

CHAPTER 14

SOCIAL LIFE OF YOUNG CHILDREN

Coconstruction of Shared Meanings and Togetherness, Humor, and Conflicts in Child Care Centers

Elly Singer and Dorian de Haan

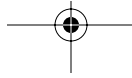


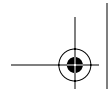
INTRODUCTION

Doenja (2;5)¹, a Moroccan girl, has just entered the multicultural play group in the Netherlands. During free play she has chosen the home corner. There are many children who want to play with the stove and cooking utensils. Doenja gets totally caught up in defending her territory against these “intruders.” She looks angry, yells “no,” “don’t,” and succeeds in defending her territory, has owned the cooking utensils, but hardly plays with the other children. A week later, we see Doenja again during free play, now in a different social situation. Doenja has chosen to play with glue, paper, and scissors. She sits next to Hind (3;6), also a Moroccan girl. Doenja glues a piece of paper, but she is most interested in Hind. She looks at her, and when Hind makes a funny face, she immediately takes her chance to make contact. Doenja laughs at Hind, imitates her funny face and laughs brightly when

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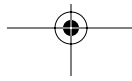
Hind imitates her. Then they start to make and imitate each others nonsense words; a mix of Dutch and Moroccan words and sounds (pattojaaaaaaa, pattojpattojpattoja). (Singer & de Haan, 2006)

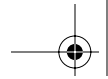
Within a week Doenja has experienced different social situations with peers and has showed diverse strategies to deal with them. In her study of children's experiences on starting day care, Dally (2003) analyzes how 2-year-olds learn the basic rules of the peer group by trial and error in peer relations, and with help of the teacher. They learn rules about ownership, such as, "If I try and take an object from someone, they may/will take it back." They learn about the rules related to power: "It is easier to get what you want if the other claimant is younger, and/or in the absence of a teacher." And they learn moral rules related to fairness or being generous towards other children. Besides learning rules, young children develop skills to communicate, negotiate, and solve problems with peers. Doenja, for instance, may have learned that you don't make friends when you are only focused on defending and ownership of objects, and that imitation is an effective tool to make contact.

In this chapter we will review research on early social and moral learning in interaction with peers in child care centers. We will discuss how young children make contact and create togetherness; how they make fun and jokes together, and how they deal with peer conflicts and coconstruct social and moral rules. Finally we will shortly discuss the educational consequences, how teachers can support social life in the peer group.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Teachers of young children used to be taught that infants and toddlers do not form peer relations, and that they cannot share and enter into joint play (Howes & Ritchie, 2002). Until the '80s these ideas were confirmed in mainstream psychology (Schaffer, 1984; Verba, 1994). Peer relations of children under 4 years old were considered to be rare, short-lived, and often aggressive. But this opinion was hardly based on research. Since the '70s, the increase of day care facilities for babies and toddlers in western countries has led to a growing body of observation studies of peer relations of young children in natural and laboratory situations. These studies have radically changed our views of social skills and the importance of secure peer relationships in early childhood. Teachers have to understand how infants and toddlers coconstruct a shared reality and shared rules, and how she or he can foster positive peer relationships. From the perspective of the children, the best thing in day care centers is playing with other children (Hännikäinen, 1999). Therefore, positive peer relationships are seen as an important characteristic of high quality early childhood education and care.





Studies of interactions between 0- to 4-year-old children and their teachers often have an ethnographic and explorative character. The focus is on diverse aspects of peer interactions and teacher behavior with regard to: togetherness and belonging (Brennan, 2005; Hännikäinen, 1999); level of joint play (Brenner & Mueller, 1982; Camaioni, Baumgartner, & Peruchini, 1991; Göncü, 1993); communication of young children (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2004; Rayna & Baudelot, 1999; Verba, 1994); imitation (Eckerman & Didow, 1996; Meltzoff, 2002); pretend play (Howes, Unger, & Matheson, 1992); conflict behavior and reconciliation (Shantz, 1987; Verbeek, Hartup, & Collins, 2000); humor (Loizou, 2005; Burt & Sugawara, 1988); and social and moral rules (Dalli, 2003; Killen & Nucci, 1995).

There are two dominant theoretical approaches of the study of peer interactions. From the attachment theoretical approach, the quality of the teacher-child relationship is put in the center, and the effects of the teacher-child relationship on peer interactions is studied (Howes & Ritchie, 2002; [Howes & Jones, 2002](#)). These studies are built on a theoretical model for teacher-caregivers relationships with children similar to that found in mother-child relationships. The focus is on how teachers can foster secure attachment relationships with (individual) children within group settings. This research points out that children's relationships with teachers are emotionally significant and affect how children develop, what they learn and how they interact with peers (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001).

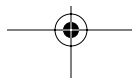
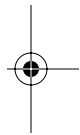
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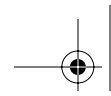
The second dominant theoretical approach is based on socioconstructivist assumptions, and often puts the child-child interactions in the center; how they coconstruct a shared reality and how teachers can support processes of coconstruction. Inspired by Piaget, the child is conceptualized as an active learner and constructor of (sensomotor) schemes and structures (Verba, 1994); Vygotskian theory is the background of studies of coconstruction of shared meanings in the social context, appropriation of cultural tools, and the role of the teacher (Brennan, 2005; Singer & de Haan, 2006). Teaching and learning of young children is conceptualized as a collaborative and coconstructed process. In this chapter we will mainly focus on studies based on a *socioconstructivist* approach. The term socioconstructivist is broadly used for studies that share some basic theoretical assumptions. We will shortly discuss three theoretical assumptions that are formative in the studies of peer relations in this chapter.

