

International Perspectives on
Early Childhood Education and Development 44

Niklas Pramling
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Adults in Play with Children

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 Springer

International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development

Volume 44

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This work was supported by Faculty of Education, University of Gothenburg (strategic means for research).



ISSN 2468-8746
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development
ISBN 978-3-031-99628-3
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-99629-0>

ISSN 2468-8754 (electronic)

ISBN 978-3-031-99629-0 (eBook)

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

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Part I
Introduction

Chapter 1

Adults and Children Engaging Together in Play: A Case for Empirical Investigation



Ann Farrell, Malin Nilsen, Cecilia Wallerstedt, and Niklas Pramling

Introduction

The background of our book on adults in play with children originated from a combined research and development project exploring the relationship between teaching (and in a wider sense education) and play in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings in Sweden.¹ The project aimed at studying empirically and elaborate theoretically how teaching (and education) in Swedish preschool could be inclusive of play as a central mode for engaging children in mutual activities. This research topic emerged against societal changes where the national curriculum and the school law for the first time had included ‘teaching’ and ‘education’ also for preschool (i.e., the institution caring for the education and care for the 1–5-year-olds). This institution has a long tradition of a holistic approach, often referred to as *educare*. This approach integrates education and care, organizing for children’s

¹The project was funded by the Swedish Institute for Educational Research (Skolfi, 2016/112). The participating researchers were Niklas Pramling, Cecilia Wallerstedt, Pernilla Lagerlöf, Camilla Björklund, Anne Kultti, Hanna Palmér, Maria Magnusson, Susanne Thulin, Agneta Jonsson and Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson.

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N. Pramling et al. (eds.), *Adults in Play with Children*, International
Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 44,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-99629-0_1

learning and development through theme-work and where play holds a central role. Interesting to note is that the word ‘education’ originally emerged from the word ‘educare’ “that unfolds into two different meanings: *dūcere*, which means to take, guide, lead someone somewhere, and *educare*, which is linked to the sense of nurturing, raising (a child), and making (someone) grow” (Neves-Pereira (2022, p. 1103), italics in original). Hence, conceptually, education’ stems from and was differentiated out from a more holistic conception that encompasses what is today referred to as ‘education’ and ‘care’. While much thinking about ECEC still maintains a distinction between what these two words refer to, in ECEC the original unity of educare is still nurtured. Harmonizing with this original conception, as shown by the contributions to the present volume, playing together with children—responsively and responsibly (Pramling, 2022)—can contribute to such educare where children are simultaneously part of education and cared for.

The combined development and research project—bringing together preschool (ECEC) personnel, including teachers, development leaders, and preschool heads, with researchers—was designed to generate new knowledge relevant to both research (empirical study and theoretical development) and the *educare* practices of preschool. This collaborative effort resulted in the theorization of ECEC, and its teaching practices, culminating in a framework entitled Play-Responsive Early Childhood Education and Care (PRECEC) (Pramling et al., 2019). Very briefly put, this theorization conceptualizes teaching as a mutually constituted activity (i.e., it cannot be ascribed to one part—the teacher—alone), established through response patterns, where participation is possible with different semiotic means. Most importantly, it involves shifts between the modes of sense-making of culturally established, conventional knowledge (as is), transformation of the conventional into something else that it usually is not (as if it were), and engaging in the thought-figure of changing a premise (or several) and then reasoning about what that change would entail (what if). The terminology of ‘as if’, ‘as is’, and ‘what if’ were incorporated from Vaihinger (1924/2000) but developed within PRECEC in a way that is partly different from how these terms are used in other scholarly literature on play (cf. Pramling et al., 2019; Pramling & Pramling Samuelsson, 2025, to Bretherton, 1984; Engel, 2005; Schousboe, 2013; Winther-Lindqvist, 2013). That teaching is understood as mutually constituted means that it is understood as communication; however, not communication according to a transmission model where the knower (the transmitter: the teacher) transmits knowledge (or rather, information) to the novice (the receiver: the child) to ‘take in’ and store in identical form in memory. Instead, communication is understood as a field of tensions between processes of establishing enough mutual ground to go on with a joint activity (Rommetveit, 1974; Wittgenstein, 1953) and differences in perspectives, intentions, and understandings (Linell, 2009; Wertsch, 1998). In theoretical terms, this represents an inherent tension between intersubjectivity and alterity. For a more developed, and empirically grounded, clarification of PRECEC, see Pramling et al. (2019) and regarding different support strategies—towards predefined goals (scaffolding) and open goals (triggering), see Wallerstedt et al. (2021).

