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### Play and playfulness, basic features of early childhood education

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## Play and playfulness, basic features of early childhood education

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**ABSTRACT:** This article argues that play and playfulness are basic features in early childhood education, but that play curricula can have serious drawbacks. The starting point is the play theory of the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, a radical critic of the focus on the educational benefits of play. According to Huizinga the essential feature of play is pleasure, and play gives a sense of freedom. When the focus on the educational benefits of play becomes too dominant, the most essential feature of play is lost: children's pleasure. In play children and adults co-construct a shared world, and they are able to modulate their experiences with reality. Recent studies of caregiver–infant communication, neuropsychology and evolutionary psychology are in line with Huizinga's theory. Without play, adapting to and surviving in a complex social world would be difficult. Play helps to overcome differences in power in the caregiver–child relationship, and play is a resource of shared pleasure and creativity.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Cet article met en avant que le jeu et la joie du jeu sont les caractéristiques principales de l'éducation des jeunes enfants, mais que les curricula qui s'appuient sur le jeu peuvent avoir de sérieux désavantages. Il sera d'abord question de la théorie du jeu de l'historien néerlandais Johan Huizinga, une critique radicale du focus mis sur les bénéfices éducatifs du jeu. Selon Huizinga, le trait premier du jeu est le plaisir et jouer donne un sentiment de liberté. Quand les bénéfices éducatifs du jeu deviennent trop dominants, l'essence principale du jeu est perdue : le plaisir des enfants. Dans le jeu, adultes et enfants co-construisent un monde partagé et sont capables de moduler leurs expériences avec la réalité. Des études récentes sur la communication entre enfant et accueillant, de neuropsychologie et de psychologie évolutionniste s'inscrivent dans la lignée de la théorie d'Huizinga. Sans jeu, s'adapter et survivre dans un monde social complexe pourrait être difficile. Jouer aide à dépasser les différences dans les relations de pouvoir entre enfant et accueillant ; jouer est une ressource de plaisir partagé et de créativité.

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG:** Schwerpunkt dieser Arbeit ist die These, dass Spiel und Verspieltheit Basiskompetenzen in der frühkindlichen Erziehung sind, doch dass Spielcurricula große Nachteile mit sich bringen können. Ausgangspunkt ist die Spieltheorie des niederländischen Historikers Johan Huizinga, der radikaler Kritiker des Fokus auf dem pädagogischen Wert des Spiels war. Huizinga sah den wesentlichen Wert des Spiels in der Freude am Spiel und in dem Gefühl der Freiheit, das sich durch das Spiel einstellt. Wird jedoch der pädagogische Wert des Spiels zu sehr in den Vordergrund gerückt, geht die wichtigste Qualität des Spiels verloren, nämlich die kindliche Freude am Spiel. Im Spiel konstruieren Kinder und Erwachsene gemeinsam eine Welt, die sie miteinander teilen, und in der sie ihre Erfahrungen mit der Realität modulieren. Jüngere Studien zur Kommunikation zwischen Bezugsperson und Kleinkind, Neuropsychologie und

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Evolutionspsychologie schließen sich der Theorie von Huizinga an. Ohne das Spiel wären die Anpassung und das Überleben in einer komplexen sozialen Welt schwierig. Das Spiel hilft, Machtunterschiede in der Beziehung zwischen Bezugsperson und Kind zu überwinden. Außerdem ist das Spiel eine Quelle gemeinsamer Freude und Kreativität.

**RESUMEN:** Este texto argumenta que el juego y su capacidad son aspectos básicos en la educación de la primera infancia, pero su desarrollo curricular puede presentar serios inconvenientes. El punto de partida es la teoría del juego del historiador holandés Johan Huizinga, un crítico radical centrado en los beneficios educativos del juego. De acuerdo con Huizinga, la característica esencial del juego es el placer, y el juego aporta un sentido de libertad. Cuando el interés en los beneficios educativos del juego se torna muy dominante, el rasgo más esencial del juego se pierde: el placer infantil. En el juego, infantes y adultos co-construyen un mundo compartido, y son capaces de ajustar sus experiencias a la realidad. Estudios recientes sobre la comunicación entre infante y cuidador, neuropsicología y psicología educativa siguen la línea de Huizinga. Sin la adaptación y supervivencia del juego en el complejo mundo social será difícil. El juego ayuda a superar las diferencias de poder en las relaciones entre el infante y el cuidador, igualmente es un recurso de gozo compartido y creatividad.

