Theories about young children's peer relationships

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Cultural values and peer relationships

Young children are highly interested in peers. They love to meet the children of their mother's best friend and to play with age-mates at the children's centre. But they have few opportunities to decide for themselves where, when and with whom they can play. Their parents' values and resources, and the availability of educational provisions determine their playmates. Early peer relationships are embedded within an amalgam of cultural values. The history of early childhood education shows that pedagogues like Froebel, Montessori, the McMillan sisters, Isaacs and Malaguzzi had high ambitions to foster community life and harmony in human relationships (see Chapters 3, 4, 5, 10, 31). Although these pedagogues started from diverse philosophical and religious traditions, they shared the appreciation of play, peer relationships and cooperation of parents and teachers. Their pedagogical ideas often found fertile ground in educated liberal families in Western countries. Governments that supported children's centres in the twentieth century, however, had different concerns. The prime interests were the preparation for formal education and to free the parents, especially the mother, for work outside the home (Singer 1993).

In the history of theories on young children's peer relationships there is an ongoing debate between the liberal educational philosophies on play, peers and community life on the one hand, and the traditional adult-centred ideas on early childhood care and education on the other. As Kessen (1979) stated, the child is a cultural invention and science plays an active role in the creation of new images of young children. Empirical data are raised in specific social contexts and theoretical constructs are embedded in cultural values. In this chapter a review is given of studies on peer relationships of young children in social-historical context. What social and pedagogical conditions can impede or foster the development of peer relationships in young children?

Developmental psychology and new theoretical approaches

None of the major developmental theories of the twentieth century – psychoanalytic, evolutionary, attachment, social learning, cognitive developmental, behavioural-genetic
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theory – have explicitly predicted that young children can interact in meaningful ways. The major developmental theories held that:

1. Infants' capacities for true social interaction are limited;
2. The ability to engage in peer relationships develops later in childhood and derives from earlier relationships with caregivers; and
3. Later peer relationships are consequential for development but early ones are not.

(Hay et al. 2009: 125–126)

The peer relations of under-three-year-olds were considered to be rare, short-lived and often aggressive (Verba 1994). A common assumption was that only adults—especially mothers—constitute the meaningful environment of infants and toddlers (Singer 1993). These opinions were hardly based on research; before 1970 there were hardly places where young children could meet and be studied. The first studies of peer relationships were undertaken in the 1930s and 1940s in residential facilities for orphans, e.g. by Bridges in Canada and by Anna Freud in the London war nurseries for the very young survivors of concentration camps. Also, studies were done in American university-based nursery schools, the so-called laboratory of human relationships (Goldman and Buysse 2007). Susan Isaacs (1933) carried out her famous study in an English experimental nursery school. These early studies vividly describe the development of peer play in young children, from onlooker behaviour, parallel play, associative play, to cooperative play (Parten 1932); and the development of emotional relationships by mutual touching, mutual smiling and extended bouts of imitation that start at an early age (Freud and Dann 1951; Isaacs 1933). But these studies were exceptional and did not change the theoretical assumptions of major theories.

From the 1960s and 1970s a new wave of studies of young children's peer relations arose. A growing number of young mothers were working outside the home and there was a need for childcare facilities. In several European countries and the USA small groups of researchers started innovative research in group settings for young children. For instance, Stambak and Sinclair (1993) and Verba (1994) in France studied joint play in toddlers, and Italian researchers like Mussati (1986) analysed the communicative skills in early social play. Important work was done in the Scandinavian countries and Finland, for instance by Løkken (2000) on the toddler's style in peer interactions, Lindahl and Pramling-Samuelsson (2002) on peer play and learning, and Hännikäinen (2001) on togetherness among children. In the USA, the work of Howes (1983) on friendship and Corsaro (2010) on peer cultures was groundbreaking. These studies of peer interactions and relationships often aimed to counteract the negative bias in the scientific literature. Studies were done in close relationship with practitioners to develop pedagogy for infants and toddlers in group settings. Qualitative methods predominated: phenomenological analyses, participatory observations, field notes, interviews and video fragments. New theoretical concepts were constructed, like co-construction and mutual imitation (Verba 1994), and collective we-intentionality among teachers and young children (Tomasetto and Rakoczy 2003). Besides qualitative studies, quantitative data are also important to understand whether specific phenomena are exceptional or typical and in what circumstances, and to study short- and long-term effects of peer relationships.

Studies of peer relationships have broadened the scope of major developmental theories to capture new phenomena. Two stand out: attachment and socioconstructivist theory. In attachment theory the main issues are emotional security in the teacher–child relationship and factors that promote positive bonding among children (e.g. Howes 2011).
socioconstructivist approach builds on the work of Piaget and Vygotsky (e.g. Stambak and Sinclair 1993). The focus is on tools that young children use to co-construct shared meanings and sense of belonging, and on the pedagogical tools of teachers that create zones of proximal development in peer relationships. The broadened scope relates to the emphasis on: (1) young children's abilities to engage in multiple relationships with peers and caregivers and not exclusively in the mother-child relationship; (2) the innate sociable nature of young children and their active role in the construction of friendship and peer cultures; (3) the complex social networks in which parents, caregivers and young children participate.