Constructivist Assumptions

The Child Is an Active Learner

Piaget, Vygotsky, and current socioconstructivist psychologists assume that the urge actively to adapt to the environment is basic to human devel-



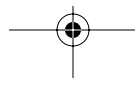


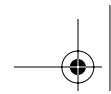
opment (Fischer, Shaver, & Carnochan, 1990; van Emde, Biringer, Clyman, & Oppenheim, 1991; Piaget, 1967; Vygotsky, 1978). From the start, the infant explores the environment, seeking what is new in order to make it familiar. Confronted with the environment, there is a basic motive to “get it right.” This process of achieving balance, or equilibrium, leads children to develop new, adaptive psychological structures (Piaget, 1967). At a subjective level, this means that children as well as adults need to experience their own actions as logical and sound. This assumption of the child as active learner has inspired studies of young children’s actions, skills, and tools to explore and to communicate (see for instance Verba, 1994; Oliveira & Rossetti-Ferreira, 1996). Moreover, many studies are focused on reconstructing the logic of young children’s activities from their own perspective. Piaget’s interviews with young children about their behavior in a range of experiments are outstanding examples of this focus on children’s argumentation to understand underlying cognitive structures. An important key to understand young children’s logic is the concept of “logic-in-action” (Singer, 2002). As Piaget stated, infants and toddlers mostly think at a sensorimotor level; they learn by doing, observing, touching, exploring. Vygotsky’s theory (1978, 1987), extended by others (Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1985), stresses the developmental transition from interpsychological to intrapsychological functioning. Children’s learning and development takes place through guidance provided by caretakers or a more experienced peer who monitor and support the child. Imitation and appropriation are seen as processes of active reconstructions by the child in relationships with important others.



The Child Is a Relational Being

For young children, the environment is first and foremost a social environment. They are focused on understanding their social world. This is probably related to another basic motive, to maintain social relationships, and their need to bond (Bowlby, 1982; van Emde et al., 1991; de Waal, 2000). Infants come into the world preadapted for initiating, maintaining, and terminating human interactions (Schaffer, 1984). By 3 months of age, infants and their caregivers are jointly experiencing pleasure in simple face-to-face interactions. Within this familiar frame of joint play, infants learn to “read” their mother’s faces and they develop particular procedures for monitoring their caregiver’s emotional availability. From 10 to 12 months, most infants engage in social referencing. They use their caregiver’s emotional expressions as a guide to how they are expected to feel and act in a particular situation. The assumption of the human being as a relational being—which is shared by most influential theoretical approaches nowadays (Bowlby, 1982; Stern, 2002; Løkken, 2000)—has inspired many researchers to study verbal and nonverbal communication



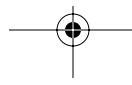
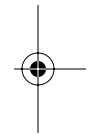


of young children with adults and peers. With regard to peer relationships, the functional and behavioral differences in child–child relationships and adult–child relationships are analyzed. The relative equality of partners with respect to competence and social power in peer interactions allows processes of coconstruction to emerge that differ from those characteristic in adult–child interaction (Verba, 1994).

Unity of Actions and Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Processes

Socioconstructivist psychologists assume that thoughts, affects, and (social) behavior form an indivisible whole in human behavior. In line with Vygotsky and Piaget they emphasize that all our activities, including our thinking, are motivated (Piaget, 1967; Vygotsky, 1987); and that all our emotions and moral affects suppose cognitive processes to signal that important interests are at stake (Frijda, 1986). They try to overcome the dichotomy within traditional developmental psychology of studying cognitive development and socialemotional development as separate domains. This requires new theoretical concepts. Fischer et al. (1990), for instance, use the concept of *script* to refer to the socially embedded knowledge of children as to how to act, feel, and express their emotions in specific situations. Another example is the concept of *cognitive-affective structures*, by which is meant complex synthesizing structures integrating *cognition* (in the form of appraisals, expectations, and beliefs) with *motivation* (in the form of interests, goals, moral commitments, and emotional action tendencies), *affect* (in the shape of physiological arousal and sensory and bodily feeling), and *actions* (in the form of motor responses and social procedures and methods for acting (Singer, 2002). We prefer the concept of cognitive-affective structures, because structure directly refers to the self-evident frames in which a person observes, feels, and acts (i.e., to their “inner logic”).

These new conceptualizations of the relationships between cognition, motivation, and (social) activities lead to new insights into the development of a self. The theory of the early development of the moral self by van Emde and colleagues (1991) is an example of this approach. Van Emde et al. stress that the cognitive-affective structures of infants are sensorimotor in nature. According to them these structures are stored as procedural knowledge of the infant’s most emotionally engaging experience with their caregivers. They argue that the coconstruction of procedural knowledge (how to act) is crucial for the development of a moral self in infants and a sense of belonging to a parent, family, and cultural group. As a result of face-to-face turn-taking behavior with caregivers, infants learn rules for reciprocity—for give and take—together with the powerful motive for using these rules—“together” is so pleasurable. The authors argue that acting according to this procedural knowledge is a basic form of morality, long before the child is able to verbalize moral rules. “All systems of morality





have a sense of reciprocity at their centre with a version of the Golden Rule: ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’ (van Emde et al., 1991, p. 261). Because of shared regularities, infants know how they can influence their caregivers; this gives them their first sense of control and agency. Later on, shared procedures, for consolation for instance, are put to use by the toddler as tools for self-regulation of his or her emotions. One might think here of children who imitate with their teddy bear the rituals of consolation they have constructed with their caregiver.