**Keywords:** play theory; play curricula; daycare; teacher-child relationship; very young children

## Introduction

*Let my playing be my learning, and my learning be my playing* is a well-known expression of the belief in play as progress. Ever since the Enlightenment play has been associated with moral, social, emotional and cognitive learning and development. Founding parents of Western early childhood education such as Froebel, Montessori, Steiner and Malaguzzi have focused on the active playing and learning child (Singer 1992). Since the Second World War many developmental studies have attempted to demonstrate the educational benefits of play; and indeed in many studies – though not all – such relations were found, e.g. between playful mother–infant and later social skills, or between pretend play and later abstract thinking (Sutton-Smith 1997). Unlike the teacher-based curricula aimed at instruction and the transmission of knowledge, ‘play curricula’ were, and are, seen as child-centred and developmentally appropriate. But play curricula also have their drawbacks. According to Sutton-Smith (1997), the belief in play as progress and the royal road to stimulating development has become so dominant in the educational discourse that we tend to forget the playing child itself. Children’s ideas of play generally centre ‘on having fun, being outdoors, being with friends, choosing freely’ (49). Teachers tend to behave too ‘teacherly’ and misuse children’s play for their own educational goals, thus spoiling children’s fun (Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson 2008).

Dutch historian Johan Huizinga was among the first and most radical critics of the focus on the social and educational benefits of play, claiming that the essence of play gets lost in what he called the ‘functionalist approach of play’. In *Homo luden*, first published in 1938 and still acknowledged as a groundbreaking study for modern theories on 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. (8)

Huizinga analysed play as a free and meaningful activity, segregated from the obligations of practical life. I will start with some of the core arguments of Huizinga's theory, then apply his insights to recent theories of play in early childhood education. Following Huizinga, I will argue that play is an essential aspect of early childhood education in its own right. I focus my argument on the very young – the under-four-year-olds – and draw my illustrative examples from studies of, and observations in, daycare centres and playgroups. Huizinga's anti-educational approach to play makes clear that play and playfulness in both children and teachers have to be considered as basic feature of early childhood and care.

### **The irreducible experience of play**

The philosophical starting point of Huizinga is the observation that playing makes sense to the player. 'All play means something' (1). The basic motive to play is the experience 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' (1).

Humans also play for the sake of the subjective experience. According to Huizinga these experiences can only be captured in qualitative descriptions of feelings like excitement, tension, release, uncertainty, togetherness, surprise, rhythm, risk, balance. He criticises psychological and biological theories that aim to explain the nature and existence of play in terms of its presumed function and biological or social benefits. He points to the enormous diversity in functions and benefits cited in these theories. Psychologists claim that children play to discharge superabundant energy, to prepare for the demands of life, to exercise motor skills, to develop self-control and frustration tolerance, or for wish fulfilment. In this diversity of functions the most essential function of play in learning and development is lost.

In this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening, lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play. Nature, so our reasoning mind tells us, could just as easily have given her children all those useful functions of discharging superabundant energy, of relaxing after exertion, of training for the demands of life, of compensating for unfulfilled longings, etc., in the form of purely mechanical exercises and reactions. But no, she gave us play, with its tensions, its mirth, and its fun. (Huizinga 1955, 3)

All these functionalist approaches of play have in common that they start from the assumption that play must serve something else which is *not* play. Huizinga asserts that one could perfectly well accept all the theories of the benefits of play without capturing the essence of play – because 'it is precisely the fun-element that characterises the essence of play. We have to do with an absolutely primary category of life.' (p. 3). Children do not play because of some benefit that is more valuable than play itself, and neither do adults.

### **Rhythm, rules and the magic circle**

Huizinga's emphasis on the subjective experience of play might suggest that he starts from the individualistic assumption. But in his work 'experience' does not refer to inner states of an isolated individual. Play presumes an intense relation with the immediate social and physical environment. A child plays with a friend or an adult, and plays