The research resulting in PRECEC contributed to conceptualizing teaching and education; the latter, briefly put, is conceptualized as the (meta)narrative weaving together of different activities, that is, how what we do now relates to what we did before and what we will do later. When it comes to play, another approach was taken, which has direct bearing on the present book. Based on insights from key literature on play (Garvey, 1977/1990; Schwartzman, 1978; van Oers, 2014; Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012) that there is no way to include and define all activities commonly referred to as play while excluding adjacent activities, play is treated as the participant's concern. Building on the foundational insights of Bateson (1972/2000) that only those (animals) who can meta-communicate can play together—that is, in order to play together participants need to be able to communicate that what they do is not what it seems (e.g., when playing a fight, in order not to hurt each other)—what is taken as play is what the participants indicate to each other, and therefore also for the ECEC teacher or the analyst, they take as play. They do so through shifting between the modes of sense-making of *as is* and *as if* (cf. above). This is a negotiated issue, and participants are not necessarily in agreement. Rather, negotiating how to interpret actions is an important part of establishing and developing play (cf. alterity, above).

Three of the lessons learned from the research that led to PRECEC were that

- (i) there is often an initial resistance among personnel in ECEC settings to engage in play with children, which can be related to differing (implicit or explicit) understandings of key processes such as play, teaching, education, agency, and care;
- (ii) when examining actual adult-child play, there are ample developmental opportunities that benefit play (learning to play, learning in play, and learning from play), which potentially also have relevance for adult-child interactions in contexts beyond ECEC; and
- (iii) there is a need of making claims grounded in empirical investigation of actual play activities rather than based on ideology or perspectives—Romantic or otherwise - of play, children, and childhood: How do participants—children and, when they participate, adults—respond to each other's play (and other) actions?

These lessons lead to the present book, which aims to provide empirically and theoretically grounded insights into what happens when adults play with children, and what are the potentials, consequences, challenges of, or resistances to doing so.

The experiences from research on PRECEC resonate with other contemporary studies on ECEC practices. The resistance to play with children is typically framed in terms of adults tending to 'hijack' the play of children (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Adults in play with children, is a 'hot'—and controversial—topic. Looking at debates in various fora, and as is arguably in the nature of debate, points of departure are often formulated in terms of dichotomies, that is, as choosing a side between mutually exclusive alternatives (either/or). For example, this mode of reasoning comes to the fore in claims about the need to choose between play or teaching in ECEC, adult-initiated activity or child-initiated activity, free or non-free/restricted

activity, and goal-directed or non-goal directed activity. The problems with dichotomies—when it comes to the phenomena studied and explained by research on learning, development or ECEC—is that they constitute what are dynamic and evolving phenomena as if they were static, unchanging. Hence, these stances are unresponsive to the nature of the investigated matters. Another problem with dichotomies in this context is that, in being formulated as either/or, they ‘lock’ people in exclusive positions from which it is unlikely that they will generate any new knowledge in communication with ‘the other’. The way out of such a deadlock is, arguably, to establish some mutual ground rules—which researchers should be able to do—such as the importance of grounding knowledge claims on empirical investigation rather than on ideology or personal remembrance (of one’s own or one’s children’s childhood, for example). Investigating phenomena empirically can generate findings contrary to preconceptions and allows for more nuanced—and relational—conceptualizations. Relationships *between* are precluded by a dichotomous point of view. Relationships are precisely the interest of this book, reconnecting this general discussion to the matter of children and adults engaging in play.