These insights are also very important in the child–child relationships, as we will show in the next paragraphs in which we will discuss three aspects of peer relationships of young children: coconstruction of shared meanings and togetherness, humour, and conflicts.

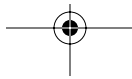
COCONSTRUCTING SHARED MEANINGS AND TOGETHERNESS

Young children show interest into each other from an early age. “From at least as early as 2 months of age they touch one another, make noises to draw one’s attention, stare avidly at an age mate, and smile” (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 166). Often such initiations are returned in kind by the other child, thereby demonstrating the existence of social interest (Vandell, Wilson, & Buchanan, 1980). For instance Merel and Bram in a Dutch day care center:

Merel (0;5) has a play object in her hand, but is more interested in Bram (0;5) who lies next to her on the play mat. She touches his arm, smiles, but Bram is more interested in Merel’s play object. Merel holds on in trying to catch Bram’s attention. She lightly touches his hand and face. Then Bram looks at her, and Merel and Bram produce shining smiles to each other. (Singer & de Haan, 2006)

Children as young as Merel and Bram are able to make contact and to respond to initiatives of a peer. Simple series of interactions can be observed from the age of 8 or 9 months old, like rolling a ball to each other, exchange of objects, and mutual imitation. In current studies descriptions of interactions between infants like Merel and Bram in the example above, are interpreted as revealing intentional acts that display understanding of other children’s feelings (Løkken, 2000; Musatti & Panni, 1981; Rayna & Baudelot, 1999).

Without doubt caregivers are the most important sources of security in the life of young children. But young children in day care centers spend increasingly more time with peers. In Swiss day care centres Simoni (2004) found that, during free play, infants from 9 to 25 month old spend 39% of





the time playing alone, 31% of the time involved with peers but without direct interactions (for instance parallel play), and 29% in direct interaction. In a Dutch study of 2- and 3-years-old children during free play comparable percentages are found: 43% alone, 34% parallel play, and 23% in direct interaction (Krijnen, 2006). These children play most of the time without direct contact with their teachers; only 22% of the time they interacted with their teacher (Pollé, 2006). Viernickel (2000) found that 90.7% of all interactions of 2 year old children during free play was with peers. Kontos (1999) shows that, although the teacher spends 70% of her time involved with children, she is relatively rarely involved from the perspective of the individual child. Sometimes teachers help to sustain the interactions between young children by participating in their play (Kontos, 1999). But most of the time young children succeed in making sense of each others actions and utterances on their own (Verba, 1994).

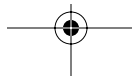
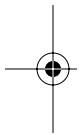
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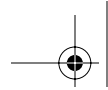
These observations of peer interactions of children younger than 4 years old strongly contradict the earlier opinions of peer interactions at that age are diffuse and fragmented; a view that has not disappeared completely (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). These negative opinions of peer interactions of young children are probably related to the assumptions about “joint play.” Two-year-olds don’t have a plan, or don’t discuss story lines and roles before they start playing. They develop the story line and often several story lines at the same time, during their play—logic-in-action. For instance Oliveira and Rossetti-Fereira (1996) show how two girls of 21 and 23 months follow different story lines during their joint play that sometimes conflict and sometimes converge. In their play you can see, among other things, fragments of a birthday singing ritual, a combing-and-washing-the-baby-routine, and the game of building up a pile of blocks and knocking it over. In the most dramatic part of this joint-play episode, Vania uses various strategies trying to involve Telma in the role of baby-to-be-taken-care-of. Vania acts as a mother in a very expressive way.

Vania looks at Telma, smiles to persuade her and touches her in a gentle way. But she also assumes an authoritarian postural attitude, trying to force Telma into submission, and is quick to reconcile the ensuing disagreement to prevent any escalation. Telma initially remains more passive, but later on she tries to escape from the script proposed by Vania by introducing a new script of her own. At the moment of crisis, both girls look at the researcher. Telma is almost crying and seems to ask for help, while Vania produces a kind of vague smile. The researcher refrains from intervening. After a few seconds Vania gives way and for a while complies with Telma’s proposal to play with the blocks. (pp. XX–XX)

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The joint play of Vania and Telma has the character of a collage and has many fragments that are unconnected. So it depends on the observers’





norms and concepts how to evaluate their play—as an example of young children’s lack of skills to play together, or as an example of their improvisation talent and involvement in social contact. According to Løkken (2000), the value of peer interaction studies is that the ways in which toddlers socialize are more easily recognizable, “to be valued as fully worthy social ‘style’, meaningful to the children, although different and possibly appearing to be meaningless from an adult point of view” (p. 538).

Reciprocal Imitation

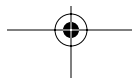
Although children from the age of 18 months old often use simple verbal utterances to communicate with peers—“no,” “that,” “ohh”—they mostly rely on nonverbal tools. They use mime, gestures, body language. A central role play is the use of reciprocal imitation—one child imitates the other and the other goes on with the imitation, or brings in new elements that lead to new series of reciprocal imitation (Camaioni et al., 1991; Rayna & Baudelot, 1999; Völkel, 2002). Most interactions of young children contain elements of imitation. By deliberately inviting the other child to imitate, young children are able to accomplish long series of interactions.

