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37. Toddlers' Play in Early Childhood Education Settings

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Abstract

More and more toddlers participate in early childhood education outside home, sharing a significant part of their day with teachers and peers, often in play. Despite the knowledge that has accumulated on toddlers' playing skills and on the psychology underlying the development of play, research on toddlers' play from the educational and pedagogical viewpoints is limited. Whereas teachers of toddlers report high respect for play and the importance of play in toddlers' lives, research shows that the position of play is generally weak. This chapter, drawing on existing research, reviews the development and characteristics of toddlers' play, describes the ways in which they play, and discusses how teachers through their own actions create opportunities for the youngest children to express, carry out and develop their existing potentials of imagination, narration and play, together with them and other children. A sensitive, responsive, physically and emotionally present teacher, who is able to observe what is going on in the group, who understands the meanings of activities from children's viewpoints and who can work - and play - accordingly with them forms the basis for shared imagination and joint play. How to be such a teacher is a central issue in this chapter.

Keywords: Early childhood education, imagination, joint play, peer relationships, play, pretend play, teacher's role, teacher sensitivity, toddler, view of the child

This chapter deals with the play of younger children in the context of centre-based education.

Currently, in early childhood education settings, the younger children, the children up to the age of three, are mostly placed in groups of their own, although multi-age groups are becoming increasingly common. That is why all teachers should be well-informed about younger children's play, and have the relevant knowledge and competence to support it. Moreover, teachers working with older children's groups should also be aware of the earlier development of play and of children's play experiences to build their educational activities on this knowledge.

Play has its roots in the first years of life; here the focus is on children during their second and third years of life, often referred to as *toddlers* in the literature. Despite the knowledge that has accumulated on toddlers' playing skills and on the psychology underlying the development of play, research on toddlers' play from the educational and pedagogical viewpoints is limited. Shin (2015) criticises the term 'infant caregiver', which by referring solely to education as care, neglects the

bringing up and teaching of younger children that also take place in early childhood education settings. Therefore, we use the term *teacher*, conceiving teachers' work holistically as a combination of the physical and emotional aspects of care, moral aspects of upbringing and academic aspects of teaching. When considering play, all these aspects of education are of great importance.

Younger children's conditions for play are not equal. There are differences between and within countries in factors such as legislation and steering documents, adult/child ratios, group size, environmental organization, and the education and experience of teachers (Dalli et al., 2011). High staff turnover, inconsistent care, poor working conditions and low status are often the reality in early childhood education settings of toddlers (Dalli et al., 2011; OECD, 2012). Research shows marked variation in pedagogical aims and in the organization of early childhood education for younger children in different national and cultural contexts (Elfer & Page, 2015).

Variation also exists between staff in their beliefs and values about working with younger children. Whereas teachers of toddlers report high respect for play and the importance of play in toddlers' lives, research shows that the position of play is generally weak (Grindheim & Ødegaard, 2013; Lemay, Bigras, & Bouchard, 2016; Singer, Nederend, Penninx, Tajik, & Boom, 2014). This also applies to the Nordic countries, where play is deemed to be paramount in the early childhood education of younger children (Alvestad et al., 2014).

Here, we focus our attention on the play of toddlers as such – not its impact on children's development. We first describe our view of younger children, and then discuss the development and characteristics of their play, after which we turn to the ways in which toddlers play with each other. Ultimately, the key issue in this chapter is how to support and enrich the play of toddlers in early childhood education settings.

View of the Child

For adults, who live, work and play with toddlers, the critical issue is how they see toddlers, how they comprehend toddlers' life-worlds and how they understand and perform their relationships with toddlers. These factors affect each other. In this chapter, we share the idea that young children are active, curious, energetic and full of life. We also acknowledge how crucial the first years of life are and how decisive this time is for brain development and for the overall wellbeing of the child. We see young children as both competent and vulnerable, resilient and weak, self-directed and in need of adults. To comprehend and support children's play requires that we find ways of gaining access to children's perspectives and enhance our understanding of their experiences. This is challenging when a considerable proportion of a child's daily life is spent in early childhood education settings, confronting adults with the task of interpreting toddlers' mostly non-verbal, embodied interaction.

