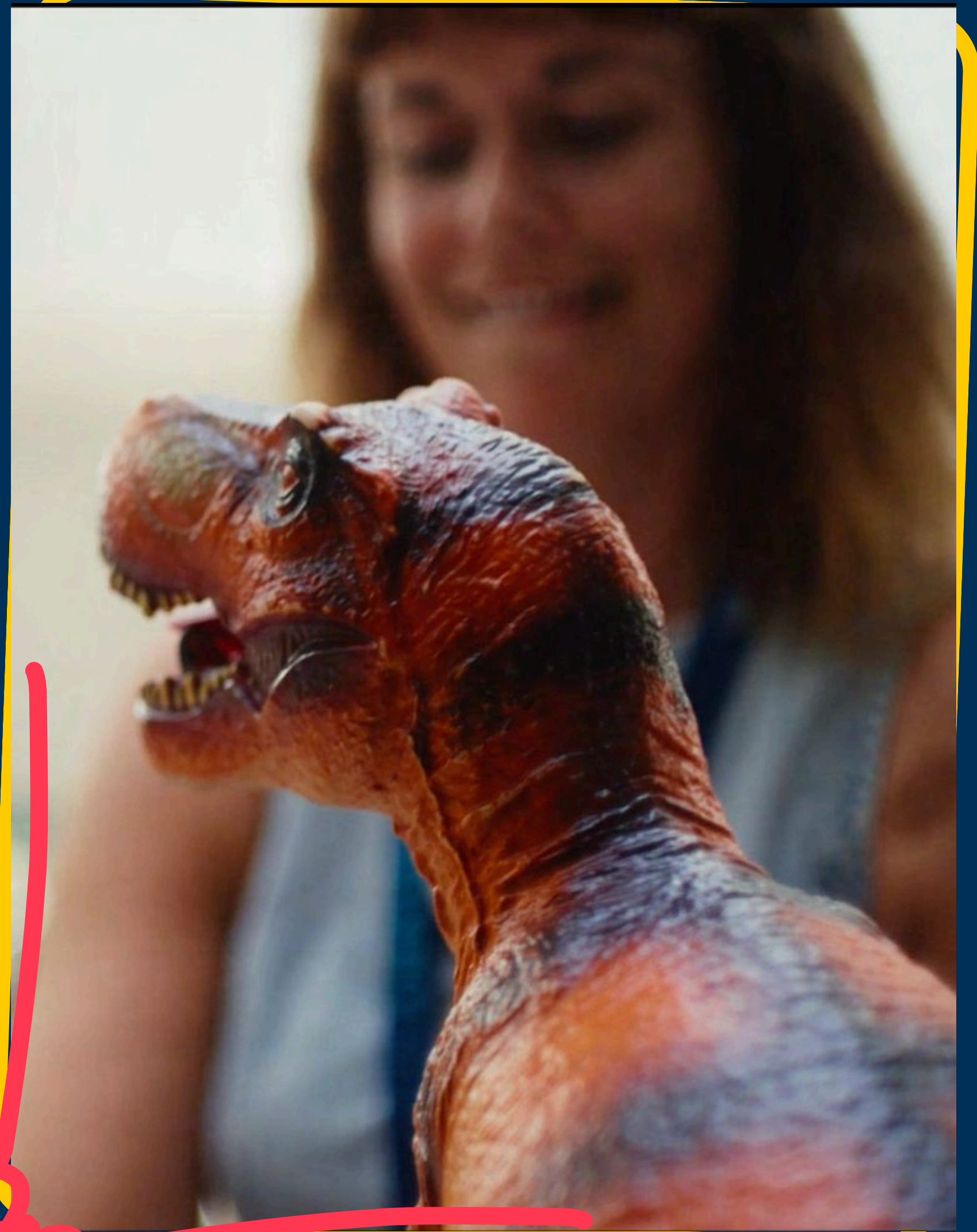
If play is important, why does it often feel so indulgent? Modern life has created a growing tension between enjoyment and productivity, leaving many adults feeling pressure to justify how they spend their time. The result is a culture where relaxation can come with guilt, and where doing something simply because it's enjoyable can feel harder than it should.



ONLY 3 IN 10

**CLAIM TO HAVE ENOUGH
TIME FOR THEMSELVES**

The barrier isn't the desire to play or
unwind. The barriers are guilt and time.





