

# A Playful Approach to the Five Ways to Wellbeing

Alison Tonkin, Lecturer in Childcare, Stanmore College, Middlesex

Julia Whitaker, Health Play Specialist (Freelance)

## Abstract

In 2008, the New Economics Foundation (NEF) was commissioned to develop a set of evidence-based actions that would improve personal wellbeing and consequently, demonstrate 'real economic wellbeing' (Aked et al, 2008). Acknowledging the importance of personal, social, cultural, environmental, and economic determinants of health, the NEF replicated the ideals of the *5-a-Day* campaign using advice from the World Health Organization to promote the need to eat at least five portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables every day, due to the significant health benefits this brings (NHS, 2022). Consequently, the NEF developed a new and creative approach to health promotion and developed the Five Ways to Wellbeing (Aked et al, 2008), which encourage us to Connect... Be active... Take notice... Keep learning... Give. These five simple steps can be followed every day to enhance mental health and wellbeing (Mind, 2023).

Play-based strategies feature heavily in the activities associated with each of the Five Ways to Wellbeing (Mind, 2023), and the role of play and playfulness for lifelong health and wellbeing feeds into a growing body of evidence that supports the premise that opportunities to engage autonomously in self-motivated, pleasure-giving experiences with no pre-determined outcome are critical to living a long and healthy life (Whitaker and Tonkin, 2016). This article will explore each component of the Five Ways to Wellbeing, to show how play and having a playful attitude contribute to the human capacity for flourishing in a changing world.

**Key words:** play, playfulness, health, Five Ways to Wellbeing<sup>[1][2]</sup>

## Introduction

Wellbeing 'explores the question of how well people are doing' in all domains of their lives; it encapsulates living well, with dignity, independence, and a sense of purpose, all of which contribute to a pleasurable life (Age UK, 2023). Feelings of 'happiness, contentment, enjoyment, curiosity, and engagement are characteristic of someone who has a positive experience of their life' (Aked et al, 2008: 1) and these traits are also associated with play and

playfulness (Whitaker and Tonkin, 2016). To help visualise how wellbeing can be optimised on an individual and societal level, in 2008 the New Economic Foundation (NEF) was commissioned to develop a set of evidence-based, easily actioned prompts – the Five Ways to Wellbeing - which encourage us to Connect... Be active... Take notice... Keep learning... Give (Aked et al, 2008). This article will explore each prompt from the Five Ways to Wellbeing, to show how play and having a playful attitude contribute to wellbeing and the human capacity for flourishing in a changing world.

### **Defining wellbeing**

There are many different definitions of wellbeing (Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management [CIEEM], 2021) but they tend to agree that it is a two-dimensional concept made up of an individual's personal experience of life (subjective) and a comparison between individual circumstances and social norms and values (objective) (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2013). Good health, social connection and having access to life's essentials are regarded as key determinants of both subjective and objective wellbeing (CIEEM, 2021).

The Department of Health (2014) describes wellbeing as 'feeling good and functioning well', linking wellbeing and health. Positive emotion (feeling good) is a motivating factor for engaging in behaviors which extend and enhance the range of personal experiences (functioning well), creating a positive feedback loop. A longitudinal study by Vella-Brodrick et al (2023) reveals the importance of social connection for the creation of a sense of wellbeing and that wellbeing and social connection may be mutually reinforcing, in line with Fredrickson's (2013) *upward spiral theory of lifestyle change*.

### **Defining play and playfulness**

The human drive to play is a vital feature of both human and animal development. It originates deep within the brain, is evident pre-birth and observable throughout the lifespan (Whitaker and Tonkin, 2021). Play means many things and its definition is constantly evolving in line with our understanding of its role in adaptation and human flourishing. In his seminal study, *The Ambiguity of Play* (2001), Sutton-Smith elaborates on the fact that the term 'play' describes a wide range of experiences and activities, and that its conceptualization depends on its cultural and ideological context (Sefton-Green, 2017). There is more consistent agreement on the meaning of 'playfulness', which is defined by Barnett (2007: 955) as 'the predisposition to

frame (or reframe) a situation in such a way as to provide oneself (and possibly others) with amusement, humor, and/or entertainment’.