The research in ECEC settings that has empirically investigated adult-child interaction shows that it is a reliable measure of program quality (Howard et al., 2024), with positive teacher-child interactions associated with the development of children’s social, emotional, and cognitive skills (Melhuish et al., 2015; Siraj et al., 2023). So too, in home settings, mothers’ conversational styles have been found to impact children’s recall and narrative skills (Fivush et al., 2011), with parent-child interactions being found to generalize to children’s verbal interactions with nonparent adults (Hedrick et al., 2009). Moreover, adult conversational styles have been found to change with training and, in turn, to impact children’s narrative skills (Boland et al., 2003; Rees & Newcombe, 2007). Despite the corpus of evidence in support of adult-child interaction, less is known about adults and children engaging together in play, a gap that invites the systematic investigation provided in this volume. The ambition is to challenge readers to engage with diverse conceptual understandings, research methodologies and empirical findings about adults and children interacting in and around play. In these chapters, the form of adult participation in playing with children will be investigated, along with the patterns of communication that emerge and how participation, roles, and development of narrative are made visible.

This book provides conceptual and empirical insights into what happens when children and adults play together, whether in adult-initiated play or child-initiated play to which adults seek to gain entry. The empirical examples of play capture a variety of contexts: playgroups in ECEC in Switzerland (Kalkusch & Perren, 2025), the PlayLab environment in Lithuania (Bredikyte, 2025), preschools in Sweden (Cekaite & Simonsson, 2025), a bereavement camp in Finland for families with children who have lost a parent (Pursi et al., 2025), a refugee camp in Greece (Løge Hagen & Heldal, 2025), and parent-child-play in home environments in Australia (Li, 2025). To further broaden the scope, there is one chapter that specifically focuses on children’s play with older relatives (Farrell, 2025), as well as one chapter that examines play activities in global majority societies (Roopnarine & Wusirige, 2025). Conceptual discussions are particularly conducted in the chapter on the

ethical dimensions of teacher-child play interactions in preschool (Trawick-Smith & Lee, 2025) as well as in the closing chapter of the volume (Pramling et al., 2025). In the following sections of this introductory chapter, we will highlight some of the key issues that will come to the fore throughout the volume. These concern children's rights, perspectives, and agency when entering play activities that include adults. The latter also leads to a discussion on the idea of 'free play'. Finally, we will introduce the individual chapters briefly by highlighting their approaches and methodologies.

With an Interest in Children's Perspective

From an historical perspective, the interest in children and play can be seen to have changed over the past century. With the emergence of the new sociology of childhood during the second half of the twentieth century, attention turned towards children's peer cultures, highlighting how children create relationships with other children in and through play (Corsaro, 1992). As a result of this research interest, how the power dynamics between children and adults are understood has reportedly shifted. Children have been studied in research based on their own conditions, rather than being viewed solely from an adult perspective, such as what they can or cannot do according to adult norms. Today, this interest in children's perspectives is typically referred to as stemming from the (new) sociology of childhood. However, the research interest in children's perspectives, in fact, is a legacy from the much earlier work of developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980). The rationale of Piaget's research was a critique of previous research on children—particularly intelligence testing—that clarified what children at various ages and levels of development could *not* do (Beilin, 1992; Pramling & Säljö, 2015). In contrast, Piaget set out to study how children perceive and reason about the world. That is, his interest was in why children, for example, answer questions the way they do, regardless of whether they arrive at the expected (correct) answer or not. This interest in the logic of children—and how this logic changes with development—is evident already in his first book, *The Language and Thought of the Child*, published in 1923 (Piaget, 1923/1926).

