

Play and playfulness in early childhood education and care¹

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Play and playfulness are basic features in early childhood education. The elements of play are pleasure, a sense of freedom, and the co-construction of shared meaning through the use of rules or rhythms. Play and learning are closely related in early childhood. But when the focus on the educational benefits of play becomes too strong, the most essential feature of play is lost: children's pleasure. Young children in group settings often have to adapt to the teachers' demands related to security, hygiene, and social norms and values. But the playfulness of the teachers helps to overcome differences in power in the caregiver-child relationship and prevents young children from becoming overburdened with strict rules and group discipline. Play and playfulness are a resource of shared pleasure and creativity in learning processes.

Keywords: play theory, play curricula, day care, teacher-child relationship, very young children

Introduction

The founding parents of early childhood education, such as Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, and Lev Vygotsky, focused on the active playing and learning child (Singer, 1993). Play and learning go hand in hand in young children. Formal curricula aimed at instruction and the transmission of knowledge are seen as teacher-centered. "Play curricula" were, and are, seen as child-centered and developmentally appropriate for young children. Many developmental studies have demonstrated the educational benefits of play (Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew, & Ingram, 2010). Neuropsychological studies have given new scientific arguments for the belief that play and learning are closely related in young children (Panksepp, 2012). During play, intense positive emotions, actions, and sensory experiences go hand in hand. Play experiences have a major impact on learning. But play cur-

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ricula in which play is used as an educational tool can have drawbacks. According to Sutton-Smith (1997), the belief in play as an educational tool has become so dominant that we tend to forget the playing child. Children's ideas of play generally center "on having fun, being outdoors, being with friends, choosing freely" (p. 49). But teachers tend to behave too "teacherly" and misuse children's play to attain their own educational goals, thus spoiling children's fun (Pramling Samuelsson & Asblond Carlsson, 2008). In this article I rethink the importance of play from the perspective of children and the perspective of teachers. I argue that play and playfulness are a resource of shared pleasure and creativity for teachers and young children. The playfulness of teachers helps to prevent young children from becoming overburdened with strict rules and group discipline.

What is play?

In *Homo Ludens* the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1938/1955) analyzes the phenomenon of play in human cultures. His play theory is still acknowledged as a ground-breaking study for modern theories about play. He writes: "First and foremost, all play is a voluntary activity. ...Child and animal play because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom" (p. 8). The basic motive for play is the experience of pleasure that it affords. Huizinga gives the example of two puppies involved in play-fighting. "They keep to the rule that you shall not bite, or not bite hard, your brother's ear. They pretend to get angry. And what is most important — in all these doings they plainly experience tremendous fun and enjoyment" (Huizinga, 1955, p. 1). Humans also play for pleasure. These experiences can be captured only in qualitative descriptions of feelings like excitement, tension, release, uncertainty, togetherness, surprise, risk, balance. Children do not play for some educational benefit that is more valuable than play. For instance, 3-year olds do not jump up and down to practice motor skills but because jumping up and down is fun.

The play-world: rhythms, repetition, roles, and rules

Play presumes an intense relationship with the immediate social and physical environment. Children play with a friend or an adult, and they play with objects. In relation to other people and the surrounding environment, the playing child creates a play-world that is different from the "ordinary world." The child and play partner create a shared play-world by using rhythms, rules, and roles. Detailed analyses of parent-infant interactions, for instance, show how a shared play-world is created. The infant and parent communicate by imitating each other, through eye contact, by taking turns, and by repeating, varying, and improvising sounds and gestures (DeZutter, 2007; Trevarthen, 2011). The main goal of this communication is to make contact. These interactions have a rhythm and are structured like music and dance. The infant and family members start playing rhythmic body games and enjoy music, songs, and dancing, which become part of the fun of their life together. Their vocalizations and the movements of face and body follow rhythms; they follow patterns of sound and movement in time. Researchers such as Stern write about "socio-dramatic episodes" in which "emotional narratives develop" (Stern,

1977/ 2009). In playful interactions infant and parent “negotiate the invented life of meaning” (Trevarthen, 2011).