There is now a substantive body of research to show that play and playfulness are beneficial for adult health and wellbeing. Adults who play tend to be more physically active (Thiel et al, 2016), more adaptive to life’s stresses (Clifford et al, 2022) and have greater emotional intelligence (Holmes and Hart, 2022). Lubbers et al (2023: 1) conclude that, ‘adult play and playfulness are ways of experiencing life that are often motivated by the experience of positive emotions, humor, and engagement in activities that promote relationships and that relate to positive mental health outcomes’.

### **The origins of the Five Ways to Wellbeing**

It is perhaps curious that the NEF, a British think-tank that aims to ‘transform the economy so it works for people and the planet’ (NEF, 2024) were tasked with developing a set of evidence-based actions that would improve personal wellbeing, clearly linking personal wellbeing to ‘economic wellbeing’ (Aked et al, 2008). Higher levels of wellbeing in childhood are predictive of wellbeing in adulthood and subsequent enhanced performance in the workplace, which in turn leads to better national economic performance (Ruggeri et al, 2020). Therefore, utilising the *2008 Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project* from the UK Government’s *Foresight* programme, the NEF integrated the importance of personal, social, cultural, environmental, and economic determinants of health into their planning (Aked et al, 2008). The NEF replicated the conceptualisation of the *5-a-Day* campaign which promotes the need to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables every day, due to the significant health benefits this brings (NHS, 2022).

The NEF subsequently produced a generic set of five actions that would appeal to a wide audience of people of different ages, enabling individuals to adopt changes in their own lives to enhance their own wellbeing (Aked et al, 2008). A set of five postcards, each featuring a different one of the ‘Five Ways’ and an assortment of approaches to achieving it, ensured the ‘Five Ways to Wellbeing’ would be accessible to everyone (Cordon et al, 2008) and play-based strategies are evident throughout (Mind, 2023).

### ***Connect***

Human beings, like most mammals, are a social species (Braren, 2023), reliant on each other not just to survive but to thrive, and research shows that social connection may also be one of the most protective factors against depression (American Psychiatric Association, 2024). Social connection is a conduit of healthy development and, from the moment of birth, infants are primed to connect in playful ways (Trevarthen, 2017). When early interaction is joyful and socially engaging, children learn the importance of collaboration and cooperation, skills essential for social connection throughout life. The playful exchanges of infancy re-emerge in the playground games of childhood and the banter of the teenage years, and again in the intimacy of adult relationships (Brauer et al, 2021). These playful connections stimulate positive emotions (joy, interest, engagement, love) which, in turn, have a wide-ranging influence on personal wellbeing (Alexander et al, 2021), building resilience and increasing the likelihood of engagement in future positive behaviors and experiences (Fredrickson and Joiner, 2018). Tidmand (2021) cites numerous examples of playful interactions which promote social connection, including the 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade teacher who starts the school day with playful morning handshakes (AWESOME, 2017) and the FISH! Philosophy (2023) of organizational change.

### ***Be active***

The NEF (2008) state that being active is good for us and can take many forms - walking, running, cycling, dancing, gardening etc. - providing it suits individual fitness and mobility levels. Activities that strengthen muscles are particularly valuable for older adults and gentle exercise, such as chair yoga, can help prevent falls and improve mobility (NHS, 2021). When we 'step outside', activity in green (woods, meadows, parks) or blue (rivers, lakes, and sea) space enhances its benefits, further contributing to general health (University of York n.d.).

Technology has broadened the range of what constitutes *activity*, to include games such as Pokémon Go which is the most successful augmented reality mobile game ever, motivating its users 'to become physically active, socialize, and spend more time outdoors' (Wang 2021). Pokémon Go demonstrates how the creativity associated with play has opened up opportunities to be active in a sustainable and achievable manner, while players also reap the rewards linked to physical, mental, and social health as well as wellbeing (Wang, 2021).

