



## **EUDAEMONIA** **Play, with Mike Fairclough**

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Kim Forrester 0:00

How often do you set aside your obligations and demands to engage in moments of wholehearted fun, adventure, and imagination? I'm Kim Forrester, you're listening to the Eudaemonia podcast, and today it's time to explore the importance of play.

Intro 0:21

Welcome to Eudaemonia, the podcast that is all about flourishing. Plug in, relax and get ready for the goodness as we explore the traits and practices that can help you thrive in life... with your host Kim Forrester.

Kim Forrester 0:41

Mike Fairclough is an internationally acclaimed educator with over 25 years experience. Based in the UK, Mike is regarded as a thought-leader in the field of character education, and he is the author of "Wild Thing: Embracing Childhood Traits in Adulthood for a Happier, More Carefree Life". I'm truly excited to be chatting with Mike today to learn how we can boost our wellbeing by embracing play, imagination, and a childlike enthusiasm for life. Mike Fairclough, it is just such a delight to have you here on the Eudaemonia podcast. How are things with you today?

Mike Fairclough 1:20

Fabulous, thank you very much. Really lovely day today. Spring has sprung in England, and yeah, I'm in the groove. How about you?

Kim Forrester 1:28

I've had a wonderful day of play and a little bit of dance today, Mike. So I'm feeling pretty good, myself. The most important question I think that we need to start off with is, why play? What does the science say about playfulness, and its wellbeing benefits?

Mike Fairclough 1:46

So there are a number of scientists who've explored the whole concept of play, but there are certain people who've inspired me and informed my decisions within my work at West Rise Junior School, where I'm the head teacher. One of them is Beau Lotto, a neuroscientist, who really explores the whole concept of play, and particularly says that that is our natural disposition as human beings; to have a playful outlook, and it's actually how our brains evolve and expand. And he particularly cites the need for play in order to explore the unknown, and uncertainty, which of course, are absolutely integral parts of everyday living, but which we often shy away from. So by playing, it's a way of learning about the world, it's a way of expanding our brains, it's about connections happening within our brains which have multiple, multiple benefits on a neurological level. And then there's the whole

field of positive psychology as well. Martin Seligman is the founder of that, and that has very much informed the work of the school, and that talks about positive character traits such as resilience, inquiry, gratitude, etc, all of the elements of play, which are so prevalent when you watch children at play, but also adults when they engage in it. And again, the positive effects on a person on a physical level, emotional level, mental level, are measurable and extremely impactful. So that's the second influence. And then thirdly, it would be the flow concept, and the act of immersing oneself in deep play, and then finding ourselves in that vibe where we are completely feeling limitless, connected. There's that sense of timelessness. And once we come out of that flow state, problem solving becomes much easier, our general sense of well being has been elevated, and again there are measurable effects. So there are lots of different fields of science and psychology which kind of feed into and underpin the whole concept and need for play.

Kim Forrester 4:18

When you talk of play as a path to wellbeing, what kind of play you referring to though, Mike? So is it enough that we take a few moments each day to play some Candy Crush or some Minesweeper? Is that what you're talking about?

Mike Fairclough 4:33

No. So I advocate a playful mindset. So it's not necessarily playing a specific game or engaging in a particular activity, it's more of a playful mindset and outlook. So play is very enquiry based. So I'd advocate enquiry, a lighthearted outlook. So I think that underpinning play are various traits such as risk-taking, venturing into the unknown, I really feel very strongly that the flow concept is very much part of that, having a sense of gratitude, and also having a spirit of adventure. And then underpinning all of that is imagination. Play is informed by and led by a child or an adult's imagination. So, think of it less of playing a particular game, and more having an imaginative outlook on life.

Kim Forrester 5:32

So playing with life, rather than playing a specific game.