Elwick, Bradley, and Sumsion (2014) emphasize that while adults have an ethical responsibility to treat infants and toddlers from the outset as genuinely human beings, they have nevertheless to accept that they cannot know them with any certainty. It is not enough to see and read young children's behaviour through adult experiences, developmental theories or one's own expectations about how children should behave. Often, only the surface behaviour of children is noticed; however, as Degotardi (2010) shows, if teachers' interpretations of infants' behaviour are more complex, their understanding of infants' viewpoints and their interactions with children are also more sensitive and stimulating. But how can this be achieved?

Johansson and Løkken (2014), who, like many others seeking to understand the life-world of children, draw on the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, conceive the body as the centre of all our experiences. Adults and children see the world and each other from their individual, although intertwined, embodied positions. The teacher, who wants to understand the child, has to understand that each participant in interaction is seer and seen, hearer and heard, and that all of children are both alike and different.

For children, only experiences that have emotional meaning for them are significant. Vygotsky's concepts of *perezhivanie* and *social situation of development* capture this notion from a broader perspective. *Perezhivanie*, which refers to a lived emotional experience as a multifaceted and dynamic unity of imagination and creativity, emotion and cognition, is inseparably connected to the child's environment and it determines what kind of influence this environment will have on the child (Vygotsky, 1998). The *social situation of development* is always a system of changing relations between a child of a given age, environment and social reality. What is meaningful for children emerges in this particular social situation of development. This is the most important factor to recognize when contemplating teachers' possibilities to scaffold young children's play.

We want to see children as fellow human beings in society and as plenipotentiary citizens of the future, growing to citizenship from the very beginning, which means respecting their rights. Of special importance are the rights to participation laid down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Regarding play as central is the first part of Article 31, according to which "States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts."

As Duhn (2015) notes, when we speak about participation and its precondition, agency, we are not usually thinking of younger children. If, however, participation and agency are considered together with play, it also becomes easier to see them as active participants in their life. Duhn (2015, p. 928) states that "infants and toddlers, perhaps, are less caught up in the illusion of a self that controls and governs than older humans who have learned to see, feel and think the self and the world in particular ways." Therefore, toddlers, with their whole body, senses, languages, emotions and spontaneous intentions, can actively take part in everything in their surroundings that excites their curiosity. By using their power of play, they make their contribution to the shared life in early childhood education communities.

Play as Developmental and Cultural Process

We understand the concept of play, in accordance with Vygotsky (1978), as imaginative play, as an activity that happens in the framework of ‘as if’. In imaginative or ‘pretend’ play (the terms ‘make-believe play’, ‘sociodramatic play’ and ‘role-play’ are also used; see Bodrova & Leong, 2015), children make sense of the world by creating an imaginary situation, acting out roles and following a set of rules determined by these roles. Vygotsky’s definition of play is interpreted to mean so called ‘mature’ or ‘true’ play, which reaches its highest level during the preschool years, between three and six years of age. This definition does not include other related activities, such as corporeal activities, games, object manipulation and exploration. However, we are looking at the roots of mature play, knowing that all prerequisites for mature play emerge during the first three years through different kinds of toddlers’ playful and explorative activities, and early pretending.

Following Vygotsky’s (1978) idea about the child’s cultural development first on the social level, then on a psychological level, imagination also appears first interpersonally, then inside the child. The origin of imagination is the emotional communication and imitation between the adult and the child, through which they co-construct *a zone of proximal development*, an activity where learning and development take place. Likewise, somewhat later, a zone of proximal development is co-created in play among children and adults (Hakkarainen & Brédikytè, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978).

Children have a readiness for social interaction and intersubjectivity from birth onwards. This is evident in certain embodied, emotional, perceptual, rhythmic and musical communicative practices that take place between infants and their caregivers (Stern, 1985; Trevarthen, 2012). In this playful interaction, the child feels safe and confident, and, as Engel (2005a) notes, is therefore free to explore the world (‘what is?’) and imagine possible worlds (‘what if?’).

Children move in and out of different frames in everyday life, some of which are to do with play and imagination, others with a variety of practical matters (Engel, 2005b). Their experiences are organized in narrative form from the beginning of their joint activity with adults. As Bruner (1990) states, children are interested from birth in temporal sequences of events and unexpected

turns in the chain of events. They begin to make sense of what is going on, and play becomes children's narrative about their own life experiences, thereby creating the sense in play.