THE OPTIMISATION GENERATION

We are living through an era of unprecedented self-improvement. Our steps, sleep, exercise, productivity and wellbeing can all be measured, tracked and analysed. While these tools can be helpful, they have also changed our relationship with leisure, encouraging us to view more and more of life through the lens of performance.

Our feeds are overwhelmed with gurus, creators, influencers, and friends discussing, demonstrating, and promoting performance and optimisation hacks.

In a world obsessed with optimisation, enjoyment can sometimes become an afterthought. Moreover, it can lead to anxiety, stress, and burnout.



Nearly 8 in 10 parents feel pressure to use their free time productively.

34% say they feel pressure to optimise every area of their lives.



CHILDREN DON'T SEPARATE THE TWO. NEITHER SHOULD WE.

Children don't separate play from learning. Building, imagining, exploring, creating and collaborating are all part of how they make sense of the world. While adults often view play as something separate from achievement, children experience it as one and the same. Play isn't a break from development. It is development.

At Nord Anglia Education, play is seen as an integral part of the holistic educational experience. Where imagination, creativity, social bonding, and low mental stimulation environments offer unique development opportunities. In that regard, play and productivity are siblings, supporting a joint objective. Whereas, our research shows that adults tend to see play as an excursion from productive activity.



***At Nord Anglia Education we
believe play is the work of the child.***



HEALTHIER, NOT HAPPIER

The global smart wearables market is predicted to reach \$280bn by 2030.

While there are many health benefits, 53% of our parents highlighted that constantly tracking productivity is not improving their overall wellbeing - instead it is making them more anxious.

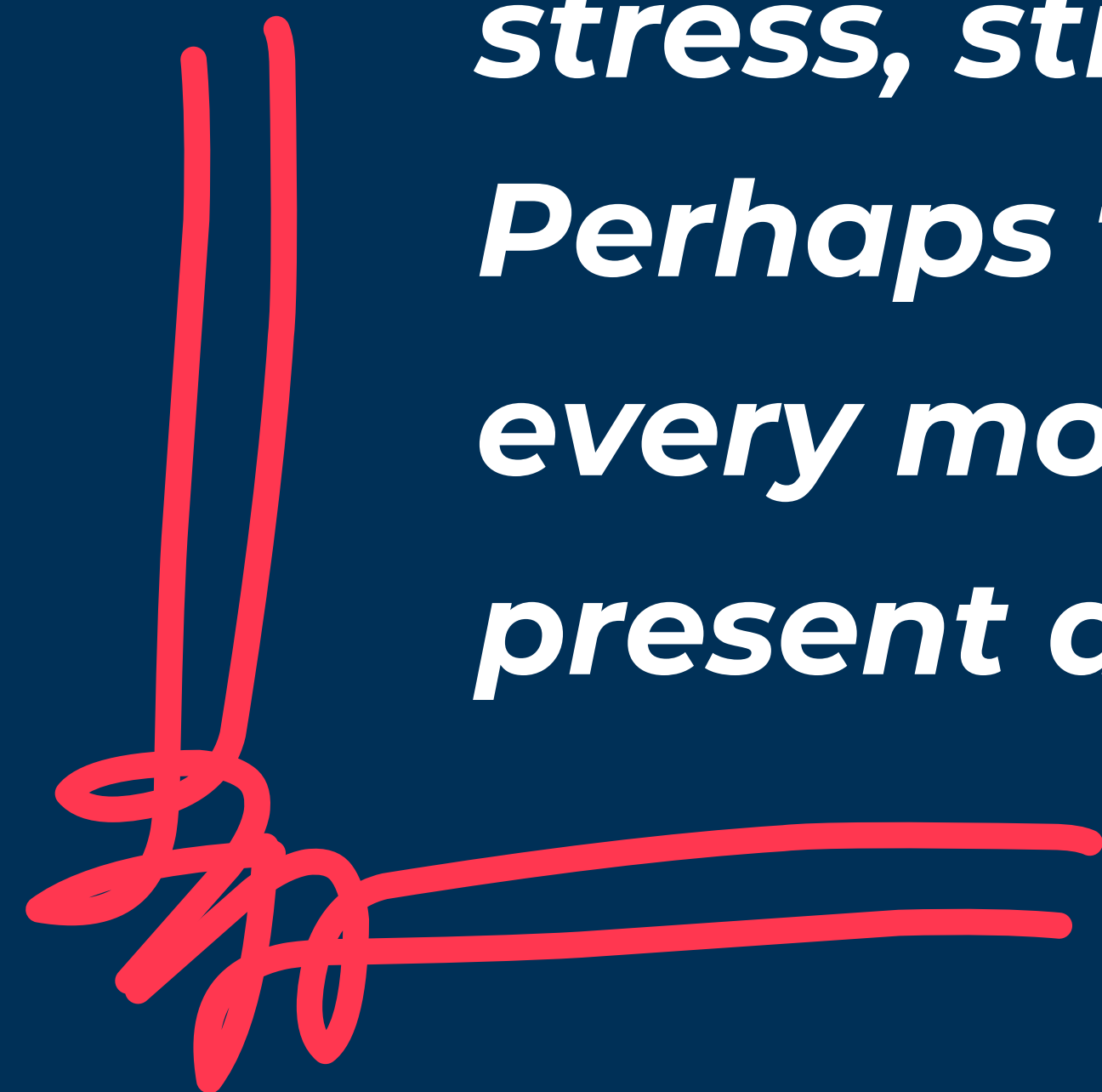
More than 50% of parents believe constant tracking makes us more anxious.