Mike Fairclough 5:36

Completely, and also maybe not analysing things too much, or taking things too seriously. I've over the years just looked at how adult society has evolved, and also the messages that we tend to give children and it's coming from a very well intended place, but it feels like teachers and parents over the years have told their children, told themselves, a pursuit of a safe, predictable, and secure, and certain life will result in all of those things manifesting. And, of course, life isn't really like that. Life will present all sorts of challenges at different points - there might be the death of a loved one breakdown of relationship, troubles at work, problems and challenges within the wider world, such as we've got with COVID, etc. and the pursuit of safety and certainty, doesn't safeguard ourselves against those sorts of experiences. Whereas a sense of playfulness and venturing into the unknown, embracing the unknown, having a spirit of adventure, really engaging in the imagination, allows certain other traits to come to the fore, such as flexibility and resilience, and it's those things which help us deal with life's challenges, whether they're in the wide world or in our personal lives.

Kim Forrester 6:55

You write specifically about this in your book. You actually encourage us all to ignite our spirit for adventure and I love that you say that we ought to see life as a series of opportunities. What do you mean by that and how does that help us, through play, live a more flourishing life?

Mike Fairclough 7:13

Well, again, it is sort of returning to this idea of sort of rejection, or of getting into this idea of joyful rebellion, actually, at the moment; of sort of joyfully rebelling against certain societal messages and norms, which, frankly, haven't really served us that well. And I think, looking at the economy on a global level, looking at ecology on a global level, it doesn't feel like some of the things that we've invested in over the years, and we've been... and some of the mindsets that we've been told to sort of slavishly adhere to have actually borne fruits and actually, perhaps have let us down. So I think having a different approach, and perhaps looking at some of the things that we have held us of cherished beliefs and rules that we adhere to, and just let them go very lightly - have that awareness where we can, you know, is this serving me anymore - and then look at the magic of life all around us. Because the fact that we're even here at all is a complete miracle, and I feel like if we can just acknowledge how miraculous, how incredible it is that we are born, we have then this adventure of life. And then death itself, as well, is one of these greatest mysteries. It's all incredible, miraculous stuff and to see life more as a magical journey, rather than some sort of endurance test, or perhaps even something which is predictable and safe if we follow certain rules. Because certainly that isn't the case in my experience.

Kim Forrester 8:49

I just adore that whole concept. I used to walk home from school with an imaginary herd of horses, and so I used to gallop alongside them, and I used to leap fences in my mind. But of course, these days, I just walk where I'm going. But that's specifically what you're talking about, isn't it? Engaging our imagination, and placing it into the world around us so that the world becomes alive.

Mike Fairclough 9:10

Yes. Now I must say it's really helpful with this journey, having children around to remind ourselves about those sorts of things like your herd of imaginary horses. Because with my wife, Sundeep Sitara, my lovely, lovely wife, we've got four kids. One is like 23-year-old Tally, there's Indigo, who's nearly 17. And then we've got two, 4-year-old twin daughters called Luna and Star. And I will come home from work after being at school, but quite often, you know, a little bit tired, whatever, and just kind of wanting to sort of down tools, etc. And of course, I walk through the door, and the girls have a completely different idea about what I'm going to be doing. It's certainly not going to be just sitting on the sofa and chilling out and, invariably, I'm suddenly having to become a different character. And so your story about your imaginary herd of horses, I totally relate to that. And actually, I will be occupying imaginary worlds with them on a daily basis. And what at first feels like perhaps a waste of time, or a bit frivolous or childish or whatever, is actually incredibly magical. Because once you give yourself that first few seconds of, you know, feeling a little bit silly, you can really get into it and really feel uplifted, and it's just light hearted. And again, that whole idea of then moving out of that mindset, moving out of that kind of role playing, and then moving into your sort of everyday life, again, problem solving etc, becomes incredibly easy. So yeah, I would say, get your herd of imaginary horses back on. Like gallop to work in the morning.

Kim Forrester 10:54

You say that we're actually already more playful than we think, even as grownups. Even as serious grownups you say in your book that we have more playfulness within us than we would be led to believe. What do you mean by that?