with objects from his or her environment. In relation to other people and the surrounding environment the playing child creates a play-world, distinct from the 'normal world', in which rhythms, rules and structure play an essential role. Minutely detailed analyses of caregiver–baby interactions show that, for example, both partners create a play-world together, by imitating each other, through eye contact, and taking turns, by repeating, varying and improvising sounds (Trevvarthen 2011; DeZutter 2007). There is also a structure of repetition in the play with the physical environment. For example, a baby who drops an object listens for the plop-sound and then looks questioningly and enthusiastically to the caregiver, who then has to pick up and return the object so that the baby can drop it again. Caregiver and baby together create a rhythm or pattern, which they vary to maintain the excitement. These first forms of ludic, non-verbal communication are comparable to dancing or making music together (Malloch and Trevvarthen 2009; Stern 2000). A shared play-world often has the character of a 'magic circle'. For example, think of a teaching assistant who reads a story aloud to children: while listening, they are transported into another world. Or think of children who are totally absorbed in their play with cars, or dolls, or in their role as a tiger or pussycat.

As a rule adults make a clear distinction between the 'play-world' and the 'real world' by means of rules of play and demarcations in time and space. In the theatre it is a question of acting-as-if. Games of football or chess are forms of 'play-fighting' because of rules to which the players must conform. Competition during a football or chess match is delimited by the rules of the game. With young children the rules and the structure of play are still simple and loose can easily be changed during the course of the play. The play of young children often has the character of a repeated series of actions. A two-year-old drumming with the 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 table is concluded with singing, clapping of hands and finally letting the heels drum (Corsaro 2010). A well known example is the variations on the game of peek-a-boo which children all over the world love; either with their carers 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.

### **Freedom to modulate experiences**

Play is not 'normal' or 'actual' life; in playing we create a temporary sphere of activity, the play-world that differs from the 'normal'. But the awareness of 'just playing' does not mean that children and adults cannot become seriously absorbed in, and lose themselves, in their play. According to Huizinga elements of play can be found in every serious cultural institution – the law, the economy, religion and even the army (Huizinga 1955). In all these institutions ritual plays a role, i.e. patterns of actions in which those involved give form to central values or social relations. Rituals express central values and are able to make 'true' or represent truths that cannot be objectively demonstrated. The judge, for example, wears a toga, a ritual garb which serves to signal and delimit the 'play-world' of the law. Mr. Pietersen is no longer the usual Mr Pietersen, but 'Judge'. Sacred rituals often have the structure, to be irreverent for a moment, of a do-as-if game, in which the experience of the religious community, the Sacred Truth, is embodied (De Botton 2012). Take, for example, the Christian ritual of Holy Communion, the connection with the body and blood of Christ; in this ritual

wine and bread change, according to Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theology, into the body and blood of Christ. Through ritual people create a communal reality, a culture; they create a magical world in which the ‘the truth’ is revealed; and in the process their freedom as human is expressed.

Seriousness also occurs a great deal in children’s play, certainly when children are wholly absorbed in their play. If a three-year-old absorbed in his or her play with dolls or trains is disturbed by another child the reaction is often violent. The child is angry. The magic of his or her play-world is broken. Children play out serious experiences or experiences that make a deep impression (Kalliala 2006; Rogers & Evans 2008). After a hospital admission children will often play at doctors. ‘Mother and baby’ is a beloved theme in which 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. They make the experience their own – or to speak with Huizinga, in play the child creates its freedom to shake off the inescapable.

In Huizinga’s phenomenological analysis play is opposed to actions that are utilitarian, that are materially significant, work demanded by or issuing from a recognition of the laws of society and nature. Play breaks through the rule of law that governs ‘normal’ life. According to Rodriguez (2006), a specialist of modern-day games theory, this is the cornerstone of Huizinga’s theory of play.

Logical thinking and play differ in their fundamental aims. The point of logic, as traditionally construed, is to establish unambiguous canons of correct reasoning. In contrast, the fundamental aim of play is the *modulation of the player’s experience* (underlining ES) (4).

During play we can temporarily escape from this rule of law and obligations to the ‘normal’ life. Play gives a sense of freedom. Perhaps that is what makes play exciting: freedom to change our experience of reality in play. Indeed, this is a point shared in common by highly diverse forms of play. A group of two-year-olds who walk around a table laughing and screaming forget in their play all the times that they fall and get up again and hurt themselves because they can’t yet manage to run properly. A three-year-old can enjoy playing ‘child at the doctor’s’ without the anxiety that the doctor may actually hurt him or her. When a teaching assistant reads aloud a story of the bear who has lost his mother, the children can enter into the story with pleasure without feeling any actual fear of loss.