Jouri (2;2) puts his head between the wall and the closet, and yells, “Ohhhh!” He pulls his head back, looks at Emma (2;3). Emma does not react. Jouri puts his head again between the wall and closet, and yells again, “Ohhhh!” looks at Emma again. Now Emma reacts. She bows herself in the direction of the wall and closet, and calls, “Ohhhh!” Jouri immediately repeats his game and he laughs while he is yelling, “Ohhhh!” Then Emma changes the game. She starts clapping on the wall with both her hands, looks smiling at Jouri, but still imitates his call, “Ohhhh!” Jouri takes over Emma’s new game, and a new series of interactive imitation evolve. (Singer & de Haan, 2006)

Reciprocal imitation suggests not only that a given child is socially interested in a peer to the point at which he or she is willing to copy that peer’s behavior, but also that the child is aware of the peer’s interest in him or her and aware of being imitated. Mutual imitation, which increases rapidly during the second year, appears to lay the basis for later emerging cooperative play, for instance pretend play (Howes, 1992; Stambak & Sinclair, 1993). See **Figure 14.1** for an overview of levels of intersubjectivity and joint play in 0–4 year old children.

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Children’s imitation is not just the copying of movements of other people, but a reflection and interpretation of the meaning of actions witnessed (Lindahl & Pramling Samuelsson, 2002). Young children use imitation as a creative tool to activate the interaction of a peer, to confirm one’s wishes, and to respond to. Hanna and Meltzoff (1993) describe how infants more



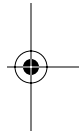
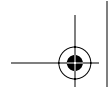


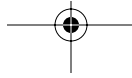
Figure 14.1.

often imitate children of their own age than adults. Imitation for children is a natural way to communicate with peers.

Several psychologists consider imitation as central to the development of social understanding in early childhood. According to Piaget (1967), imitation fits into the general framework of the sensorimotor adaptation. He describes, for instance, how young children learn the game of marbles, first by imitating older children without understanding the rules and assimilating the observed new behavior in the old schema; they move the marbles without focusing on the “pot.” Only later on do they accommodate the old schema to the new behavioral model, and follow the rules of winning and fair play (Piaget, 1932).

Meltzoff (2002) theorizes that early imitation reflects an understanding that the other is “like me” and relates imitation with early moral development. Reciprocity at first occurs in action, through imitation. Without an imitative mind, we might not develop this moral mind. This insight into the importance of imitation for the moral development is also confirmed by the studies of Forman, Aksan, and Kochanska (2004). Responsive imitation reflects a relationship in which shared values are likely to develop over time.

In short, imitation plays an important role in sensorimotor learning and communication in peer interactions in early childhood, and is a good





example of the intrinsic relationships between cognitive, social, and affective processes in young children's functioning.

Emotional Dramatic Recurrent Activities and Routines

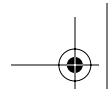
According to Thyssen (2003), early recurrent imitative activities often are "emotional, dramatic activities." In running together, jumping, falling on the couch, climbing up the slide and gliding down, taking an object and running away to be chased, and so on, children capture each other's ideas. Thyssen (2003) gives an example in the following episode.

Mia (18 months) follows Victor into a room where you may tumble in mattresses and pillows. They crawl around in Duplo bricks and then let themselves fall down into a beanbag chair. Victor then sits down in the chair. Mia lies down on her stomach. A game begins. Victor touches Mia carefully on her back. She raises her head, looks at him, and then turns her head again. Victor laughs delightedly. They repeat the sequence in a quickly rising tempo. Victor laughing more and more. Finally, Mia tumbles down from the chair. She climbs up onto the chair again. They sit side by side. Then Victor takes hold of Mia and they tumble into each other, laughing. (p. 593)

The simple structure of the joint play of toddlers makes the meaning of the game easily clear to all participants, and is therefore easy to repeat (Vandell & Mueller, 1980). Within this simple structure, the children are understood to elaborate a common theme, and cultivating their play into "routines" (Corsaro, 1997). Most of these routines are nonverbal. An example is the "little chair routine" of Italian toddlers described by Corsaro (1997), in which every morning the little chairs were pushed by the children into the middle of the room, put in line to move upon them, jump, or letting themselves fall down in different ways. This routine was an authentic creation of the children without adult initiates. Because of the simple structure, a large number of children could participate with a fairly wide range of communicative and motor skills.

A fine example of recurrent activities in the form of music making is giving by Løkken (2000)—A playful "glee concert" performed by seven toddlers in a Norwegian day care center, with no adult "conductor" present. In Løkken's words:

What happened during 11 minutes of "making music" was the children improvising their own and very special version of well-known songs, rhymes, and play usually performed in this setting. Additionally, the children constructed playful "conversations" on the spot, among other things in the form



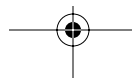
of a “Mama-choir.” Musically the sequence may be viewed as a “symphony,” as experiencing “melting together of simultaneously jingling sounds.” (p.536)

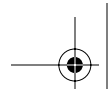
According to Løkken this sharing of the other’s flux of experiences results in the experience of the “We” which is at the foundation of all possible communication. Probably, the repeated activities and coconstructed procedural knowledge lays the foundation of shared cognitive-affective structure. As van Emde et al. (1991) already stated, emotional experiences are remembered as procedural—sensorimotor—knowledge in early childhood.