Ordinary linear categorizations of play, such as object play, role-play and rule play or solitary play, parallel play and joint play, do not do justice to play as a complex, continuously changing activity. How these aspects relate to each other depends on the child's experiences, intentions and competences, and on the institutional conditions for play (e.g. Hedegaard, 2016). Thus, play should not be considered through successive forms of play, but as a cultural and social activity, which emerges in interaction.

Vygotsky's (1998) concept of social situation of development helps us to perceive the developmental changes, and the meaning of children's own subjective experiences, in play. The concept describes the unique, age-specific, inimitable and emotional relationship between the child and her or his social environment. A transformation in a given social situation of development happens through the developmental crises, which redefine the psychological content of the situation and provide a new impetus and a new direction for the child's psychological development (Karabanova, 2010). Crises are not categorically age-dependent. They emerge from the dynamic, changing relationship of the child to her or his environment. The relationship changes, because both parties, the child and the environment, change.

According to Vygotsky (1998), emotional interaction with caregivers resolves the crisis of the new-born baby. The first-year crisis involves the beginning of intentional understanding: the child begins to understand that she or he has intentions and that other people also have them. Emerging independent movement opens up a new world of motion to the child. Understanding intentions and sovereign moving mean that the child exhibits her or his own personality and will more clearly. The child forms new relationships, especially with space and objects and to their social meanings. During the third-year crisis, at the end of the second year, when the child's consciousness of self becomes stronger and verbal language begins to take over from immediate

perceptions, the child's relation to her- or himself and to other people as separate subjects changes. Now the child has acquired a good foundation for imaginary play. These developmental changes have consistently been confirmed by later infant and toddler research.

All these changes mould children's initiatives and intentions, experiences and perspectives in their being-in-the world making up the period, when interacting, imitating, exploring and inventing 'I' in the social world opens the gates to imagination and creativity. As Parker-Rees (2007, p.11) aptly puts it, "instead of passively copying what other people do, taking up cultural habits as if they were a uniform, they [children] adapt them, play with them and dress up in them, and, in the process, encourage others to see new possibilities in them." How successfully this happens, depends on adults' understanding of the importance of play for children.

Toddlers as Players

When a new toddler enters an early childhood education group on her or his first day, she or he will usually look intensively at the other children, following what they are doing. As soon as the toddler feels safe, she or he will join in an ongoing activity in one way or another, demonstrating the desire to act in company with peers. Later, when toddlers begin to play more and more together, they continue closely observing each other. There seems to exist a social pattern of observation, imitation and joining in others' actions. It is easy to see that imitation is the primary way in which toddlers create companionship and shared joy, inspiring them to engage further in their interaction (Brownell, 2011; Parker-Rees, 2007; Ridgway, Li, & Quiñones, 2016; Selby & Bradley, 2003).

Development of imitation and pretending

The peak period of toddlers' imitation occurs between eighteen and thirty months, thereafter decreasing as children begin more and more verbally to negotiate play. In fact, imitation never stops but continues throughout life. Vygotsky (see Holzman, 2010) stresses that children do not imitate everything in their play. They imitate things that while not developmentally attainable in their real lives are nevertheless present in their environment. Imitative, pretend play among children and

between children and adults becomes meaningful because children understand it as shared, complementary activity (Rakoczy, 2008; Striano, Tomasello, & Rochat, 2001). As Göncü (1998) points out, this requires the children to share a minimum level of emotional similarity and affective needs.

The accumulated research demonstrates that by thirty months of age children have attained the ability to understand the make-believe sequences of others and become full partners in shared pretend play (e.g. Kavanaugh & Engel, 1998; Rakoczy, 2008; Stambak, Ballion, Breaute, & Rayna, 1985). Children understand the basic intentional structure of pretending as a non-serious fictional form of action and respond appropriately to the imaginary suggestions of their play partners. This is possible, because around one year of age, children began to comprehend that people's actions are guided by plans, goals, desires and beliefs (Agnetta & Rochat, 2004). Briefly, the first half of the second year of life is mainly a period of intense imitation, the next half year sees shared, simple, imitative pretence and the third year coordinated pretending, i.e. shared play in the frame of 'as if'. This indicates changes in children's sense of self, their developing conscious self and understanding of themselves among other things, as social (Brownell, 2011; Rochat, 2010; Stern, 1985).