Mike Fairclough 11:06

So first of all, daydreaming. Most adults will daydream, they'll have scenarios. And unfortunately, I think within adulthood quite often we'll indulge in negative scenarios, which I don't think are helpful. I think any sort of negative visualisation will invariably manifest some sort of negative physical experience in the outside world. But equally and more powerfully, indulging in positive daydreaming is a really, really, really good thing to do. Partly because we can set goals and imagine futures, which then we can manifest in the physical world, but also, maybe just imagining ourselves in beautiful places, like natural environments. Say, imagining yourself on a beautiful sandy beach with the sun beating down on you, and you can hear the sound of the waves in the background, and immediately feel much more present and much more connected. Or it might be a woodland scene, or whatever it might be. So we, we tend to daydream. The other thing is, of course, music. Who doesn't love to just, when they're cooking in the kitchen, or whatever, put some tunes on? And you might get that great tune, totally get in the groove; dancing around, picked up something, pretended it was microphone, you know, we all kind of do that kind of stuff. So I think there are lots of lots of times when in adulthood, we actually do play. The other example I use is when we watch a film, or read a book and identify with the main character, and then within our lives, after watching the film, or reading the book, or whatever, take on a little bit of one of the traits of that character. So yeah, I think lots of adults do that as well, even though lots of adults might not necessarily admit to doing it.

Kim Forrester 12:53

So imagination and daydreaming, it all sounds truly wonderful, if not a little irresponsible for us adults, Mike. But there's also something else that it raises in my mind, and that is that around the world at the moment there is a rising understanding of the power of mindfulness, and of the importance of being present right here, right now in this moment. So if we're daydreaming, aren't we taking ourselves out of this present moment, and therefore undermining that sense of mindfulness and presence?

Mike Fairclough 13:27

What I would say to that is, I think it's about first of all valuing our imagination and recognising it as our superpower. And it is, because if you think about imagination, it's responsible for every single human development throughout history, from the creation of writing and music and the arts, to every single technological advancement throughout history. From the moment we are born, we are imagining things, we're playing, etc. And yet, it's imagination, which seems to be systematically jeopardised - I'm quoting Sir Ken Robinson, here, the late Sir Ken Robinson - in our education system, and some of the messages that we give as adults to our children. So for example, curiosity killed the cat, daydreaming is a waste of time, get your head out of the clouds, you know, playing is waste time. And therefore somehow being more serious is a higher state of being and higher state of consciousness. Now, I would say that to be present and mindful, rejecting things which are very inherent to our human experience - like, you know, eating, drinking, sleeping, breathing, imagining is just as equally important and integral to the human experiences as all of those sorts of things - and I think to reject those or to push those away, is perhaps not being completely mindful and

present. And I think that to say, for example, the daydream that I just illustrated to you where, you know, you're on the beach, you can feel the sun on your skin, you can hear the waves in the background - what could be more imminent and present than that beautiful, beautiful daydream? And of course, once you come out of that, and you're back in the so-called real world, you do feel more connected and more uplifted and elevated and present. So I don't think the two things are in conflict, I think they're very, very integrated and connected.

Kim Forrester 15:27

Listening to you talk, there's an overwhelming understanding, in my mind, of how little we gift ourselves as adults when it comes to play, and daydreaming and imagination and just pure joy. You actually write that children are instinctively drawn to the things that make them feel happy, and I do feel that when we reflect on adulthood, that we seem to have lost our willingness to seek out joy in our life. It's almost like we feel that we must be martyrs to seriousness and unhappiness. Do you feel that there is something larger than us that is driving us to choose seriousness, unhappiness, and a lack of joy?