Humor and Laughter

As we have seen in our examples, succeeding in making contact often evokes a bright smile as in the case of Merel and Bram, or delighted laughter in the case of Mia and Victor. In studies of peer interactions of young children, researchers often mention the children’s joy and laughter in joint play. Humor seems to be an important tool for young children to feel and construct togetherness, as well as to feel agency of the self and to test limits and boundaries in social relationships (Loizou, 2005). This becomes clear when we look at when and why children laugh and smile. During free play of 2- and 3-year-old children in Dutch child care centers, the children seldom laughed or smiled when playing alone; only in 4% in the humorous episodes that were collected. So laughing and smiling seems predominant behavior in social situations in young children. They most often laughed during physical play, such as running and jumping, and during pretend play (Bartholomeus, 2006; see also Løkken, 2000). Loizou (2005) found in her study of children between 15 and 30 months old in a day care center on Cyprus two broad reasons why young children laugh. Firstly, the children tend to laugh about the unexpected and incongruence. She calls this the *theory of the absurd*. This theory explains the joy because the events are a mismatch from the children’s world and do not fit their existing schemata (e.g., funny gestures, sounds or words, incongruous actions, and incongruous use of objects). Laughing about the incongruity of an event is also found in other studies (see Bartholomeus, 2006; Burt & Sagawara, 1988; McGhee & Chapman, 1980). An example of a funny gesture is:

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!” Katie and the caregiver look at Akiko and laugh. 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, p. 48)





Burt & Sagawara (1988) present the following example of incongruous labeling of objects and event in 2- to 3-year-old children: “While nibbling cookies around the snack table, Trina presents her chewed cookie and says, “See my shoe,” then laughs, children laugh and continue to exchange information” (p. 18).

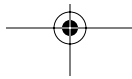
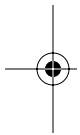
Secondly, the children tend to laugh when they violate the expectations of the caregiver. Loizou (2005) calls this the “empowerment theory.” This kind of humor arises most often in the caregiver–child relationship, and sometimes with several children who are “naughty.” At an early age challenging adult authority starts to be a source of humor and laughter (Burt & Sagawara, 1988). Corsaro (1997) gives several examples of pleasure and excitement related to power and control over the authority of the teachers, for instance during the “little chairs” routine that we mentioned earlier. When the children start jumping down from the chairs and pretending to fall, sometimes a child hurt him/herself. In the case some one is hurt a “little bit,” they hesitate to ask help from adults, but console each other. They know the teachers’ ambivalence towards the game because of safety reasons. But they love the excitement and adventure.

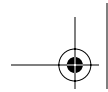
In the study of free play in the Dutch day care centers we did not find laughter because of violating the teacher’s rules; neither did we find laughter to tease or hurt another child (Bartholomeus, 2006). But a third reason for laughter was found that closely related to the recurrent activities during joint play. Children not only laugh because of an incongruity, but also because of a congruency; that is, when something fits into their expectations. Good examples are peek-a-boo and pretending to fall. Maybe the children laugh because the fulfilling of a prophecy leads to a feeling of agency and empowerment in young children.

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Verbal Means to Coconstruct Togetherness

When language comes in children’s life, reciprocal imitation and recurrent activities remain important tools to share their world. From then on, their nonverbal coacting sequences alternate with verbal chants, which may last huge periods of time as Dunn (1988, p. 112) shows for a child of 24 months who plays a forty minute “*loola loola loola*” chanting-laughing-prancing game with an older child. The “glee concert” that we earlier quoted from Løkken (2000), is also a good example. Children’s sensitivity to the playful potential of the sounds of language can be seen in the “*pat-tojaaaaaaa, pattojpatttojpatttoja*” imitation and variation of Doenja and Hind in the introductory vignette of this chapter, which was only a small part of a long rhythmic verse. But not only sounds, also words, phrases, and whole sentences become tools to coconstruct togetherness for toddlers and pre-





schoolers. In the analysis of peer talk of two dyads, Katz (2004) found a 65 percentage of repetition utterances during a painting episode. She, too, emphasizes the function of this kind of imitation “to establish copresence, joint attention, and shared or agreed-upon knowledge that cemented the dyad” (p. 341).

This function of imitation may be seen as one of the means of relational language of young children. De Haan and Singer (2001) have applied the taxonomy of Brown & Levinson (1987) to explain the choice of politeness strategies which adults use when they wish to satisfy their desire for freedom of action and at the same time want to maintain good relationships. For the “desire of relationship,” the model distinguishes three dimensions: (a) the expression of “common ground” in attitudes and knowledge, (b) the expression of cooperation, and (c) the fulfilling of the needs and desires of the other. With regard to the first dimension, the expression of common ground, de Haan & Singer (2001) also found that imitation is a powerful tool of children to communicate their membership of the same in-group. Other ways to express common ground is the use of nicknames, jokes and “dirty words,” and especially the explicit labeling of sameness like Randa’s (2;7): “We’re all eating together,” or the use of, “me too,” as in conversations like those of Bob (2;10) and Cas (3;2)—Bob: “I’m a monkey.” Cas: “I’m a monkey too.” Bob: “You’re a monkey too...” Further, young children often explicitly label or refer to the friendship, as the following example shows.

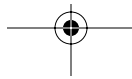
Cas (3;5): You’re my friend, aren’t you?

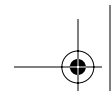
Emma (2;8): Yes.

Cas: And Bob is my friend too.

Emma: I’m, I’m, I’m Leanne’s friend too.