In play with the physical environment, there often is a rhythmic structure of repetition and variation as well. For example, a baby who drops an object listens for the “plop” and then looks questioningly and enthusiastically at the caregiver, who then has to pick up and return the object so that the baby can drop it again. Children explore the environment by imitating, trying out, repeating, and varying actions and observing the effects (Piaget, 1967).

With young children the rules and the structure of play are still simple and loose, and they can easily be changed during the course of play. The play of young children often has the character of a repeated series of actions. A 2-year-old’s drumming of feet on the sofa can develop into a concerted drumming involving four or five children (Løkken, 2000). Children can allow these repetitive series of actions to grow into a more comprehensive ritual. For instance, lunch at the table may be concluded with singing, clapping of hands, and finally drumming with heels (Corsaro, 2010). A well-known example is the variations on the game of peek-a-boo, which children all over the world love playing either with their caretakers or with other children. In this context social constructivists speak of “co-construction” (Valsener and Vos, 1996). Through repetition and variations on series of actions, young children together with caregivers and other children co-construct a shared play-reality, a “magic circle.”

Freedom to modulate experiences

Play is not “normal” or “actual” life. The players create a magic circle, which is different from ordinary life. But that does not mean that play is not related to serious issues that children experience in ordinary life. In role play children often act out experiences that have made a deep impression (Kalliala, 2006; Rogers & Evans, 2008). After a hospital admission children often play at being doctors. Mother-and-baby is a beloved theme in which the child plays out his or her most basic experiences with love, dependence, and power. By means of pretend play, children make their own subjective play-world out of experiences that have partially overwhelmed them. In play they can be the actor instead of the passive victim. They make the overwhelming experience their own. Play gives a child a sense of freedom and the subjective experience of shaking off the inescapable.

Play breaks through the rule of law that governs normal life. According to Rodriguez (2006) this concept is the cornerstone for understanding the meaning of play. Rodriguez argues that logical thinking and play fundamentally differ in their aims. The point of logic, as traditionally construed, is to establish unambiguous canons of correct reasoning: something is right or wrong, true or false. “In contrast, the fundamental aim of play is the *modulation of the player’s experience*” (Rodriguez, 2006, p. 4). During play we can temporarily escape from the rule of law and obligations in normal life. Perhaps this escape is what makes play exciting: it gives us the freedom to change our experience of reality. Indeed, freedom is a feature that highly diverse forms of play have in common. A group of 2-year-olds who walk around a table laughing and screaming forget in their play all the times that they fall and get up again or the times they hurt themselves because they can’t yet man-

age to run properly. A 3-year-old can enjoy playing child-at-the-doctor's without the anxiety caused by the fear that the doctor may do something that hurts. When a teacher reads aloud a story of a bear who has lost its mother, the children can enter into the story with pleasure, without feeling any actual fear of loss.

Play and the art of adaptation

Evolutionary psychologists and neuropsychologists show that play helps young animals learn about their physical environment and the behavior of peers and adult members of their group. Bjorklund (2007) hypothesizes: "When behavioural flexibility is important to an animal it is likely that some mechanisms would evolve that promote learning the vagaries of a changeable environment. Play is one of those mechanisms" (p. 145). In play, juveniles enjoy adapting to unexpected circumstances (Pellis, Pellis, & Bell, 2010). Neuropsychological studies show that the play system is a primary process that arises from ancient regions of the brain related to survival, just as does, for instance, the panic system, the care system, or the lust system. This primary play system helps to achieve the programming of higher brain regions. Most of the higher brain is created by experience (Panksepp, 2012). "Perhaps it [play] is especially influential in refining our frontal cortical, executive networks that allow us to more effectively appreciate social nuances and develop better social strategies" (Panksepp in *American Journal of Play*, 2010, p. 269).

Many behavioral and mental functions are refined during youthful play. The more complex the social life of a species, the bigger the brain size, the longer the period before juveniles reach mature adulthood, and also the longer the young can play without the burdens and obligations of adult life. In this respect Panksepp's (2007) study of Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHA) is interesting. Animals that have little play when young show stereotyped behavior toward peers and are deficient in regulating their aggressive urges when adults (Kempes, Den Heijer, Korteweg, Louwerse, & Sterck, 2009; Potegal and Einon, 1989). Although relevant research in human youngsters is scarce, there are good reasons for suggesting that play-deprived children also have less refined behavioral and mental skills for self-control. Studies show that problems with the inhibition of natural impulses are related to the development of ADHD and that daily sessions of playing rough-and-tumble diminish ADHD symptoms in boys.