The beginnings of ‘true’ peer interactions

According to Hay et al. (2009: 127) true peer interactions take place when peers show mutual engagement of attention, explicit communicative acts, sensitivity to the behaviour of the partner, and coordination of actions with those of the partner. For example, two-month-old babies look at each other, touch and make noises to attract attention; five-month-olds understand each other's nonverbal communication of intentions:

Merel (0.5) is looking at Bram (0.5). She touches his arm and laughs at him, but Bram is more intent on Merel's toy and does not notice her attempt at contact. Merel persists and, looking at him, tries to touch his hand and strokes his face. At this, Bram looks at her and Merel gets a beaming smile from him in return.

(Singer observation)

One-year-old babies show early forms of prosocial behaviour. They try to share interesting experiences by pointing out, tapping and showing, and offering objects (see Chapters 10, 11, 15). They sensitively respond to the needs of peers and try to help:

On the way back to the classroom from the park, Katie (1:1) starts fussing. Emily (1:2) points at Katie who was sitting across from her in the cart and gently touches her body. Emily reaches into the backpack and takes out a tissue. Emily tries to help Katie wipe her running nose.

(Shin 2010: 297)

Bystanding two- and three-year-olds even intervene in violent peer conflicts, when they cannot attract the attention of the teachers for help (Van Hoogdalem et al. 2008). Toddlers appreciate humour and joking with peers. They most often laugh during joint physical social play, such as running and jumping, and during pretend play (Singer and De Haan 2007; Løkken 2000). Humour is an important tool for young children to construct togetherness and to feel agency of the self. Testing limits of teachers is a source of shared fun: naughty words, playing with food, throwing objects. Toddlers' humour is related to the unexpected and incongruence of well-known schemata (e.g. funny gestures, sounds or words, incongruous actions, and incongruous use of objects). An example of a funny gesture:

Katie and Akiko ... are at the table. Katie drops something on the floor and says, 'Oh my!' using her hand to touch her head and smiles. Akiko looks at her, smiles and repeats, 'Oh my!' Akiko goes on to repeat the action. She vocalizes and uses her hand to touch her face and head, laughs out loud looking at Katie and the caregiver.

(Loizou 2005: 48)
Peer conflicts are quite normal, but violent conflicts in which children show anger or sadness are rare in most group settings (Hay et al. 2009), but there can be up to one violent conflict per hour per child, dependent on the pedagogical quality (Singer and De Haan 2007). Young children have conflicts over objects, intrusions on physical space and trials to enter into peer play. Toys are more attractive in the hands of another child, even when an exact duplicate is available. But even one- and two-year-olds are more likely to offer toys to peers than to grab their possessions. In peer conflicts children learn to take into account the playmate's perspective (Singer et al. 2012). In order to continue joint play, three-year-olds tend to refrain from will-enforcing strategies like pushing, grappling or hitting, even when these strategies enlarge their chance to win.

**Joint play and recurrent well-scripted social exchanges**

Mutual imitation plays a central role in co-constructing meaning: one child initiates contact with explicit gestures, the peer understands the invitation and imitates the gestures; new elements are brought in that lead to new series of recurrent mutual imitations. Young children use mutual imitation to start an interaction, to confirm one's wishes, to make jokes and solve conflicts (Mettzoff 2005). For instance:

Marie (3:1) and Jona (2:11) are playing together with a ball. Abram (3:4) wants to join them. But Marie refuses him: 'No, no, go away. Go away'. Abram looks sad, and keeps standing nearby the girls. Marie repeats: 'No, no'. Then Abram starts to imitate Marie, and also says: 'No, no'. Then a joint rhythmic no-no-no sing-song develops. They start to shout louder and louder and burst out in exuberant laughter.

*(Singer observation)*

Major developmental psychologists, like Bandura, Freud, Piaget and Vygotsky, considered imitation central to the development of social understanding in early childhood (Cole et al. 2005). Imitation reflects an understanding that the other is 'like me' (Meltzoff and Prinz 2002). Neuropsychological studies have confirmed this insight, and added hypotheses about 'mirror neurons', specific neurons that are activated both when the child performs a specific action and is observing the same action performed by another human.

Joint play of one- and two-year-olds often has the structure of recurrent imitations of physical activities. According to Lokken:

At this age, the art of headshaking, 'curtain-running', 'paper- (or table-) licking', 'box-tapping', 'wall-kicking' ... appear as meaningful ways of children celebrating and/or utilizing being in a (public) toddler group.