Relating to the second dimension, the expression of cooperation, children may communicate common desires and goal in offering something to the other, or when they promise something. Another way to index unity in play is the use of language forms like *let’s*, and the pronoun *we*—as in the example in which Cas steps up to Bob, who says, “Stepping together!” Cas: “Yaa.” Bob: “We’ll do it like this!” Relational talk is further to be seen in proposals to cooperate to play—“would you like...”—in which the child inquires for the other child’s wants and in the verbalization of play continuity. In pretend play in particular, in which children coconstruct a shared “reality,” their use of connectives, lexical cohesive devices, and parallelism in constructions sustain each others’ contribution. Finally, regarding the third dimension, the fulfilling of the needs and desires of the other, children offer help, express compassion—“What happened to Noortje?”—and comfort other children. Sometimes they express social understanding, as





in an example of Cas (3;1), who offers a back seat on his tricycle to a moody Vera, “You may sit here!” Children may also support another child in conflict and repair the relationship afterwards (Verbeek et al., 2000).

In using this relational talk, children may coconstruct particular relational styles. Katz (2004) shows that relational styles are not a matter of personal traits of an individual child, but the results of dyadic interactions. She shows how Elisabeth (2;10) varies her style in playing Elena (2;9) or with Nina (2;9). Elisabeth and Elena co-construct a “narrative style” in their painting, talking in daily routines and pretend play, full of descriptions of what they are going to do or are doing, explicitly bringing in topics and, by continuing them, reinforcing their intersubjectivity. Together they build up a narration of their actions. However, with Nina, Elisabeth makes a humorous game out of their conversations. Phonological inventiveness, rhyming “puzzle, fuzzle,” invention of nonsense words, violation of semantic categories in silly talk like, “Would you like to eat some paint?” Dramatic enactment of strong emotions, high pitched voices, laughter, and a ritualized use of asking silly questions make up the “humor style” of these young girls. Both dyads often use repetition, but in different ways: Elisabeth and Elena’s repetition is the basis for further improvisation and elaboration of their narrative, while Elisabeth and Nina’s repetition is the focus of joke exchange:

Nina: [yells] Would you like some veeda?

Adult: Some veeda?

Elisabeth: [laughing] Would you like some geeda?

Nina: [laughing] Would you like some geeda?

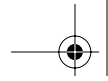
Elisabeth: [laughing] Would you like some feeda?”

(Katz, 2004, p. 342)

CONFLICTS, RECONCILIATION, AND COCONSTRUCTING SOCIAL AND MORAL RULES

Social life in child care groups also causes conflicts in young children. Many of those toddlers who are frequently involved in conflicts with peers are the most socially outgoing (Rubin et al., 1998). In an extensive review, Shantz (1987) mentions young children playing in groups have a median number of 5 to 8 conflicts per hour. Most of these conflicts have a short duration, with a mean of 24 seconds; the majority of conflicts of 2- to 5-years-old children entailed only five turns. Kinoshita, Saito, & Matsunaga (1993) found that 3-year-olds had a number of encounters with an offensive action of a child but no resistance of the other and 22% of their conflicts were simple one or two-turn conflicts. Singer and de Haan (2006)



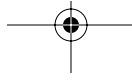


even found that 43% of the conflicts of 2- and 3-year-old children in day care were one- or two-turn conflicts with an offensive action of one child and hardly any resistance of the other. Full-blown quarrels and aggressive acts that hurt the opponent are relatively rare (Verba, 1994). Singer and de Haan (2006) found a mean of one crisis per hour in Dutch day care centers during free play; that is, a conflict in which children show negative emotions like anger or sadness.

Recently, researchers are focused on the social functions of conflicts and on reconciliation during and after conflicts. For instance, de Waal and his colleagues propose a relationships model in which individuals are studied from the perspective of their social embeddings (de Waal, 2000; Aureli & de Waal, 2000). According to them, the expression of destructive behavior is constrained by a need to maintain beneficial relationships. Members of nonhuman and human groups have histories of interaction and expected shared futures. De Waal and his colleagues found that nonhuman primates and children engage in acts of “reconciliation” after a conflict. Wherever social relationships are valued, one can expect the full complement of checks and balances. Dunn (1988) has also pointed to a relationship model to account for the development of social understanding. Social development would start from the child’s interest in and responsiveness to the other; the literature of the preceding paragraphs provides ample evidence for this view. With development, the children become aware of the tension between their own agency and the desires of the other; and they learn to deal with conflicting wants of self-concern and relationship with others. Butovskaya, Verbeek, Lungberg, and Lunardini (2000) have investigated the relationship hypothesis with regard to peace-making strategies of young children. It was hypothesized, that friends would be more inclined to engage in post-conflict peace making than children who were only acquaintances, since friends have a close relationship worth protecting. However, both groups of children showed comparable behavior, which leads the authors to suggest that, next to relationships, interactions as such do matter to young children, simply because the continuation of playing together is most attractive. In fact, the finding that playing together after a conflict occurs significantly more often when children played together before the conflict than when they played alone, is one of the most stable results of conflict studies (Shantz 1987; Laursen & Hartup 1989; Singer & de Haan 2006).