Mike Fairclough 16:16

It's cultural and historical, so you could probably go back to religion. Within this country, the Victorian age was very much, the whole sort of industrialization was very much that whole idea that is sacrificing yourself for, you know, society. And somehow that seriousness and a rejection of childish, quote-unquote, sort of ways was the way to go in the way that it would help society as a whole, and individuals as a whole. And I think there's the sort of layers of conditioning, which again, I would point to the state of the world at the moment in terms of wars across the world, the ecological issues that we're facing, the massive economic issues which we're facing as well, and argue that actually, none of those messages have particularly served us well. Whereas actually, embracing imagination, embracing play, can offer solutions for some of the world's biggest problems. Because of course, if we try to do things as we've done it previously, we'll just get exactly the same outcome. So we need to do things in a very different way. And I think that children illustrate this so brilliantly, I noticed that at playtime, so break time in the morning, at lunchtime, when the children go out and play, there'll be 365 children in my school, spilling out into the playground. And even though there might be nothing in the playground, they will invent games completely out of thin air. They'll become different characters and change them at the drop of a hat. They'll negotiate different rules, different things. If there's somewhere they can explore that they've never been to before they will be drawn to those things. They love to take risks, they like to just totally let their imaginations run wild. And of course, what playground is absent of just elation and laughter? And, you know, looking at that, you've just gonna go, "Okay, the kids have got something here". So I think that really, yes, we do get very bogged down in this sort of seriousness of things. And again, this sort of pursuit of safety and conformity and certainty, when in actual fact, life isn't like that. And if we can embrace the unknown, embrace uncertainty, embrace change, then we can really just kind of surf those waves and really enjoy ourselves much, much more, and also find solutions to our own personal problems, as well as the world's wider issues as well.

Kim Forrester 18:55

Because of course, when we are creative, when we are in play, is when we come up with the most innovative and original ideas and solutions.

Mike Fairclough 19:02

Totally.

Kim Forrester 19:04

Your conversation there brought us straight back to that idea of joyous rebellion, and you do write in your book that in order to be more playful, we ought to be a little bit naughty, which is what children are, right?

Mike Fairclough 19:18

Yeah.

Kim Forrester 19:19

You say that we ought to break a few rules. But you know, the free spirit inside of me is going "Yes, it sounds fun." and then the serious, you know, responsible adult is going "But we must all follow the rules." How do we break the rules, Mike, in a way that enhances our sense of joy and playfulness, but that is not disruptive or disrespectful to others, or to the greater good?

Mike Fairclough 19:44

Yeah. So I think we need to tune into our our own navigating compass, our own internal sense of value, what's right, where we need to tune into and to have trust in our own intuition and instincts. If we were to look at the rules that we adhere to - it might be rules which we have imposed on ourselves, and like, "Oh, I can't do this, or I can't do that", it might be the rules of another person, "You can't do this, you can't do that", or group or institution - and then just gently have that kind of growing awareness of, "Okay, so which rules serve me, and which rules no longer serve me?" Because what may have served us yesterday, might not be the case today. Because things change and evolve, and that's the nature of our lives and reality. Now, if we trust in our own intuition, and instinct, and we're coming from our heart, then absolutely, we're going to be making the right choices in terms of, you know, what is the impact of this choice of releasing a particular rule. If it's going to hurt another person, then, of course, we're not going to do it. It might be that it will rub somebody up the wrong way, but then I say in the book "better to rattle a few cages, than to live in one of our own making." So I think that it's very much about just gently having that awareness, gently releasing our attachment to certain rules if they no longer serve us, and trusting in our ability to make the right choices as adults.

Kim Forrester 21:25

One of the most fascinating things in your book, Mike, is how playfulness can help us become luckier. You were saying before how, you know, when we play, we come up with these amazing creative solutions. Not just to challenges in our own lives, but challenges in the world. And it's certainly true, I think, that a lot of the inventions and innovations through human history have come about through creative play and exploration. But also, we could say there was a lot of luck involved in a lot of those steps forward in technology and innovation. How does a playful attitude lead to greater luck in life?

Mike Fairclough 22:06

So that whole concept is influenced by the writer Richard Wiseman, who wrote a book called *The Luck Factor*, and he spent a long time really researching what makes lucky people lucky and unlucky people unlucky. And there were various sort of traits that he discovered, and he found that actually, the more anxious a person is and the more sort of insular they are, the less they are able to see opportunities outside of the things that they're obsessing about. And conversely, the more relaxed somebody is, the less anxious they are, the more they break routine as well - so for example, instead of going on exactly the same route to work every day, maybe changing a different kind of route - what that actually does, is it opens a person up to new opportunities. So he did quite a number of really interesting experiments where he got hundreds of so called lucky and unlucky people to do various things. For example, there was one where people had to look through a newspaper and he said, when you get to a particular page, there will be some information, which if you discover it, you can win £200 pounds. And he found that the unlucky people, were really kind of just focused on that one thing. And they've spent minutes and minutes and minutes, often missing these enormous letters on page three or four, whatever it was, which said, "Stop now. Claim your £200 pounds." And yet the other people, the lucky people, were able to find those words within seconds, because they were just automatically more relaxed, more open, and had that sort of sense of lightness about them. So there is a lot of scientific background to this stuff that I'm talking about, in terms of the benefit of a more playful, imaginative and lighthearted outlook on life.