When children play, their play might smoothly alternate between solitary, parallel and complementary play. As Howes (1985) conveys, these are children's ways of acting in a group, sometimes preferring to play alone, sometimes wanting to experience togetherness by imitating. She noticed that about half of the youngest toddlers, aged from thirteen to fifteen months, participated in reciprocal, complementary games. The children were familiar to each other, the setting was natural and the toys invited pretend activities. In addition to these prerequisites, the scaffolding role of adults is essential. In such conditions, toddlers spontaneously form small groups of two or three and usually communicate successfully. They engage in cooperative play not only to achieve a common goal but for the playful act of cooperating per se.

Objects, spaces and playing together

If the social attraction between children arouses the desire for shared play, the play itself is distinctly characterised by the children's changing relations to objects and spaces and by their developing motor skills. Together these three elements modify toddlers' intrinsic style of playing. The ardent desire of toddlers to seek out of novel, stimulating ways to engage with whatever is around them — first crawling, then walking, seizing and scrutinizing — opens up options for them regarding what the environment has to offer and what their possibilities for action are. As Gibson's (1979) theory of affordances states, the constraints of the actor and the constraints of the environment mutually contribute to the possibilities for action and so define the self. In this process, Merleau-Ponty (1962) highlights the emergence of synaesthetic perception, which invests the perceived world with meanings and values that refer essentially to our bodies and lives. The body is not 'in' space but inhabits it. These ideas about the physicality and material existence of the human body in the world, replete with cultural meanings for inventing, becomes evident when we look at toddlers in action.

Small replica objects such as puppets, cars, bricks, and big objects such as cardboard boxes, slides and stairs, invite toddlers to act with them and with each other differently. Before the mental image guides the child's actions, immediate perception takes the lead. Whereas small objects invite toddlers to grasp them, to imitate and to acquire the same toy as a nearby peer has, big objects invite them to run around these objects together, to crawl in and out, to climb up and down, to hide and seek. As demonstrated by Kultti and Pramling (2015), toys work as triggers of and bases for a mutual focal point when communicating intentions and expectations. With small objects, toddlers practice the basic social rules of playing (you don't grab something from another's hand, you must wait, ask, give and exchange). When they invent what to do with toys together or with the teacher, they practice their first joint play activities. Big objects and the space around them enable children to feel the joy of moving together in an exultant atmosphere. These activities give rise to affiliation and companionship, the first preconditions of joint play. Løkken (2000) proposes that toddlers may

connect the meaning ‘this toy is for me to play with’ with small objects, whereas the meaning attached to big objects is ‘this thing is for us to play with’. The meaning of holistic bodily games may be ‘this play is for me and for us and moving together’. Therefore, for toddlers, bodily games may have greater social importance than games with small objects.

Montagner et al. (1993) showed in their longitudinal study, how over a period from nine to nineteen months of age, toddlers not only developed their motor skills but also their affiliative and cooperative behaviours in a milieu that allowed moving in space with no limitation. The toddlers shared games that were fun and long-lasting with very little aggressiveness or self-centred behaviours. Young children, if they are not restricted by the social or physical environment, run, jump, trample, twist, bounce, and romp together. They engage in playful ‘music-making’, and by imitating, repeating and varying these activities they develop shared routines, using various humorous ways to express their shared enjoyment. They create their own jokes by means of laughter, funny gestures and facial expressions, playing with language and the sounds of words, and by violating expectations and socially agreed meanings (Hoicka & Martin, 2016; Loizou, 2005; Reddy & Mireault, 2015).

We assume that without shared experiences of togetherness and joyful friendship arising from bodily games, mature play would not emerge. Bodily games also develop co-operation skills, which support the emergence of more challenging coordinated joint play with small objects, which in turn is also a prerequisite for mature play. Playing with small objects and toys begins with exploration and continues alternately: when I know what this object does, I ask what I can do with it (Hutt, 1976). Toddlers are impelled to bang, throw, open, shut, empty, fill, pull, push, pile, break – all over again, alone and together. When they invent cultural meanings for objects, they begin to imitate their cultural uses and real pretending begins. Pretend acts become coordinated into sequences of behaviour such as telephoning, caregiving and cooking by realistic and substitute

objects, and developing gradually from self-referenced pretence to other referenced (e.g. Fein, 1981).

First roles, shared imagination

Before 'true play' is possible, children must be able to distinguish between inhabiting or being outside a role so that they can direct their roles (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010). This 'dual-positional' aspect of play allows the player to orient her- or himself to the character represented in the game. The playing toddlers are not only Mary and Mathew, but also mummy and daddy. They have moved to the imaginative level of playing, guided by spoken language. This happens usually around three years of age. Before that children like to probe distinct roles. They are cats, dogs, bears, moving and vocalizing like animals, imitating each other's representations and varying them. With familiar adults, they like to play at role-change totally on the imaginative level, trying to understand how it feels to be another person.

