Play

safe & social + flight/fight = play

Play is a mixed state combination. It’s the ventral vagal social engagement system being utilized along with the sympathetic flight/fight system. Play is being mobilized while safe.

Play is shared, synchronous, in the same state and following the same rules. Face to face contact is an important aspect of ensuring that play remains safe. Using the face signals that the autonomic nervous system is still accessing the pathways for safety and social engagement.

Play exercises the ability to self-regulate; to tap into the defensive states while staying in the safety state. The flight/fight mobilization system is being accessed and utilized, while under the influence of the social engagement system. When playing tag, the flight system is used. In wrestling, the fight system is being used. And when playing hide & seek, the shutdown system is being used. But all while actually safe.

Play can also be sharing attention on a task or game. Doing a puzzle, playing soccer, baking a cake or even working together can all be considered play.

For traumatized individuals, play may become unsafe or be unappealing. The safety system needs to be accessible, which can be a significant challenge for a nervous system stuck in a defensive state. Both (or all) of the nervous systems that are engaging in play need to be able to give and receive cues of safety.

Have you ever heard of kids that “don’t play well with others”? These are kids who have lost access to their safety state and what was once play becomes something else. This kid in a defensive state may end up hurting others, breaking the rules or quitting entirely.