Only 8% believe it makes people happier.





“We live in an age of constant connection, where emails and notifications follow us everywhere and even our wellbeing is measured and tracked. Yet there is little evidence that being perpetually connected or endlessly monitoring ourselves makes us happier. Some of the longest studies on human flourishing points instead to simpler sources of fulfilment: meaningful relationships, purpose, laughter and genuine human connection. As adults, we often dismiss play as unproductive, forgetting that carefree moments reduce stress, strengthen bonds and bring joy. Perhaps the challenge is not to optimise every moment of life, but to remain fully present and truly live it.”



DR RUBA TABARI

Consultant Educational Psychologist
BSc, PGCE, MSc Ed Psych, DEdPsych, C. Psychol, AFBPsS





CHILDREN JUST GET IT. ✨

More than

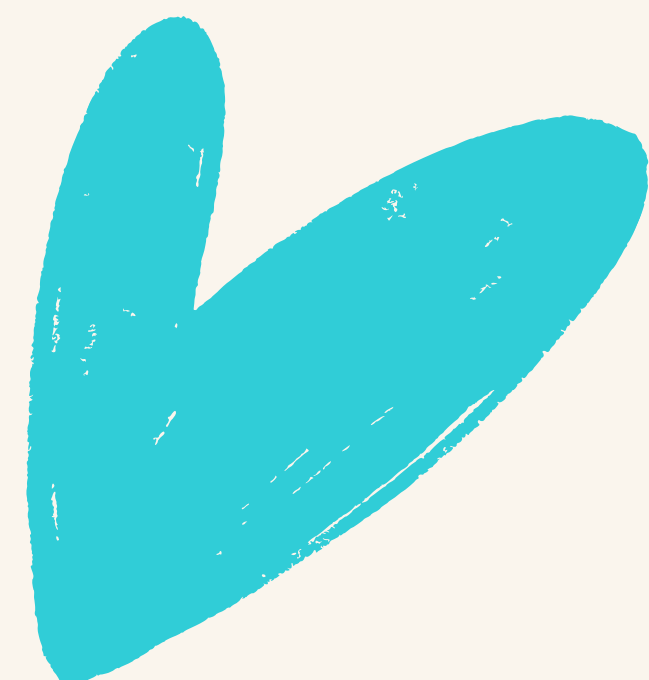
80%

agree it's harder to switch off and play now than in childhood. Kids play because it's fun, full stop.

Children approach play differently. They don't play to improve, optimise or achieve. They play because it is enjoyable. In doing so, they remind us of something adults often overlook: not everything needs a purpose beyond the experience itself.

The activities we remember most fondly from childhood were rarely productive, but they were often the moments that shaped us most.

And though it may seem obvious, adulthood has made switching off and embracing pure joy much harder.



WHAT'S THE MESSAGE WE'RE SENDING?