The perspective put forward by Corsaro aligns well with and may even through ECEC teacher education have contributed to the common ideal of ECEC to let children play as much as possible independently from adults (their teachers). However, this ideal is more likely rooted in the widespread influence of Piagetian theory, implying children developing through interacting with the physical world rather than in communication with adults (Bergqvist, 1990; Säljö & Bergqvist, 1997). Corsaro argues:

Once children recognize that they have the ability to produce their own shared world without direct dependence on adults, the nature of the socialization process itself is transformed. Never again will the asymmetrical adult-child relationship dominate. Children now begin routinely to socialize each other, and inputs and experiences from the adult world are inter-

preted within the routines of an increasingly complex and autonomous peer culture. In short, with the creation of an initial peer culture, other children become as important as adults in the socialization process. (p. 162)

This perspective can be interpreted as suggesting that, once children discover the value of interacting with other children, adults are no longer as interesting to them as before. Such a perspective can be questioned partly based on what we now know about how even very young children enjoy playing with other children and partly based on what Corsaro (1992) himself also writes. He not only highlights the importance of children's play with one another but also emphasizes the role of adults in play. Corsaro underscores the significance of adults in creating time and space for play and in providing support during socially challenging situations. He also points out that, through interactions with adults, children encounter social knowledge that they do not fully understand or are unfamiliar with. In this way, challenges are created in play that enable the expansion of children's experiential worlds. Therefore, it becomes important not to interpret children's play development as a trajectory progressing from playing with adults to playing only with other children. Neither is it a question of a dichotomy, that children either—or in normative terms should—play with peers, or with adults.

Corsaro's reasoning also actualizes other critical points. One thing to consider is that his work referred to here is published in 1992, and the claim that "Never again will the asymmetrical adult-child relationship dominate" (p. 162) may be questioned in light of subsequent changes. Something that has recurrently been pointed out in more recent time is that, due to safety concerns, many parents are far more restrictive in letting children play on their own, out of sight (e.g., Davey & Lundy, 2011). This also implies fewer opportunities for spontaneously encountering and playing with other children (where there are no adults). Hence, the view of children roaming free to play with other children may already be a thing of the past.

The reasoning about the disappearance of "the asymmetrical adult-child relationship" (Corsaro, 1992, p. 162) implies that a child-child relationship is symmetrical. This assumption is problematic. As has been amply clarified by communications research (see e.g., Linell, 2009), there is always asymmetry in communication. This is due to differences in experience and knowledge among interlocutors, and it is precisely these differences that drive communication and make it worthwhile. If our knowledge and experience were identical, there would be no point in communicating. Furthermore, marginalization and exclusion processes also occur in children-only play (e.g., Brooker et al., 2014; Einarsdottir, 2014; Evaldsson, 2009; Löfdahl, 2014; Winther-Lindqvist, 2019). It is important not to Romanticize children-only play as symmetrical (and per implication, harmonical).

Another critical reflection that could be made in relation to Corsaro's (1992) reasoning about children's "autonomous peer culture" (p. 162) is not only, as we have already hinted at, that it is, and cannot be, independent from wider culture, but also that the singular implies a simplification suggesting there is one culture for children and one for adults. However, arguably, children are—more central and more peripheral—participants in or members of many cultures, as are adults, for

example, contingent on upbringing, schooling, (extended) family relationships, language(s), and mediated by digital technology. Separating out children's peer culture as distinct disregards all these interweaving cultures and how children—like adults—have different identities in different cultural settings, which are likely to have importance to how they interact with others, including other children. Corsaro's reasoning about children's "autonomous peer culture" reinforces a dichotomy that our reasoning and the studies in the present book move beyond.

It should be recognized that in later writings, Corsaro has somewhat nuanced the argument about children's peer culture. For instance, in Corsaro and Johannesen (2007) it is argued that "children collectively produce and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively appropriating aspects of the larger culture" (p. 444). In this reasoning, and in their reasoning, which explicitly latches onto a sociocultural perspective, the authors thus give a more dialogic account of children's cultures; and it is significant, from our perspective, that the plural is here used. However, despite connecting to a sociocultural perspective and briefly touching upon mediation, emphasizing peer cultures as children's "own" and that it is "unique" contributes to conveying a picture of such cultures that downplays how these are contingent on and—as the authors' own analysis make clear—emerge in relation to other (adult, popular etc.) cultures. This, clearly, has implications for analysing and understanding adult contribution to and occasional participation in such activities with children. Terminology is important to research, since how researchers refer to and thereby perspectivise phenomena has consequences for how they direct their attention in analysis. This semiotic mediation (Wertsch, 2007) of languaging was forcefully argued by one of the classics of the philosophy of science, Norwood Hanson's *Patterns of Discovery* (1958/1981). We return to this issue about the semiotic mediation of the languaging of research in relation to the notion of "children's play" in the concluding chapter (Pramling et al., 2025; see also, briefly, below).