Maintaining the Relationship and Reconciliation

What do young children do to restore the interaction with their playmates? Forms of reconciliation, expressed in invitations to play, body con-



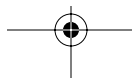
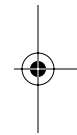


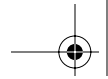
tacts, offers of objects, self-ridicule, and verbal apologies, all serve to enhance tolerance (Verbeek et al., 2000). Smiling, ignoring, and giving in are also very common strategies to prevent the escalation of a conflict (Singer, 2002; Singer & de Haan, 2006). Children under 4 years old predominantly rely on nonverbal means. But from their second year, they begin to use justifications. Although justifications may be viewed as a strategy to underscore one's own interest, Eisenberg & Garvey (1981) treat them as one of the more adaptive strategies of verbal conflict resolution, since they provide more information than just a bare opposition. The authors show that most 3- to 5-year-olds do not accept a bare "no" opposition, and that conflicts in which children just insist and repeat their positions ("Yes!", "No!", "Yes!", "No!") lead to longer adversative episodes, and are the least successful in resolving the conflict. However, insistence is most used in this age group of 3- to 5-year-olds—they make up 40% of the strategies used. Killen and Turiel, (1991), analyzing conflicts of 3-year-olds, show that many of their conflicts ended without active resolutions; in a setting without teachers, 60% of the conflicts ended by topic dropping. Eisenberg & Garvey (1981) found that the use of adaptive strategies like countering moves and compromises, was frequently successful. An important finding is, that the children respond in a similar way to the strategies of their opponent—they often imitate the other child's behavior, by taking words, phrases, and entire utterances. This is found for adversative behavior, but also holds for the adaptive strategies. However, only 12% of all strategies were countering moves and compromises. The 2- and 3-year-old Dutch, Antillean-Dutch, and Moroccan-Dutch children in the study of Singer & de Haan (2006) also used adaptive strategies to a limited extent, in 9% of their conflicts these were nonverbal strategies, and also in 9%, verbal modification strategies (e.g., offering objects, making a game out of the conflict, proposing alternatives and compromises). There were no differences between the 2- and 3-year-olds in the frequency of modifying behavior, although the strategies used and the linguistic expression of the older children was more sophisticated (de Haan & Singer, submitted). The use of these strategies may be already rather advanced at this age of 3 years. For instance:

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Otto (3;10) wants to play with the fire engine of Jim (2;0), he starts off with a proposal, "I am a fireman too!" And when Otto refuses, he says, "Can we be two fireman?" Then, during a ten minute interaction, in which Jim persists in his refusal, Jim changes from snatching to asking, "Can I go one round?", from tempting by laying his arm around Otto's neck to demanding, and from just looking appealingly to calling upon an engagement, "Together, YES?!" (Singer & de Haan, 2006)

Kinoshita et al. (1993) analyzed the strategies of young children in Japanese kindergarten at different ages, from 3;7 to 6;3 years, in more detail.





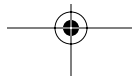
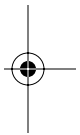
They show how in the course of development, termination of the conflict without consent decreases with age. Percentages of the use of “mutual understanding” strategies (opinion sharing, explanation, use of rules, and compromise) increase from 27% when the children were 3 years old, to 31% when they were 4, and 63% at the age of 5 years. The authors emphasize the growth of verbal abilities and interaction skills, and suggest that participation in kindergarten provides a facilitative context in this respect: They show how the 3-year-olds make a progress from 13% of using mutual understanding strategies when they just have entered kindergarten in the beginning of the summer, to 29% in the autumn, and 37% in the winter.

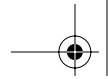
Types of Conflicts, Social Rules, and the Teacher’s Role

This latter finding brings us to the question about the educational implications. There is a firm consensus about the view that conflicts may be conducive in learning the social and moral rules of the environment (Piaget, 1967; Vygotsky, 1978; Killen & Nucci, 1995). In day care and (pre)school, children encounter a continuous flow of moments which confront them with conflicting wants and interests, and urge them to make social choices. These moments may be learning moments in becoming a social and moral person. However, the pedagogical context seems crucial in creating learning opportunities. The 27% of (verbal) mutual understanding strategies among the 3-year-old Japanese kindergarten children in the study of Kinoshita et al. seems considerably high, compared with the 9% verbal strategies in Singer & de Haan’s (2006) study and the 12% in the study of Eisenberg & Garvey (1981). Peacemaking may be culture specific, but there may also be differences on the local level of the (pre)school. Killen and Turiel (1991), for instance, show significant differences between three preschools. Therefore, it may be supposed that teachers may influence children’s social development, and may provide a context to learn social and moral rules.

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The most frequent types of conflicts in day care are object disputes, physical encounters or irritations, entry disputes, and arguments about ideas (Shantz, 1987; Singer & de Haan, 2006). It may be worthwhile to investigate the effects of a pedagogy explicitly directed to the appropriation of the different rules related to these conflicts. For instance, in object disputes, children may learn to cope with the contrary rules of “share your belongings” and “respect another’s possession,” and they may learn social skills like not to snatch, taking turns, and playing together. In physical encounters, children may learn the basic moral rule of “don’t hurt one another,” and they have to find out the boundaries between respect for “another’s physical domain,” and “valuing physical intimacy.” The social





skills of not to intrude and to touch only when the other child agrees are very difficult for young children. Pim (3;8), for instance, hardly can understand why the other children don't like to join in his rough and tumble play. Because of his need of physical contact and his impulsivity, he repeatedly falls into minor conflicts and is frequently turned down. In entry or territorial conflicts, the opposing rules to "respect another's social domain" and the rule to "be generous and to share with newcomers" are central. Garvey (1984) pointed at three "don'ts" for successful entry: "Don't ask questions for information," "don't mention yourself or show your feelings about the group or its activity," and "don't disagree or criticize the proceedings" (p. 164). Corsaro (1997) found a number of successful play-entry strategies, reflecting the social skill to focus on the other child's frame of reference and participation structure. A funny act may also do wonders.