### ***Thin lines between play and serious life in young children***

There is always a tension between play and ‘normal’ life. The adult player is aware of the boundaries between ‘play-world’ and the ‘real’ world. Play has a beginning and an end and is marked by boundaries in time and space and by rules: think, for example, of the rules of the game for competitive cycling or for the theatre. But these rules can be broken – on occasion even as a game (what is real and what is fiction?) Sometimes breaking the rules evokes a sense of betrayal, as with the doping affair in international cycling and in the role of huge sums of money in football. Is sport still sport or is it purely a matter of money? But in relation to the delimitation of the play-world there is a great difference between adults and young children. Children of two or three years of age intuitively know the difference between ‘for fun’ and ‘for real’. They play ‘dog’ or ‘mother’ and they are that completely for the duration of the game.

And when they stop playing they know very well that they are not a dog or a mother. But the boundaries between play and ‘real’ are often vague and fluid. The fluid transition from ‘real’ to ‘play’ and vice versa is a phenomenon that one observes frequently with young children. Young children’s humour and jokes are often based on this transition (Loizou 2005; Singer & De Haan 2007a). Sometimes conflicts are resolved in this way. Take the following example:

Three three-year-olds children are playing together. There are two girls and a boy. They chatter and walk around the playground. All at once one of the girls says to the boy: ‘go away’, and pushes him away. The boy looks rather surprised and stays where he is. ‘Go’ says the girl again. ‘No’, says the boy. ‘No’, says the girl, imitating him. ‘No’, repeats the boy, louder this time. And within a minute a ‘no-no’ game has developed, a kind of sing-song game which the second girls joins in. The children clearly enjoy shouting ‘no’ in turn: the conflict has become a game. (Observation ES)

### **Play is one of the wellsprings of culture**

Huizinga (1955) does not see play as one aspect of social life and culture alongside other aspects. His aim is more ambitious. He argues that play is one of the sources of culture. Culture develops thanks to the capacity of living beings – animals and humans – to change their experience through the freedom to create new play-‘realities’. The heart of culture is constructed from elements of drama, joyous improvisations, jokes and humour, competition and contests, making images of reality. Without play the life disappears from culture.

Summarising one may say that play can be characterised by the following:

- Play has value in itself; play gives pleasure
- Play binds through rhythms, rules and structure
- Play gives freedom to change experience
- Play is bounded by fluid boundaries, through rules in time and space
- Play is one of the wellsprings of culture

### **Playful interactions and narrative musicality**

Huizinga’s theory of humans as essentially playful (*Homo ludens*) corresponds at crucial points with theories concerning playful communication between babies and parents and also with neurophysiological theories. Since the 1960s researchers have been involved in microanalyses of mother-infant interactions (Blurton Jones 1972; Connolly & Bruner 1974; Schaffer 1977; Stern 2002; Trevarthen & Aitken 2001). These studies convincingly show that infants are active participants in the interactions with parents or caregivers from the very beginning. Newborn infants can be alert, coordinated in their movements, self-aware and capable of imitating other persons’ expressions. The communication has the characteristics of play.

A newborn baby is observed to ‘provoke’ a confirmation from an attentive parent who has just been imitated (Nagy and Molnár 2004). In the parent-infant relationship eye movements, face expressions, vocalisations and arm and leg movements become part of mutually pleasing interactions. In the 1970s the anthropologist and linguist Mary Bateson analysed these phenomena in a nine-week-old baby. She called this interaction a ‘proto-conversation’ and described it as conducted with ‘a sort of delighted, ritualised courtesy’ (1979, 65). She was convinced that proto-conversation is the

source of the ‘ritual healing practices’ she knew from her anthropological studies. She was one of the first to point to the relation between rituals and play in early childhood and the rituals and play at cultural level that was analysed in Huizinga’s work.

Recent studies of interactions of infants and parents show that they are structured like music and dance, and that they have a playful narrative quality. The vocalisations and movements of the 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 2010). Malloch and Trevarthen (2009) write about ‘communicative musicality’. In playful interactions infant and parent ‘negotiate the invented life of meaning’ (Trevarthen 2011).

Folk psychologists have always acknowledged babies’ appreciation of music and dancing as ways of sharing experiences. In most cultures mothers soothe their babies by rocking them and singing lullabies or nursery rhythms (Schön and Silvén 2007). Nowadays *YouTube* gives parents new ways to share their feelings of pride and joy in their dancing and singing baby. The clips of singing, dancing and imitating babies are very popular. See for instance *Dancing and talking twin babies*.