One final comment on Corsaro's (1992) claim that historically children eventually "begin routinely to socialize each other" and that this led to "inputs and experiences from the adult world" being "interpreted within the routines of an increasingly complex and autonomous peer culture", and how this can be summarized in terms of "the creation of an initial peer culture" where "other children become as important as adults in the socialization process" (p. 162). This reasoning can be developed, based on anthropological evidence, which indicates how when transitioning from nomadism (living as hunter-gatherers) to permanent settlement and humans started cultivating the land (the agricultural revolution). This cultivation required tools that only adults (due to strength, length etc.) could operate. From having lived as a community, children and adults together, with the division of labour that ensued, the world of adults (work) began to be separated from the everyday lives of children. However, it is at this time that proper toys are invented—that is objects that mimic actual tools (a plow, a bow, an arrow etc.)—and children start playing what the adults do (work) when they are separate from the children. Hence, what children start doing is mediated by cultural tools and practices stemming from what adults do when no longer continuously sharing everyday life with children.

Thus, even when physically separated from adults, what children do is contingent on mediation from the adult ‘world’ (Elkonin, 2005).

‘Free Play’ as a Site for Adult-Child Interaction and Agency

A focus on adult participation with children in play can be understood as a dual strand: literally (i.e., adults participating in play) and metaphorically (i.e., children alluding to or invoking adults in play, for example, to enforce rules of play or to play adult roles). The latter can be conceptualized as a form of adult participation in play, in adults being physically absent but communicatively/discursively present (cf. Bakhtin, 1986; Linell, 2009). Both strands of (i) adults playing with children and (ii) children invoking/playing out adult roles, imply a critique of an oft-repeated common-sense notion in ECEC research that play is an ‘adult-free-zone’. Contesting the notion of play as exclusively *in* and *as* the domain of children, the book adopts the nomenclature of ‘play’ rather than ‘children’s play’, acknowledging that adults may also be participants *in* and contributors *to* play (cf. also the distinction between play ‘free from’ versus ‘free to’, van Oers, 2014, as discussed below).

One reason that play is often valued in early childhood educational settings is that it is thought to provide an arena for children to exercise their agency. Play is, according to this reasoning, considered children’s own domain. However, considering theoretical developments, these ideas—play as children’s own domain and therefore an arena for them to express their agency in education—need to be rethought. Contemporary research on agency emphasizes how it is situated (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021) or its ‘situatedness’. One reason for this situatedness is that agency is contingent on experience and knowledge. For example, being able to exercise agency in playing music with others requires certain musical skills, such as identifying what others are playing and where one may contribute to the music and how, as well as the ability to play one’s instrument in line with those ambitions (on the importance of the ‘content’ of activity for the possibilities to exercise agency, see Pramling et al., 2024). Similarly, being able to exercise agency in play presumes being able to clarify to the play partners play intentions and how they relate to—build on, question, or change—what is currently being played. Another reason for the situatedness of agency is that it is contingent on the response of others in the activity (Houen et al., 2016; Pramling et al., 2024; Shengjergji, 2024). Without co-players responding to one’s play actions, one cannot exercise agency in play, without risking being excluded and left to play on one’s own. In theoretical terms, agency is further conceptualized as mediated activity (Mäkitalo, 2016). This means that rather than a natural disposition, agency is developed through the appropriation of cultural tools and the practices in which these are used.