Before verbal negotiating, toddlers have a broad repertoire of strategies for communicating with each other when inviting peers to play, joining in other children's play and during the enactment of play. Engdahl (2011) showed that the play invitation strategies of toddlers aged seventeen to twenty-four months were mostly based on forms of nonverbal communication such as movements and gestures, offering a toy, looking in each other's eyes, use of voice, one-word sentences and imitation. The laughter also seemed to attract other children and served as a signal to start playing together. During play, a typical imitation sequence occurred when one child performed an action which another child noticed and repeated, and then the first child varied the repeated action. The children also negotiated silently, for instance, about the possession of toys, by holding the toy in their hands, through movements and gestures and through intense eye contact, which together often led to a mutually acceptable outcome. Sometimes the children were not successful in inviting peers, and then joint play did not arise.

Shared play arises from shared experiences. Young toddlers, who enter the early childhood education setting, have very little in common at the beginning; however, through their activities they show what is familiar to them. Children bring their individual experiences of, for instance, sleeping, eating, shopping, activities with toys, from home to the setting. To enable these individual experiences to grow into shared experiences and motives for play, teachers must know how to make use of them. It is crucial to enrich the daily shared activities in the setting itself. Everything that takes place or is present in the group form common ground and a common history for the children, thereby offering tools and inspiration for joint intentions and shared play. The teacher's task is to create a rich, emotionally appealing environment for the whole group and for every child.

Teachers in Children's Play

To support children who are curious, live in the moment, experience rapid change in their feelings and inspire each other needs knowledgeable teachers. Such professionals know that the fundamental in the educational program for young children is play and that guiding it needs creative, respectful and sensitive interaction between teachers and children. Teachers know that while they cannot plan play beforehand, they can plan and realize the conditions for play. They can take an open, flexible and playful attitude.

Creating a zone of proximal development in play

In joint play, children and adults together create a zone of proximal development, where they act in emotionally meaningful way. Such a zone is unique and personally challenging for each participating child. Children's interests, needs, intentions and initiatives are the cornerstones in building a zone of proximal development, one that will help them to grow "a head taller than himself" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102; see also Holzman, 2010). Zuckerman (2007) emphasizes that the co-operation of children and adults does not automatically generate a zone of proximal development. The prerequisite for this is the encountering of each other's minds and the adult's orientation to what is present in the child precisely at the moment of such an encounter. In the

context of early childhood education, this is a demanding responsibility for teachers, especially with toddlers.

To create a zone of proximal development in play, it is imperative that the teacher's presence in the toddlers' play is caring and thoughtful. The teacher must have the ability to recognize and identify the children's play intentions and initiatives, to understand their non-verbal ways of communicating by gestures, such as looking and pointing at an object, offering an object, and moving towards an object or a place. All these actions manifest their wishes and will to play and explore their world, alone or together with others. However, the teacher cannot always respond affirmatively to children's initiatives or carry them out as such. When aiming to enrich children's ideas and promote their play, teachers must seek a balance between the children's and their own initiatives. If the teacher fails in this, she or he may hinder and even prevent the development of their further play, as shown by Shin (2010).

Basis for play: sensitive teacher and sensitivity in interaction

Understanding of children's intentions – and children at all – is an important adult quality irrespective of child age. The younger the child, the greater the child's need for caring and loving adults with whom to share everyday life through play. In the early childhood education setting, this role is taken by teachers who are sensitive, responsive, and physically and emotionally present (Alcock, 2016; Dalli et al., 2011; Degotardi, 2013; Ebbeck & Yim, 2009; Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Singer et al., 2014), and available for and attentive to the needs of every child (Fugelsnes, Röhle, & Johansson, 2013). The studies by Singer et al. (2014) and White, Peter, and Redder (2015) found a strong connection between close, at best continuous, physical proximity of the teacher and higher levels of toddlers' play engagement.