Play and ordinary life in early childhood

In studies of the play of young children most attention is paid to the educational benefits of "pure play" — that is, activities in which the child is spontaneously engaged for fun and pleasure: babies' playful movements with legs and arms; babies' proto-conversations with parents and teachers; toddlers' physical play of running around and going down the slide; playful explorations in the sandpit and with physical objects; pretend play with cars and dolls in the household corner (Sutton-Smith, 1997). A varied range of possibilities for play is one of the important hallmarks of high quality of the upbringing of young children.

But young children do not live exclusively in the world of play. From the very beginning children are confronted with what Huizinga (1938/1955) calls "the ne-

cessities and obligations of the normal life.” Children have to be looked after: they need to eat and drink, to be cleaned and changed, to sleep. From the children’s perspective as well, not everything they do is play. They help and comfort other children; they help their parents and teachers with cleaning, cooking, and other chores of housekeeping (Post & Hohmann, 2000; Singer & De Haan, 2007a). A lot of the time of young children’s parents and teachers is devoted to caring for them, with the caregivers adapting themselves to what the child is capable of and wants. But the young child adapts at least as much to the environment in which he or she is growing up. Children want to learn to take care of themselves. They want to learn from the adults and to contribute to the group: they want to grow up. The child learns the rhythms of sleeping and feeding as well as the customs, skills, and language of the culture (Lancy, 2008; Tudge, 2008). Young children probably make all the adaptations that are expected of them through their pleasure in contact and their urge to play and learn with their teachers and with objects in the environment. Play provides a counterweight to all the adaptations expected of young children. It is therefore important with the youngest children to look not only at their pure and free play but also at their play and playful interactions during the time adults are caring for them and fulfilling other obligations of normal life.

Play and learning boundaries

From the perspective of young children there are no clear boundaries between play, care, and work. During feeding or washing or diaper changing they can suddenly stop and demand the caregiver’s attention by laughing or making play noises (Shin, 2010). Toddlers play while eating and drinking in the day-care center. They look excitedly at the drops of lemonade dripping from the table, smear yoghurt on the table with their fingers, blow bubbles in their cup, poke their fingers in the bread, lick the peanut butter from it. They copy each other and together take pleasure in their discoveries. But activities that look like play can also be serious for a child. Helping other children is a serious business — for instance, helping each other with practical matters like putting on their coats or shoes.

Jarno (2 years old) and Emmie (2 years old) play together in the corner. All at once Jarno sees his rubber boots and decides to put them on. He puts his foot in one boot but gets no further than the shaft. Then he asks Emmie to “hellup, hellup” and pushes a boot into her hands. Emmie offers the left boot to the right foot. After much pulling and tugging, after a while, Jarno walks about with his feet in the shafts of the wrong boots. For the adults watching this scene it is all most amusing, but is it play? No, that’s probably not how the children see it. (Observation by ES)

Playing and working can pass easily from one to the other.

Sylvia (2 years old) squats on the floor with a brush and dustpan and makes as though she is brushing the floor. In fact her brush hardly touches the floor, and she does not seem bothered by whether there is anything to sweep or not. Then, when the teacher asks, “Sylvia, will you help me with sweeping?” Sylvia immediately sets to work. She carefully brushes from the floor the crumbs that the teacher points out. (Observation by ES)

The younger the child the less he or she is aware of the boundaries between play and the necessities of ordinary life. It is therefore up to parents and teachers to guard the boundaries for the children's safety and well-being. In practice, with toddlers this means many confrontations with "no," "mustn't do this," and "don't do that." Cannella (1997) found that during her observation study in day-care centers that children got to hear more than 60 different rules and commands from their teachers. During free play teachers are more often busy controlling the children's behavior than with talking or playing with them (Singer & De Haan, 2007b; Singer, Nederend, Penninx, Tajik, & Boom, 2014). Brennan (2005) and Stephenson (2009) produced similar findings. When teachers make use of play or elements of play in controlling behavior, their actions appear to have a positive effect on the children. Corsaro (2010) describes how rituals help preschool children reconcile themselves to the inevitable. For example, they can be made aware of the times dictated by the adult structuring of the day: taking leave of their parents, sitting at the table for lunch, the beginning and end of the day. Ritual provides the structure for a play-world in which the participants have a certain influence that is experienced as free activity and that can reconcile them to an accomplished fact.