With mediation of cultural tools (Wells, 2007; Wertsch, 2007), individuals can distance themselves from the immediate activity and choose another way of acting and contributing to changing the course and nature of the activity (Mäkitalo, 2016). Cultural tools are appropriated in interaction with others and used in

interaction—communication in its widest sense—with others. This perspective on agency as interactively achieved and contingent has the advantage for research of taking theorizing away from static ‘essences’ (what an individual ‘has’ or ‘lacks’) and into dynamic processes (what is interactively achieved, as empirically available to study). For educational practices, this reconceptualization of agency has important implications by emphasizing how others—teachers and children—are critical to a child’s possibilities to develop and exercise agency. That is, it is something that can be developed (as well as hindered), rather than something some children have, and others lack (as though given by nature). That agency is ‘situated’ does not imply that it is restricted to a particular activity. Rather, according to this reasoning, it is contingent on the appropriation of cultural tools and thus mediation, developing an ability and an awareness of one’s possibilities to intervene in and change the course of activities (cf. Mäkitalo, 2016). On theoretical grounds it would therefore be expected to carry beyond the specific activity, since the tools mediating this process are situation-transcending (institutional) (Pramling et al., 2024). This is, in a sense, the value of such tools, in that they detach us from dependence on the here-and-now.

Play has long been a feature of pedagogical practice in the early years and a prime site for democratic participation in adult-child interaction. It can enable children to explore their environment, develop social and physical skills and to construct knowledge of their world. Further, play is a vehicle for the core democratic principle of participation and, as such, a hallmark of quality ECEC. Adults, be they parents, family members or qualified educators are well placed to encourage children to give voice to their ideas, welcome their decision-making, share power and negotiate conflict (Danby & Theobald, 2012) within democratic settings. So too, negotiating conflict in play settings can allow both adults and children to use materials, to listen to each other’s perspectives, take turns and contribute to divergent thinking.

There are several reasons why play could contribute to generating divergent thinking. One is that there is an inherent openness to play; that is, it is not known beforehand where the play will end up; in fact, the whole play may be transformed during play into another play. This inherent openness relates to the often-voiced educational ideal of ‘free play’. What is referred to as free play typically implies that children in play are to be left alone without adult ‘interference’, to play what and how they want (if they do not hurt anyone physically or verbally/psychologically). This notion of free play, however, needs to be problematized. An important distinction made by van Oers (2014) makes clear what is, arguably, critical to free play. He argues that free play is generally and unreflectively understood as ‘free from’ adult participation. However, he further argues, what is critical to the freedom of play is what he calls ‘free to’. The latter refers to the openness of play, meaning that participants can take the activity in novel and unforeseeable directions. This freedom ‘to’ take the activity in new directions is irrespective of whether teachers or other adults participate in play with children: children—or some child/ren—may have this freedom in play *without* as well as *with* adults participating. This ‘free to’ of play is, of course, potentially challenging to education, and therefore something

that teachers will face when attempting to integrate play. A second reason that play may contribute to divergent thinking is that play implies a transformation of reality, where players take something from its conventional function or meaning (*as is*) to *as if* it were different: for example, the sofa becoming a ship or a bridge. A third reason why play may generate divergent thinking is that play, as an activity, often implies children being active in developing the activity, as evident for example in instances where children tell their teacher that her suggestion does not align with how they want the activity to develop (for an empirical example, see Pramling et al., 2019, p. 91). This connects to what is typically discussed in terms of agency.

This understanding of play as a space for openness, transformation, and agency points to its broader significance. Beyond fostering divergent thinking, play also serves as a social arena where children actively develop their agency and relationships. This dual role of play connects to its potential for socializing children into democratic citizens, as discussed next. Drawing upon Lundy's (2012) understanding of children's rights discourses—space, voice, audience, and influence—Lagerlöf et al. (2023) researched how adults respond to children's actions in play. Their findings highlight the importance of creating opportunities for children's perspectives to be shared, enabling them to contribute to evolving play/narratives, and actively listening to and acting upon their input. Together, these practices promote children's agency in the present and potentially throughout their lives. From this standpoint, adult attunement to children is key to children's democratic socialization through play.