Malloch and Trevarthen (2009) have developed a theory of ‘innate intersubjectivity’ which explains the communicative abilities and cultural learning before the development of language. Babies are ‘designed’ for mastering a social world full of human-made meanings, tools, arts and languages that transmit ideas the community believes in.

They [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.

They are sharing their special rituals and dramas, feeling them intimately in their bodies and minds, and remembering them in a ‘proto-culture’.

They negotiate the invented life of meaning. (Trevarthen 2011)

Huizinga’s theory on play and recent theories on ‘innate intersubjectivity’ share certain important insights. In both theoretical domains play is seen as basic for fun and taking delight in intimate relationships, and for the human freedom to modulate subjective experiences and co-construct shared meanings. Both Huizinga and Trevarthen warn against the misuse of play for benefits that are external to play, and against the danger of losing play elements in the culture in general (Huizinga) and specifically in the culture of upbringing (Trevarthen). Culture that destroys or misuses the impulse to play has a dehumanising effect on human beings, according to Huizinga; he refers to the misuse of sport and rituals in the 1930s before the outbreak of the Second World War. Trevarthen (2011) points to the suffering that follows if the innate capacities of babies are not acknowledged because adults are too much obsessed by routine, fixed rituals, management and economical interests (173).

### **Play and the art of adaptation**

Huizinga’s argument against functionalism and the focus on the educational benefits of play does not necessarily imply that all functionalist approaches of play are unsound. We can accept that play is essentially about the player’s experience of fun, and still look for the psychological, social or biological benefits of play. Indeed, in the raising of young children it is very difficult – indeed almost impossible – to ignore the

educational significance of play for learning. After all, young children are hungry to learn and grow up, and they also have a strong desire to play: the two are strongly linked. But as Sutton-Smith (1997) has said, the child-rearing interests can become so dominant that we forget the playing child. Playing has a value in itself. In this regard, recent studies in neuropsychology shed in new light on the benefits of play from an evolutionary perspective.

Evolutionary and neuropsychologists show that play helps young animals learn about their physical environment and the behaviour of peers and adult members of their group. Bjorklund (2007) hypothesises:

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. (145)

In play, juveniles enjoy adapting to unexpected circumstances (Pellis, Pellis, and Bell 2010). Brain size, social complexity and extended juvenile period are strongly related. The more complex the social life of species, the bigger the brain size and the longer the period before juveniles reach mature adulthood; and the longer the young can play without the burdens and obligations of adult life.

Jaak Panksepp, pioneer and founder of 'affective neuropsychology' in animals and humans, also believes that play has an adaptive function; in play juveniles learn to adapt to the changing life circumstances and survive (American Journal of Play 2010). Panksepp's neuropsychological studies show that the play system is a primary process that arises from ancient regions of the brain that are related to survival, just as, 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 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 AJP 2010, 269)

Many behavioural and mental functions are refined during youthful play. In this respect Panksepp's study of ADHA (Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorders) is interesting (Panksepp 2007). Animals that had little play when young show stereotype behaviour towards peers, and are deficient in regulating their aggressive urges when adults (Potegal and Einon 1989; Kempes et al. 2009). Although relevant research in human youngsters is scarce, there are good reasons for suggesting that play-deprived children also have less refined behavioural 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 diminishes the ADHD symptoms in boys.

There has been much development in the area of play and education in children's daycare centres. Each country can give its own example. For example, in Italy the systems of child education developed in Reggio Emilia (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman 1993) en Pistoia (Gandini and Edwards 2001); at Pen Green in Corby in the UK (Arnold and the Pen Green Team 2010); the Emmi Pikler method and situational approach in Germany (Pikler 2004); in the Scandinavian countries (Hännikäinen 2010; Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson 2006; Kalliala 2006); and in the Netherlands the developmentally focused education based on Vygotsky's activity theory (Van Oers

2012). My focus will be on the spirit of playfulness that has to permeate every aspect of the education of young children, and on the teacher as *Homo ludens*.

### **Play and ordinary life in early childhood**

In studies of the play of young children most attention is paid to 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 of 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 the quality of 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 calls 'the necessities 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 child'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 and Hohmann 2000; Singer and De Haan 2007).