*(Lokken 2000: 532)*

Lokken argues that recurrent physical imitation is the typical stylish way of toddlers to construct games, rituals or routines, and peer culture and community. Children under four years seldom plan or discuss the game or storylines before they start playing. They just start running or playing 'drinking tea'. In symbolic play they follow several storylines that are loosely associated. They use fragments of well-known scripts like singing a birthday song, building and knocking down a block tower, mother-washing-the-baby. As children grow older their scripts become more coordinated. In this respect, knowing each other for a longer period is also crucial. Recurrent imitations need time to evolve into shared routines and into more
complex, coordinated and well-scripted social exchanges. Researchers who studied groups over longer periods have documented how young children organize their behaviour step by step. How they imitate shared familiar scripts and assimilate these scripts to their own needs and understanding. These mutual imitations can turn into communal and predictable routines to be produced consistently over the year (Lindahl and Pramling Samuelsson 2002). Examples include: two- and three-year-olds who have constructed a routine of singing and walking in a row in pyjamas — after the familiar script of playing ‘train’ — when they go to sleep (observation Singer); ‘the little chair routine’ of preschoolers who used to start the day by walking over chairs and tables in a circle (Corsaro 2010); or toddlers who regularly burst into gleeful concerts by rhythmic tapping on their chairs (Lokken 2000).

Friendship and the group dynamics

When young children meet regularly over longer periods they develop preferences for specific peers. Although slightly different definitions are used, friendship is generally defined as a reciprocal, predominantly positive relationship between two children (Goldman and Bruysse 2007). Friends tend to play together, show more prosocial behaviour and affection, take initiatives and imitate each other more often, compared with other available children. Friendships are already observed in one-year-olds (Shin 2010). There is some evidence that having a friend provides young children with emotional support in the absence of parents (Howes 2011). The company of friends can make transitions to a new group less stressful. Children can form stable friendships that last for several years, and they can be very distressed when they are separated because the family moves elsewhere.

In early childhood the chance to become friends increases when the children are familiar, of the same age and enjoy the same sort of activities (Van Hoogdalem et al. 2012). From three years on, children develop a preference for children of the same gender but mixed gender friendship is also common in toddlers and preschoolers. The degree of gender-based segregation depends on the pedagogical policy of the centre. In small informal neighbourhood groups with a lack of same-age and same-gender peers, children tend to play more often in mixed age and gender groups (Howes 2011).

When children grow older they start to play in triads and bigger groups. Negative aspects of group settings also become more visible. Children without friends are likely to be lonely and socially timid or anxious (Howes 2011). Children with disabilities are more vulnerable to being refused and neglected by peers (Odom 2000). In triadic relationships relational and physical aggression can be used to settle the issue of dominance within the group and between groups. For instance in a Dutch group of two- and three-year-olds:

Finn only wanted to play with Willem when Piet was not available. When Piet was available Finn ignored Willem. When Willem and Piet were playing together, Finn tried to separate them by bullying Willem.

(Singer observation)

Kirves and Sajaniemi (2012) found that preschoolers talk about bullying, especially exclusion of peer relationships, as an everyday experience.

Pedagogical approaches and cultural contexts

Adults are the prime source of security, knowledge of the world and wisdom; the adult–child relationship is basically asymmetric. Peer relationships are more equal. In peer relationships
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Children have to improvise and to be creative in constructing shared meanings. In peer conflicts they learn to negotiate, to apply social rules like give-and-take and to reconcile after winning or losing a conflict (Singer and De Haan 2007). Friends are found to play at a higher cognitive level and in more complex activities than non-friends (Howes 2011). Emotions of peers spontaneously evoke empathy and helping behaviour, in spite of low rates of teacher reinforcement and empathy teaching (Singer et al. 2012). The available evidence suggests that young children's peer relationships can have a unique contribution to well-being and development (Howes 2011). But young children are highly dependent on adults for when, where and which peers they meet. The following pedagogical factors of policy and educational practice seem to be important for peer relationships.

**Continuity and stability in peer relations**

In many countries, facilities for daycare are strongly related to the working hours of the parents and the economic concerns of the government. Because of part-time work and flexible working hours, the composition of the group changes during the day and the week, and can be totally changed in three months (Van Hoogdalem et al. 2012). Instability of the group impedes children's chance to make friends and shared rituals.

> Relationships, whether parent-child attachment or playmate relationships, develop through multiple and recursive interactive experiences ... From these experiences, the child internalizes a set of fundamental social expectations about the behavioural dispositions of the partner.

*(Howes 2011: 181)*

Stability can also be disturbed for other reasons. For instance because of the policy of age-group composition in the organization that results in regular transitions to new groups; from the perspective of children, this is greatly enforced and disruptive towards familiar peer relationships and friendship.