A sensitive teacher is reflective in observing children both as a group and as individuals (Alcock, 2016), and open to the children's experiences, insights and needs (e.g. Dalli et al., 2011; Ebbeck & Yim, 2009). The teacher listens to the children, reads their emotional cues, body

language and subtle, constantly changing actions, and responds to them in ways beneficial to them (Alcock, 2016; Cheshire, 2007; Johansson & Emilson, 2016). She or he expresses appreciation of and respect for the children's ideas and interests (Thomason & La Paro, 2013), praises their efforts and successes, and generally encourages them. The teacher uses a friendly tone of voice and positive gestures, smiles at the children and seeks eye contact with them. A sensitive teacher hugs and touches the children gently, holds them close, laughs and makes jokes – and expresses delight at being with them (e.g. Hännikäinen, 2015; Monaco & Pontecorvo, 2010).

The teacher's smile seems to be of great importance to toddlers during their first weeks in the early childhood education setting. Zanelli, Saudargas, and Twardosz (1997) found that new children in the group responded affectionately to smiling by a teacher earlier than they responded to the affectionate words or physical contact by the teacher. Smiling aroused reciprocal affection between the teacher and the child, and encouraged the newcomer to gain acquaintance with the new environment. As Cheshire (2007, p. 37) reminds us, "For a toddler, a smile may be all that is required to reassure an explorer that an adult is nearby and ready if needed."

A sensitive teacher takes responsibility for the atmosphere in the group. When the atmosphere is characterized by empathy and emotional support, babies can learn more about themselves and others, as observed by Adams (2011). A safe, pleasant and warm atmosphere created by the teacher appears to encourage children to express their attachment and tenderness towards each other as well as to the teacher (Hännikäinen, 2015). Emotionally secure relationships in turn help children become involved in a higher level of social interaction and participate in shared pretend play (Kim, 2016).

Thus, sensitivity is not only a set of personal traits and specific behaviours on the teacher's part. It also includes the adoption of an ethical attitude by the teacher towards the child and the creation of a reciprocal, dynamic, caring relationship between teacher and child (Noddings, 1992; Elwick et al., 2014; Singer et al., 2014). Such an affective bond denotes intersubjectivity, the

participation of the teacher and the child in each other's worlds (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1962). On the child's part, close relationships invite the child to attend to the teacher, seek close proximity to her or him, initiate and respond to the ongoing interaction and engage in mutual play and laughter with the teacher, as noted by Brebner, Hammond, and Schaumlöffel (2015). Likewise, Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir (2015) observed that if the teacher's reactions to the child's bodily expressions in play showed emotional closeness to the child's world, the child expressed pleasure and happiness.

Teachers participating in play

Toddlers need to have a teacher available when they play, but they do not always need direct teacher involvement. It is important that the environment offer them the possibility to be close to the teacher if they feel the need for proximity and to distance themselves when they wish to play independently of the teacher (Singer et al., 2014). This means that the teacher should also respect and value children's autonomous, spontaneous play, and participate in it simply by being present and by active, careful observation (Fleer, 2015; Jung, 2013; Shin, 2015).

Through keen observation the teacher can judge when and how to interfere in toddlers' play, directly or more indirectly, for instance, by providing materials for play, making suggestions for actions or resolving disputes (Fleer, 2015; Jung, 2013). Prudent observation of children's play enables the teacher to notice children's attraction to each other and support them in joining in shared play, for instance, by participating together with a child in the play of another child or a group of children (Kultti, 2015). Children may also invite the observing teacher to participate in their play, for instance, to get help with the play materials and interaction with peers, to gain confirmation of their competence in play and to share experiences and joy (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015), and to feel closeness and safety.

Participation in toddlers' play generally takes place in dyadic or small group interactions with children. However, it is essential that the teacher also pay attention to all the children when engaged in an activity with an individual child (Singer et al., 2014). When the teacher notices other

children displaying curiosity in this joint activity, she or he can encourage them to join in (Kultti, 2015). In both dyadic and group interaction, the teacher can promote joint play, for instance, by directing children's attention to each other's play, linking the play to a common theme or creating a flexible connection to parallel play, as was found by Fugelsnes et al. (2013).

Teachers have multiple roles when playing with young children. They can be material, emotional and physical supporters, commentators and interpreters, facilitators and leaders, and play partners (Jung, 2013; Shin, 2015). It is self-evident that teachers are responsible for organizing the play materials and space. Children need to know where they can play and where the toys are. It is possible that the various placing of toys, for instance, some in activity corners, some on shelves and some in boxes, but always at hand, and some arranged according to specific play themes, inspire toddlers to start playing. Shohet and Klein (2010) found that toys were more interesting for toddlers when arranged in real-life sceneries instead of randomly. Even if play materials have regular places, toddlers should not be expected to remain in these places. When toddlers move around the setting, in group rooms, halls and corridors, the toys move with them, as reported by Rutanen (2012).