NEARLY

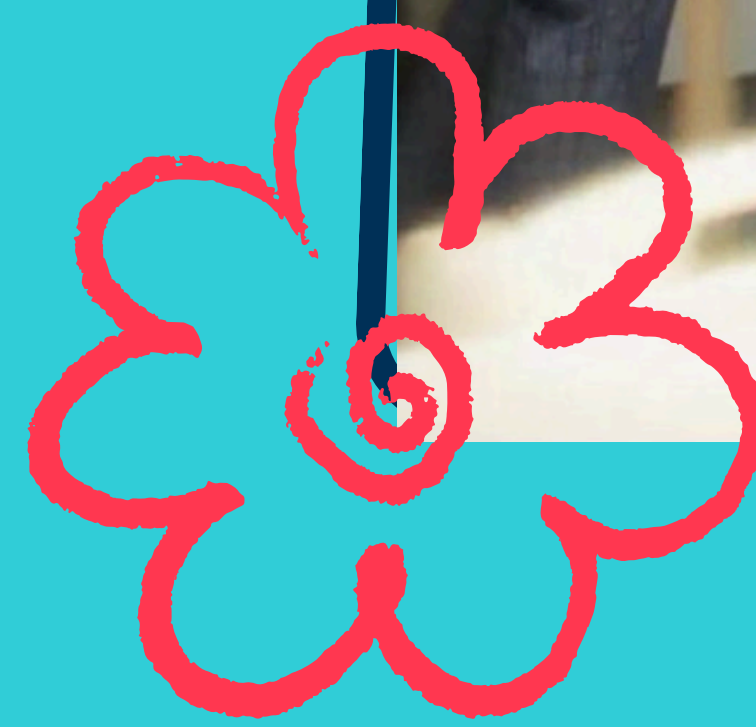
90%

of adults claim they spent the majority of their childhood playing.

This gap raises an interesting question for parents, educators, and society; what's the message we want to send our children about what to prioritise and value?

Few parents consider optimisation and productivity as key objectives for their children. Instead, research from the Pew Research Center shows that overwhelmingly parents prioritise their children's happiness and wellbeing over academic and financial success.

Which begs the question; why aren't we able to prioritise the same for ourselves?





While parents recognise the power of play, many struggle to prioritise it. In a culture driven by optimisation, play can feel unproductive, but our findings suggest the opposite. Play isn't a distraction from achievement; it's what makes it possible.



Elizabeth Lamb

Regional Managing Director - Middle East, Nord Anglia Education



THE PERMISSION GAP



Our findings in this report point to an interesting contradiction. Parents understand the importance of play. They believe it contributes to wellbeing, connection, and happiness. Yet many still struggle to prioritise it. The issue is not awareness. It is permission. In a culture that celebrates achievement, productivity, and constant self-improvement, many adults find it easier to make time for obligations than for joy.

So, despite knowing that it matters, our greatest battle appears to be handing ourselves the permission to simply switch off, play, and enjoy ourselves.

Our best example might be simply looking at our children.

91%

say play is extremely important for wellbeing.

82%

agree we've forgotten how to play like children do.



At Nord Anglia Education, we see the power of play every day. Through play, children develop confidence, creativity, communication skills and resilience. These are not simply childhood benefits; they are skills that serve us throughout our lives.



ELIZABETH LAMB

Regional Managing Director - Middle East, Nord Anglia Education





“ In a world where so much competes for children's attention, play creates something increasingly rare: space and time. Space to wonder, imagine, ask questions, and make meaning. Far from being a break from learning, play nurtures the curiosity, creativity, and independence that underpin it.



DR ANNE BALDISSERI
Head of School, Avenues São Paulo
A Nord Anglia Education School





PERMISSION TO PLAY

Perhaps the challenge facing modern adults isn't learning how to play again. Perhaps it's remembering that we're allowed to. As the demands on our time continue to grow, play remains one of the few things we do simply because it enriches our lives.

It helps us connect, recharge, imagine and create. And if there is one lesson children continue to teach us, it is that some of life's most valuable moments are also the least measurable. Sometimes, the healthiest thing we can do is stop optimising and start enjoying.



Play is one of the foundations of creativity, wellness, and connectedness.

At every age.



WATCH OUR FILM