Kim Forrester 24:12

I believe it was Einstein that explained this whole concept of us having, sort of, two levels of mind. And the innovation and the inventions and these incredible thought experiments, he said, it takes a leap beyond our logical, rational mind into this creative, intuitive mind. And when you're talking there, I can see that perhaps it's play, it is imagination, it is exploration, physically and intellectually, that opens up our mind and allows us to take out that leap into our creative and solution making mind. Would you agree with that?

Mike Fairclough 24:53

Absolutely. It's that sense that if we are just running along these sort of very linear lines of logic, and I'll mention it again, conformity, certainty, safety, security, all of those things, which of course, well you know, we want to be... we don't want to have a life where we're totally just taking risks the whole time and making ourselves vulnerable and not safe and all the rest of it. But I would argue that, actually, the pursuit of those things makes us less safe than actually embracing the unknown and risk and imagination and everything else. Because once we embrace those things, when life does kick up the inevitable challenges - and it happens for everyone, everybody - then you will have inner resources which will help you to cope with those very challenges. Whereas this kind of slavish adherence to a kind of like linear, predictable existence really doesn't prepare us for the knocks of life, and also takes some of the joy out of it. Because it's not like adversity is in fact, a bad thing. Adversity helps us to grow, and I've seen this within the pandemic. In particular, I've seen incredible, beautiful things happen with individuals where they've discovered skills they didn't have before, inner resources and traits that they didn't realise they had, a level of resilience that they didn't realise they were capable of, and innovations which have come to the fore in light of the adversity that we're experiencing on a global scale. So I think by having a more imaginative and playful outlook, we can actually enjoy the challenges when they crop up, rather than going, "Oh, there's something wrong with life", you know, "The universe has made a mistake", "Oh, it must be me", you know, all of that kind of stuff, which is natural to feel like all of those sorts of things. But it's not a mistake, is what life is like.

Kim Forrester 26:44

I love that whole idea. Because I think even our personal growth and our personal development, we can take very seriously sometimes, and the trick is to -well the Dalai Lama would tell us - the trick is to be playful, to tiptoe our way through life perhaps a little bit more lightly than what we do. Are there places and spaces or situations that you feel that we can tap into, that we can seek out in our lives, that will inspire us a little bit more into a sense of playfulness, will compel us to step out of the sense of seriousness and rationality?

Mike Fairclough 27:21

The absolutely phenomenal place to be, is in nature. Nature is the antidote for so much of our stuff that we kind of get lost in, and our mind stuff and our worries and everything else. And I think, quite often, we will say - and it might be just a tree in a park, or if you know, you live in the countryside like I do, you know, woodland, or the beaches, or whatever it is, whatever natural environment you've got around you - we often say to ourselves, "Well, you know, I'm too busy to go there now. I'll do it tomorrow. I'll do it next week, maybe in a month's time, I'll wait 'til the summer. Perhaps when I retire." You know, those sorts of things. But actually, by making the time to go to that single tree in a park, or making the time to go to that woodland that you've really, really wanted to go to but you've just thought I haven't got time to do it, what actually happens is that time stretches. And you can move into a space where you connect with something so much bigger than yourself. And it's a tangible experience, it's a tangible feeling of connection and dropping down into your body and feeling something greater than yourself feeding into your being on every single level, emotionally, mentally, physically, and I would argue spiritually as well. So yes, nature is the place to go. And of course, if you then go into nature with an imaginative and playful outlook, then you will probably start climbing trees, you'll no doubt see a path that you've never been down before and think well, I don't know what stand there, I'm going to explore it, just like children do. Children, when you put them out in nature will just be off and exploring. Sometimes they get lost as well, which is another thing I talked about in the book. You know, the art of getting lost, allowing yourself to just lose your bearings and suddenly your senses are so heightened because you can kick into sort of survival mode, but you're seeing things smelling things, hearing things with such clarity. And of course then, that's when you find your metaphorical pots of gold. You know, these these incredible treasure maps, which unleash and unveil and reveal so many brilliant, brilliant things. So yeah, nature is the place to connect with.