**Emotional security and togetherness in group settings**

Children need emotional security in the teacher–child relationship to be open to peers. Factors that promote the development of emotional security are different in group settings compared with home-like settings (Ahnert et al. 2006). In home-like settings the providers' sensitivity towards individual children predicted attachment security. In children's centres group-related sensitivity turned out to be a reliable predictor of secure provider attachment: the material and social environment has to be well structured in small playgroups and have challenging activity areas (Musatti and Mayer 2012). The teachers have to be available and accessible. For instance, by sitting in an activity area, the child is in control to play nearby or at a distance and can show attachment behaviour by social referencing and by coming to the teacher for a hug (Gosselin and Forman 2012). In a Dutch study, a coherent pattern of behaviours was observed (Singer et al. 2014). When teachers were walking around, children were following them and were also walking around; the room was noisy with lots of toys; the level of play engagement was low. The children were very seldom engaged in the same activity for longer than three minutes. Most of the time the teachers were walking around, because they aimed to respond sensitively to the signals of individual children. However, while walking around, they were not available and often distracted the surrounding children. Group life can
be chaotic for young children. Therefore they need the teacher to be easily found, for example sitting quietly at a fixed location.

Teachers induct children into group culture by recurrent playful practices, like routines, songs, rules, rituals (Brennan 2007; Hännikäinen 2001). The effectiveness of these tools and practices appears highly dependent on the quality of the teacher–child relationships: warmth, tenderness, humour, playfulness and openness for active involvement with the children. Teachers and children are actively creating their own culture:

Often realized by means of humour, fantasy, dramatic gestures, joking with language and exaggeration. Moreover a playful action is also an object as such: it is a way to communicate, express positive feelings to another person and feel togetherness.

(Hännikäinen 2001: 125)

Supportive and intrusive behaviour of teachers

Studies of direct involvement of teachers in peer interactions have contradictory findings. Some studies conclude that teachers inhibit peer interactions (Harper and McCluskey 2003). Other studies show that teachers enrich the quality of peer play (Hännikäinen 2001). Göncü and Weber (2000) relate these mixed outcomes to the issue of power. The teacher is the children’s compass and authority figure. When the teacher enters into joint play, the children stop interacting with the peer and focus on the teacher. They try to attract her attention – ‘Look what I made’ – and they look for confirmation. Whether the children become focused again on peers, depends on the teacher’s behaviour. When she is quietly sitting in the activity centre and showing her interest by eye contact, joint attention, small encounters, she has a positive effect on children’s involvement in play and peers (Gosselein and Forman 2012; Singer et al. 2014). If the teacher usurps too much initiative, the children lose the direction of their own behaviour. With more equal power shared by the children, they lose their own initiative less rapidly when they play together.

The teacher needs to adapt to young children’s rhythm and pace, which is often much slower than the teacher’s pace. Timing is important – for instance, when should one intervene in joint play? When children enter an activity area they often begin by exploring objects and playing alone or in parallel. Sometimes the following pattern can be observed (Musatti and Mayer 2012). After a first explorative contact the children think up new variations in their play. They imitate each other in increasingly exaggerated fashion. This can end up in a climax, with children screaming with pleasure and being wild:

Helen (3:0) puts an animal on top of the block construction of Maartje (2:9). Maartje takes an animal and pushes it against Helen’s. Helen throws her animal away; Maartje does the same. Helen throws off the point of her tower, Maartje makes a similar movement with her hands so that everything collapses. The imitations become steadily wilder and their pleasure more exuberant.

(Singer observation)

Good timing by the teacher means that she intervenes playfully before the children start to cry and be too wild; and before they start to be bored.
Conclusions

Since the 1960s, a growing number of infants and toddlers have entered children's centres. These new pedagogical conditions gave rise to social capacities in young children that were previously unthinkable. Scientific research of peer relationships in group settings led to new theoretical insights and added to the invention of the new active sociable child (Kessen 1979). Research showed that young children stimulate each other playfully by imitating, varying, exaggerating; by alternately playing alone or together. Playing with friends is what most children love. In peer play, children develop important social skills, like improvisation, sensitivity to subtle social signals, negotiation and reconciliation, social and moral rules, inhibition of aggressive behaviour and joking. But we should not forget that these scientific observations are embedded in specific pedagogical circumstances. When economic concerns override children's interests in peers, young children's relationships can be at risk because of unstable groups and frequent separations (Trevarthen 2011). Professionalism cannot compensate for the lack of familiarity among children and the teachers (Parker-Rees 2007). We also do not know the risks of insensitivity towards lonely and isolated children or children who are excluded from a young age. Group settings can enrich young children's social life when adults – parents, pedagogues and policy makers – acknowledge the value of peer relationships and community from an early age: pedagogical ideals should be the leading incentive.

References


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