In their studies in child centers in New Zealand, Brennan (2005) and Stephenson (2009) give examples of teachers who soothe through play and humor.

Nicola is roaming around the room although she has been asked by Donna (teacher) twice to remain seated until she has finished her lunch. Nicola ignores both requests and heads in the direction of the kitchen. Donna asks her once again to sit down but this time with smiles and says: "Nicola you have a carrot, a big juicy carrot. You will be the envy of all the rabbits in the world." Nicola grins and sits down at the table. (Brennan, 2005, p. 116)

In this example the teacher employs the magic of the pretend game in order to create together a reality that both teacher and child can share in freedom. Young children also love to play with the rules of their caregivers by transgressing them for fun (Corsaro, 2010; Singer & De Haan, 2007b). For example, children may clap loudly and scream, look to see whether the teacher has seen, and then laugh even louder if the teacher has not noticed; or children may secretly go outside, which is forbidden, and look to find out whether the teacher has seen. These studies suggest that 2- and 3-year-olds all playfully explore the boundaries of their world — the boundaries their parents have drawn. Through humor, rituals, and a playful approach caretakers or teachers and young children bridge the great difference in power that exists between them.

From an ethical point of view young children's natural impulses to play are related to the issue of children's rights and to the issue of power in the teacher-child relationship. Children have the right to play, while the task of the teachers is to set the boundaries so the children can play safely and are well taken care of. But the way the teacher sets boundaries and the way the teacher structures young children's lives should not be to the detriment of children's playfulness — that is, their creativity and sense of freedom. Children and teacher create togetherness in playful communication; with the help of humor and playfulness the teacher ensures that the child is not overpowered.

Children and teachers: play and playfulness

Teachers should ensure that the vast array of young children's confrontations with such constraints as rules, limits, experiences of failure while learning new skills, and caretaking activities are handled in a playful spirit. Play helps young children to overcome the troubles of ordinary life and to share meaningful experiences with caregivers, teachers, parents, and peers. As Trevarthen (2011) writes: "As they play and make sense together, a baby and parent learn to act their part in a set of performances and mannerisms that grow as the beginnings of a cultural way of life or 'habitus'" (p. 180). Teachers and young children who co-construct a play-reality are building a strong sense of togetherness through rituals that start the day, rituals that celebrate birthdays, or rituals that are incidentally developed by the children. Through rituals share as through drama, storytelling, and pretend play, pedagogues and children create a magic circle. Huizinga (1938/1955) reminds us of the essential value of play: children and animals "play because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom" (p. 8).

What counts is the spirit of playfulness that permeates all aspects of young children's lives. Play is fundamental to living and adapting to the demands of ordinary life. If we are not to lose the creativity needed to overcome differences in power and to take pleasure in the co-construction of meaning and the modulation of subjective experience, we must cherish the endowment that nature has given to us: the capacity to play.

In conclusion, play and playfulness are basic aspects of early childhood education. The younger the child, the more important it is that play permeate every aspect of his or her life. A play pedagogy means that teachers provide support for young children to play in a safe and challenging environment that is adapted to their needs and interests and also that teachers support peer play and peer relationships from an early age. A play pedagogy in addition involves teachers' knowing that playfulness and the co-construction of meaning with infants and toddlers go hand in hand. Structuring and limit setting by the teacher and the adaptation of young children to the teacher's demands should take place in a spirit of playfulness. Ritualized interactions or patterns of behavior help the child to anticipate, to take the initiative, and to invent variations; they support the child's agency. Above all, in a play pedagogy teachers are aware that young children live in a world that can easily overpower them. They have much to learn, and they have to adapt to the cultural world into which they are born. Play helps children to maintain their confidence and not to give up after failure. In a play pedagogy, teachers gently structure young children's lives by means of routines, rituals, songs, dance, rhythms, rhymes, and humor.

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