Kim Forrester 29:47

That is just beautiful, Mike, I love that answer there. My final question is one that I ask every guest on the Eudaemonia podcast, and I'm particularly excited to hear your answer to this. Can you offer my listeners a more morning reminder, so this may be a practice, a mantra, an affirmation, something that can help us all become more playful in our daily lives?

Mike Fairclough 30:09

Yeah, so I would say with affirmations, which I'm a big fan of, the trick there is to look at yourself in the eye in the mirror when you say them. And the reason I say that is because a lot of our negative sort of limiting beliefs which may have come from other people have been given to us with usually an adult during our childhood, looking us in the eye and saying things like, you know, "Playing is a waste of time, daydreaming is a waste of time", or "You're no good at this, you're no good at that." And you're getting that from somebody's, you know, somebody's sort of being through their eyes,

that kind of negative message. So to turn that around, looking at yourself in the mirror, and looking at your own eyes, and then giving yourself the affirmation really makes it sink in very, very deeply. And I would say this would be a really good one. Look yourself in the mirror, look yourself in the eye and say, "I love to play and to have adventures. I love to play and to have adventures. I love to play and to have adventures" and just repeat it maybe three, maybe nine times. So I really like kind of 3, 3, 3, 9, 9, these sort of like Goddess sort of numbers, these sort of very sort of female kind of nurturing sort of magical numbers like that. But as many times as you want to, really. But making sure that you're saying it looking yourself in the eye and feeling it on a very sort of deep, deep level.

Kim Forrester 31:41

I love to play and have adventures. Mike Fairclough, you have written two amazing books and the work that you do around inviting us to be more playful and imaginative and adventurous in our lives is just so endearing. How can people find out more about you and the books you've written?

Mike Fairclough 32:02

So the latest book "Wild Thing" is published by Hay House, and it's available on Amazon, Waterstones, Barnes and Noble, all over the place, so its easy to find. In terms of connecting with me, I've got a sort of embryonic Instagram account, which is @mikefairclough\_ so you can find me on there, on Twitter it's @westrisejunior, that's my tag, and that's also the name of the school. And you can also find Mike Fairclough on Facebook, and I would love to connect with people once they've read the book or heard the audio or read the Kindle or whatever it is. And you can direct message me on Twitter, you can direct message me on Instagram. My email address is on the school website westrisejunior.co.uk as well, so please get in touch, connect. If you're able to visit the school, rock up to the school, I've got loads of things to show you here like the water buffalo that we've got on site, the honeybees, we've got an 120-acre farmland basically attached to my school which I love to connect with people on, and just have a kind of cross fertilisation of ideas. Because what I find is that when I connect with people, I'm not just giving something to them. I'm also receiving amazing inspiration from others as well. So yeah, please do get in touch.

Kim Forrester 33:23

Mike, I want to thank you personally, because like many of my listeners, you know, life has been a bit tough and it's just so wonderful to be reminded of the promise of playfulness. And so thank you from my heart for gifting your time to the Eudaemonia podcast today.

Mike Fairclough 33:39

Thank you so much for having me on and I've really enjoyed connecting with you as well. Thank you.

Kim Forrester 33:44

As the playwright George Bernard Shaw suggested, "We don't stop playing because we grow old. We grow old, because we stop playing." You've been listening to the Eudaemonia podcast. If you'd like to learn more about how to live a truly flourishing life, please subscribe. Check out eudaemoniapod.com for more inspiring episodes, or come join me on Instagram @iamkimforrester. I'm Kim Forrester. Until next time, be well. be kind to yourself, and be playful.