The development of toddlers' play can be directly promoted in various ways, as illustrated in the Playgroup Project, which included early childhood education students and toddlers (Hakkarainen, Brédikyté, Jakkula, & Munter, 2013; see also Hakkarainen & Brédikyté, Chapter 27), and in a number of other studies (Fleer, 2015; Jung, 2013; Lemay et al., 2016). These studies emphasize that to support toddlers' play, adults must be actively involved in it. However, the teacher should also be flexible and step aside from her or his own ideas, when the child seems to produce something that is meaningful for that child (Lemay et al., 2016). At the same time, to support the creation of joint play, the teacher should help the child understand the intentions of the other children.

We already drew attention to the power of reciprocal imitation in toddler's play. Importantly, teachers should also imitate toddlers. Agnetta and Rochat (2004) noticed how toddlers

showed especial interest by smiling and looking when an adult imitated their play actions or played with the same kind of toy as the children. Other active ways to participate in children's play are parallel play, while maintaining eye contact with the child, and playing a role or multiple roles in pretend play (Fleer, 2015; Hakkarainen et al., 2013; Jung, 2013). Whatever the way of participation is, it is essential that teachers communicate their play actions both non-verbally (cf. Singer et al., 2014), thus displaying emotional involvement in play, and verbally, describing the course of the ongoing play.

Unfortunately, teachers may also hinder and restrict toddler's play. Singer et al. (2014) observed that teachers' walking around in the playroom, coming over to children, asking something and then leaving again, induces restlessness in children. Teachers can also be too commanding, ask irrelevant questions, join in play unexpectedly from the children's perspective, and take over children's initiatives (Hakkarainen et al., 2013). Engdahl (2011) showed how play often terminates when the teacher interferes in play by invoking a rule or daily routine. Likewise, when intruding in conflicts and clashes too quickly without following the play or without adapting to children's play logic, joint play may end, as observed by Singer and Hännikäinen (2002). It should be remembered that toddlers often manage to resolve their clashes by themselves.

Shared experiences in play

Toddlers are eager to participate in activities in which shared experiences are constructed. The teacher's responsibility is to offer children these experiences by talking together with them about everyday events and occurrences, reading and telling them stories, and by so doing contribute material to their joint play and shared imagination (see Dalli et al., 2011). However, it is not teachers alone who offer shared experiences; children also do this, often with help from teachers.

As earlier discussed, children's experiences expressed in play form a narrative. Play is children's way to understand their cultural world, and the narrative form is very a practical tool in promoting toddlers' play. Play can be viewed as a micro drama, through which children live their

experiences. The past two decades have seen much theoretical discussion and practical applications about play and narration (Kavanaugh & Engel, 1998; Lobman & O'Neill, 2011; Paley, 2001; Sawyer, 1997). Most of the theorising and applications have concerned the play of older children. However, teachers who work and play with toddlers can also make use of the idea of narrative in many ways, and good examples of this are available.

The first task for the teacher is to search for the implicit narrative structure of a toddlers' play sequence and, as Engel (2005b) says, render it visible. The teacher then joins in the child's initiative and tries to follow it. When the teacher narrates the child's pretend gestures, she or he confers structure and meaning on the child's nonverbal actions, highlighting the narrative features implicit in the child's actions. When children begin to use words, adults knowledgeable about children and their everyday experiences can grasp the meaning of a single word, understand the narrative behind it and help the child to develop it into imaginative play. Children together with adults, actively participate from a very early age in storytelling through narrative discourses. Interactions of this kind influence on children's developing abilities to recount and represent events both as real and 'as if'.

Other approaches to supporting and narratively enriching toddler's play vary from child-initiated to teacher-initiated simple, and later more intricate, stories, which can be dramatized in many different ways, but always in ways which arise from the children's experiences and affect them emotionally. Toddlers enjoy the simple narratives of poems and songs. They are interested in the rhythms, puns and fooleries contained in nursery rhymes, because they like, as Chukovsky (1971) states, the absurdity of topsy-turvy situations which break up the established and orderly world. These games are played in a linear narrative framework, first setting up, then increasing excitement and, finally, a climax. Amusing narratives and rhythmic games allow toddlers and teachers to be involved in creative co-participation, strategies which Mallock and Trevarthen (2009) regard as among the most impressive and effective in seeking to achieve togetherness.