### ***Take notice***

As we go about our daily lives, our minds are often preoccupied with thoughts of the past and the future, so much so that we miss what is going on in the present. ‘Taking notice’ is about living in the moment, attending to our present thoughts and feelings, and paying attention to what is going on around us. Having a playful mindset allows us to become curious about what we notice, to find interest, amusement, and joy in everyday things – boosting our engagement with life and feelings of satisfaction and hopefulness (DesMaisons, 2019).

Active awareness in the moment engenders an honest appraisal of what is, but also presents an opportunity to imagine how things could be different (Van Beelen, 2020). This is what children do when they play: they interact with their environment in a creative process of transformation. In the same way that a child can find the ‘treasure’ in a rain puddle, when we ‘take notice’ we can hear the music in birdsong, savor the crunch of a crisp apple, wonder at the secret smile on the face of a workmate. Facts4Life (n.d) is a health literacy programme for children and families. It offers a number of playful ideas which can be used by anyone of any age to support attempts to live in the here-and-now. Scavenger hunts and Five Senses Safaris are examples of playful ways in which families and friends can share their experience of the world, fostering the empathy and connection which support emotional wellbeing.

### ***Keep learning***

According to Judson (2017) ‘*play*—in the many different forms it takes—is learning for humans of all ages. Indeed, play drives the growth of the adult brain as well as the child’s’. Play-based learning is particularly effective when it comes to developing and mastering skills because, when learning is fun and enjoyable, it is a pleasurable experience worthy of repetition (Gooley Brains, 2015). With repetition comes mastery, leading to a sense of achievement and enhanced self-esteem (Gooley Brains, 2015), something that is noted by the NEF who state, ‘learning new things will make you more confident as well as being fun’ (Aked et al, 2008). Creative activities such as art, singing or dance, cooking or sports activities are all skills-based and can be enhanced when learnt through social engagement. In recent years, this has been incorporated into the concept of social prescribing as an approach for connecting people to a range of local community groups and non-clinical services, depending on the needs and wishes

of the individual (NHS England n.d.). Green initiatives such as gardening or walking groups can be linked to local history and may also provide opportunities for volunteering to help maintain the neighbourhood environment (NHS England n.d.).



Figure 1: Invitation to join the local Gardening Club

Informally, the development of skills can also create opportunities for social gatherings where novices can be supported by relative experts i.e. social craft groups such as ‘Knit and Natter’, ‘Stitch ‘n Bitch’ and ‘Men’s Sheds’ where men can ‘come together to build, fix and restore – projects as well as themselves!’ (UK Men’s Sheds Association, 2024).

### *Give*

One of the ways in which social connection contributes to our wellbeing is through the act of giving – putting the needs of other people before our own. Helping others improves relationships and broadens opportunities for social interaction as well as encouraging us to be more active (Curry et al, 2018). There is also mounting evidence to suggest that the act of

giving reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety, while boosting confidence and self-esteem (Cregg and Cheavens, 2023). Furthermore, giving to others seems to be ‘contagious’ in that those who receive acts of kindness are themselves more likely to extend the giving to other people (Kumar, 2022). The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation (2024) offers suggestions for many ways of giving to others - at home, at school and in the workplace - many of which have a playful flavor. At Pearls of Juggling (n.d.), Anthony writes about ‘doing things from the heart’ as a way of bringing more joy into our own lives as well as those of others. Simply sharing a smile, singing, dancing, or joking with others, playing a game, or arranging a ‘play date’ or games night reconnects us with our playful selves and with each other.

### **Concluding thoughts**

From their introduction 15 years ago, the Five Ways to Wellbeing are now advocated by the NHS for promoting mental health and wellbeing and provide an international framework for promoting public good. Play is a vital component of wellbeing and helps all of us, across the lifecourse, ‘to become healthier and happier individuals’ (Family Action, 2024), which in turn leads to better national economic performance. Play and playfulness, together with the five Ways to Wellbeing offer a set of guiding actions that together contribute to the human capacity for flourishing in a changing world.

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