Walid (3;8) fails in his first attempt in which he takes a wagon within the territory of Rahul (3;8) and Daan (3;10). Then he watches a while and laughs, and takes another wagon in saying, "This is a good one, eh? He suits into this house, look! He suits in this!" Daan responds, "Yes that's funny!" and the three boys continue playing together. (Singer & de Haan, 2006, p. XXX)

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Arguments about opposing ideas bring children to learn the rule to attend to *another's ideational domain*. Opposing ideas may be seen in all kinds of play. The most advanced form in the social domain is pretend play. To act in concert, children have to be able to coordinate their pretend acts and extend each others' contributions into a narrative (see Figure 14.1). Each turn is a move of potential accommodation or opposition. In the following example two 3-year-old girls accommodate to each other's ideas. Suzanne (3;4) knows how to use language to make sure of Sarah-Noor's cooperation, by repeating Sarah-Noor's utterances, using tag questions, "eh?", and a mitigating, "almost," in the final turn. Sarah-Noor tries to influence the plot, and uses markers like, "well," and, "or so," to mitigate her attempts. They play that they are traveling:

Sarah-Noor: Yes, we almost are there.

Suzanne: We almost are there already. We almost have to get off. We have to get off. We have to get off now.

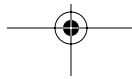
Sarah-Noor: We are there!

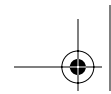
Suzanne: No, we are not yet there. We go túúút into the air. We go into the air once more. We are not yet there eh?

Sarah-Noor: We are almost there.

Suzanne: We are almost there.

Sarah-Noor: Are we there?





Suzanne: No, we are not yet there. Almost. We are there. We are there already.

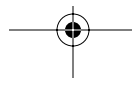
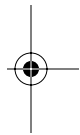
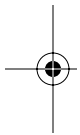
(Singer & de Haan, 2006, p. 110)

Suzanne and Sarah-Noor are expert players. They know how to interweave their concern for relationship with the complex requisites of pretend play. Younger children do not yet cooperate in this advanced way (Howes et al., 1992).

Children often develop positive strategies. However, of course they may also develop negative strategies. Jordan, Cowan, & Roberts (1995) have shown that children who master the rule not to use physical power, may adopt more covert alternative strategies to occupy space but which are not liable to the teacher's disapproval. These strategies are already there in the preschool, but in kindergarten the children develop them to a considerable sophisticated level.

Therefore, the teacher's role is crucial in creating a context in which children learn (to coconstruct) positive social rules. In a meta-analysis of studies of the quality of caregiver-child attachments in day care group settings, Ahnert, Piquart, & Lamb, (2006) found that group related sensitivity of the teachers predicts children's attachment security better than the teacher's sensitivity towards the individual child. This study underscores the importance of studying the influence of the specific ecological characteristics of the teacher-child relationships in group settings. In this respect, studies of enhancing a sense of belonging and security in group settings are illuminative. As we discussed before, shared procedural knowledge is crucial for the development of a sense of belonging between individuals. But recursive interactions are also basic in the creation of group affiliation. They motivate to participate in the group (Brennan, 2005; Hännikäinen, 1999). Social rules, rituals, and routines make the world predictable and safe, and central values are communicated at a concrete level of action (Butovskaya et al., 2000; Corsaro, 1997); for instance, rituals for consoling a hurt child or for keeping in touch with a sick playmate or teacher.

The emphasis on rituals and routines, however, should not blind us for pitfalls. Routines that are mainly based on institutional rules can make children feel powerless or obstinate, and hinders the development of a sense of agency of the child (Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Hakkarainen, 1991). Strict application of rules has a negative effect on the children's willingness to obey (Singer & Hännikäinen, 2000), and on the group climate and children's sense of security (Jones & Reynolds, 1992). Transgression of the rules is for young children a chance to experience agency, and to get personal attention of the teacher (Brennan, 2005). Humor between peers is often based on mild transgressions of the teachers' rules (Corsaro, 1997).





So the teachers have to balance between room for exploration and transgressions, and providing the security of recurrent activities at group level.

CONCLUSIONS

Research of peer interaction has shown that young children are already able social beings. Their curiosity in others and their desire of communication provide them with a strong force for achieving basic social capabilities. Young children appear to be agents in creating togetherness, and they do that with their own ways of acting and talking.

Although the family context, with parents and siblings, is a rich resource to learn social and moral rules, today, day-care centers increasingly become an important environment for young children. Here, they become real little citizens in their interaction with teachers and peers. Their day-to-day conflicts teach them about ownership, inclusion and exclusion processes, respect for the physical and psychological territories, and the ideational world of others. In short, day care centers are the first public places for many children to learn about living in a democracy.

Evidence of quantitative and ethnographic research makes it clear that the focus on good relations between children is of utmost importance in group settings. The teachers' role is central, in furnishing a well-considered pedagogical structure and a favorable atmosphere to foster positive relationships. Whereas the children may find out the rules of social life themselves in experiencing that other children may have different interests, the teacher has to support their growing awareness of moral standards. Balancing between being sensitive to children's agency and mediating the social and moral rules of culture seems to be the most fruitful approach.

NOTE

1. The child's age is stated in years and months in brackets.

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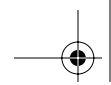
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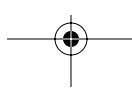
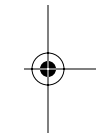
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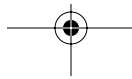


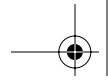
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