Paley (2001), Lobman (2003) and Lindqvist (2001) used drama and improvisation as means of enriching toddlers play, placing differing emphasis on the source of the story, the adults' role and children's participation. In Paley's method, young children tell personal stories, using at least one word, in a group, then, guided by the teacher, dramatize them, share them with each other and live through them together. Individual memories and experiences turn into an embodied story and shared play.

Lobman (2003) uses drama-like working as a form of improvisation in which the players collectively create a scene or a story. The use of improvisation shifts the focus away from what the teacher is doing and towards what the teacher and children are doing together. The teacher notices children's play initiatives, accepts the children's offerings, says 'yes and' and generally does not reject what the children are doing. The teacher listens to the children's suggestions and responds with new offers that help further develop the play. Despite the young age of the children (from twenty months to three years) in Lobman's study, play often included the whole group. Sawyer (1997), Lobman's main source, underlines the importance of the improvisational quality of children's sociodramatic play: the outcome is unpredictable, there is moment-to-moment contingency from turn to turn, and play is collaborative.

Lindqvist (2001) emphasizes that stories awaken toddlers' imagination, which gives meaning to the play actions and objects. In her approach, the ideas for stories are taken from children's literature and relived by dramatizing certain chains of events from those stories and with some roles played by adults. The play themes deal with the ability to distinguish between reality and imagination, as well as the ability to distinguish between social rules, such as being obedient and having some degree of personal freedom. The fact that the teachers take roles in play situations is one important reason why these themes capture toddlers' attention.

Roles in stories can also be taken by puppets or stuffed animals. For toddlers animals are more captivating. In the Playgroup Project (Hakkarainen et al., 2013), the main protagonist was a

lonely teddy bear, who came to play with the toddlers. With the aid of this figure, a common narrative framework was created, based on the toddlers' everyday activities. The teddy bear found a friend, a puppy dog, the two demonstrating the friendship and companionship between peers. It was important that the bear and the dog were able to create narrative continuity, offer the toddlers rituals of actions and arouse feelings like joy and empathy. In the beginning, the dramas were constructed from children's everyday world, later from children's books and from the toddlers themselves. When younger and older children took part in activities together, the younger ones were eager to imitate their older companions.

For drama presentations to succeed, teachers have to be sensitive to children's hints and responses. To children, the representation of a story is an invitation to play. Spontaneous, flexible interaction with children during this activity needs a lot of improvisation. The expression of emotion through vocalisations should be accompanied by bodily movements and facial expressions similar in quality dynamic. Children aged two and three years are very well able to follow the events of a story. As Young and Powers (2008) noticed in their theatre project, although toddlers may not understand the semantic content of a story, they may still enjoy an emotional or rhythmical narrative that takes them through familiar and expected series of sounds and actions and makes sense of significant events in their world.

Collaborating and Reflective Teachers enabling Engaging Play

The creation and maintenance of an unhurried, respectful and warm atmosphere across the early childhood education setting is the primary precondition for a playful climate and a playful community for engaging toddlers in play. Together, the staff should form a community of learners with joint pedagogical aims and values based on discussions and shared knowledge. The teachers should also seek possibilities to work together, and thereby establish personal relations with other teachers and other children from other groups.

Children's play draws deeply on their daily experiences at home. Therefore, collaboration between the teachers and parents or guardians is necessary. The atmosphere of the setting must allow and encourage confidential, continual, open discussions about children's daily life at home and in the setting. It is also important to offer parents opportunities to meet each other both informally and in organized meetings.

For several reasons, teachers should play wholeheartedly with children, not merely observe and guide their play indirectly. Play is an ideal context for understanding the perspectives of children, getting to know individual children and the relations between them, sharing and gathering experiences and feeling togetherness as a group. Play together with children gives the teacher strength, meaningfulness and pleasure in work and helps in the acquisition of greater self-knowledge. To be aware of their subjective feelings connected to their work with children, teachers need to know themselves. They need to reflect on their ways of working and playing with children, to observe not only children but also themselves, and to learn and develop together with children, thereby forming a community of learners with them. Finally, teachers should develop their own playfulness for both their own as well as the children's benefit.

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