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. The child learns the rhythms of sleeping and feeding and the customs of the culture (Lancy 2008; Tudge 2008). Young children probably realise all the adaptations that are expected of them through their pleasure in contact and their urge to play and learn with their teachers and environment. Play provides a counterweight to all the adaptations expected of young children. It is therefore very important with the youngest children not only to look at their 'pure' and 'free' play but also at the play and playful interactions during the caring and other obligations of normal life.

### **Play and learning boundaries**

From the perspective of infants and toddlers there are no clear boundaries between play, care and work. During feeding or washing and 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 daycare centre. They look excitedly at the drops of lemonade dripping from the table, they smear yoghurt on the table with their fingers, blow bubbles in their beaker, 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 (two-years-old) and Emmie (two-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: 'hellup, hellup' and pushes a boot into her hands. Emmie offers the left boot up 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 ES)*

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

Sylvia (two-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 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 the crumbs from the floor that the teacher points out.

(Observation 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 the 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 in her research in daycare centres that children got to hear more than 60 different rules and commands from their teachers. During free play the teachers are more often busy controlling the children's behaviour than with talking or playing with them (Singer and De Haan 2007b; Singer, Nederend, and Penninx 2013). Brennan (2005) and Stephenson (2009) produced similar findings.

When teachers make use of play or elements of play in controlling behaviour it appears to have a positive effect on the children. Corsaro (2010) describes how rituals help children reconcile themselves to the inevitable. For example, times dictated by the adult structuring of the day: taking leave of their parents, sitting at table for lunch, the beginning and end of the day. As described earlier in this chapter, ritual has the structure of making a play world where the participants have a certain influence that is experienced as free activity; which reconciles to the accomplished fact. In their study in child centres in New Zealand, Brennan (2005) and Stephenson (2009) describe examples of teachers who have to soothe through play and humour.

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, 116).

In this example the teacher employs the magic of the pretend game in order to create together a shared reality which 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 and De Haan 2007b). Thus, slapping loudly and screaming and looking to see whether the teacher has seen, then laughing even louder if the teacher has not noticed; or secretly going outside, which is forbidden, and looking to whether the teacher has seen. These studies suggest that two- and three-year-olds all playfully explore the boundaries of their world – the boundaries their parents have drawn. Through play, humour, 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 child can play safely and is well taken care of. But the way the teacher sets boundaries and the way she structures young children's life should not be to the detriment of children's playfulness, i.e. their creativity and sense of freedom. Children and

teacher create togetherness in playful communication; with the help of humour and playfulness the teacher ensures that she does not overpower the child.

### **Children and teachers: *Homo ludens***

Caregivers and teachers of young children should ensure that the vast array of their confrontations with life's obligations – rules, limits, experiences of failure while learning new skills, 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) wrote:

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'. (180)

In peer play young children develop finely tuned social skills. Even babies are interested in peers. One-year-olds love to imitate each other and are also the most challenging models for exciting play, overcoming fears and experimenting with boundaries (Kernan and Singer 2011). Teachers and young children who co-construct rituals are building up a strong sense of togetherness in the group rituals to start the day, rituals to celebrate birthdays or rituals that are incidentally developed by the children. Rituals share with drama, storytelling and pretend-play that pedagogues and children create a magic circle.

Huizinga's theory has to remind us of the essential value of play. We do not find that value in the educational benefits. To come back to an earlier quote of Huizinga:

All play is a voluntary activity [...] Child and animal play because the enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom. (8)

What counts is the spirit of playfulness that permeates all aspects of young children's life. 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 the 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 permeates every aspect of his or her life. A play pedagogy for young children not only means that the teachers provide support for young children to play in a safe and challenging environment that is adapted to their needs and interests, and that they support peer play and peer relationships from an early age; a play pedagogy also involves teachers knowing that playfulness and the co-construction of meaning with infants and toddlers go hand in hand. Very young children communicate with the teacher in order to make contact, i.e. to construct a shared, magical world in which the child feels safe and valued. Ritualised interactions or patterns of behaviour help the child to anticipate, to take initiatives and invent variations; they support the child's agency. Above all, the teachers are aware that infants and toddlers live in a world that can easily overpower them. They have so much to learn and they have to adapt to the cultural world into which they are born. Play helps children to maintain a positive morale and not to give up after failure. In a play pedagogy, teachers gently structure young children's life by means of routines, rituals, songs, dance, rhythms, rhymes and humour.

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