Issues, Approaches and Framing Methodologies

In Chap. 2, Trawick-Smith and Lee take on the critical question of the ethics of adult participation—or non-participation—in play with children. In a thorough and nuanced discussion, they show how different stances on the questions of adults playing with children imply or entail different ethical standpoints. This important and clarifying discussion makes evident how playing together is inherently intertwined with ideas about how to care for and in other ways relate to one other. The discussion takes us well beyond dichotomous positions and offers an approach for a more informative and productive understanding of relationships in play. Hence, the chapter is both retrospective and prospective.

Another theoretical point of view on the relationship between education and play is the PlayWorld, as extensively studied and developed in the research of Fleer and colleagues, (e.g., Fleer, 2011, 2021, 2024). This theory, which has Lindqvist's (1995) work as a foundation, and the Vygotskian theory that underlies it, in the present book informs Bredikyte's and Li's chapters (Chaps. 7 and 8, respectively, to be discussed below). There is, however, a different focus in the work of PlayWorlds, as indicated by the terminological difference between "Conceptual PlayWorld" (Fleer, 2024; Li, Chap. 8, this book) and "Narrative PlayWorld" (Bredikyte, Chap. 7, this book). This difference reflects a difference in what teachers aim to support in

interaction with children (cf. supporting play and supporting through play, respectively, as conceptualized in terms of triggering and scaffolding; Wallerstedt et al., 2021).

In an extensive and richly grounded review of the research literature on adults in play with children globally, Roopnarine and Wusirige (Chap. 3) clarify how beliefs (or ‘ethnotheories’) about ‘proper’ conduct mediate adult relationships with children playing. Focusing on adults in global majority contexts, their discussion moves the discussion well beyond simplified models such as dichotomies (either/or) in situating interactive patterns in terms of a developmental niche model. Roopnarine and Wusirige’s reasoning also highlights how playing together is a form of caring for each other. This is also important to keep in mind to avoid discussions about adults in play, particularly in ECEC settings, from being reduced to the ‘education’ part, despite such settings often having a holistic ambition of being characterized by ‘educare’, as we have already mentioned. As clarified by Garvey (1977/1990) in her classic book on play, ontogenetically play and care are initially undifferentiated and only gradually become singled out. Still, playing together, arguably, implies caring for each other in nurturing and sustaining relationships between play partners (see also, Farrell, Chap. 4, this book). Roopnarine and Wusirige’s chapter, finally, complements other chapters in this volume, testifies to the importance of different research methodologies in a research field. With their meta-study of large-scale research, they reveal patterns on another level, so to speak, from the patterns identified by in situ studies of activities (see e.g., the Chap. 6 by Cekaite & Simonsson, this book). Both of these kinds of contributions, and others, are important to the collective knowledge-building of the elusive but central matter of play.

‘Adults’ in adult-child-interactions most often refer to parents or ECEC personnel, but another important group to highlight is grandparents and other extended-family members. In an overview of research, Farrell (Chap. 4, this book) points out the need for further explorations of grandparents’ interactions with grandchildren in play contexts. These kinds of interactions take place nowadays both in home contexts (when grandparents provide childcare while parents work etc.), and in institutional intergenerational programs.

In an experimental set-up, Kalkusch and Perren (Chap. 5, this book) address the question of what difference, if any, adult play participation makes, in addition to providing play props. Relating their work to the notion of ‘guided play’ (cf. Cekaite & Simonsson, Chap. 6, this book), they clarify what their approach shares with it and how it differs from the former:

Social pretend play tutoring, understood as an active involvement in children social pretend play, shares many of the key features of guided play. However, the concept of a clear learning goal in play tutoring may differ slightly. Instead of focusing on specific social, emotional, or cognitive skills, play tutoring primarily aims to foster children’s engagement in high-quality pretend play. The emphasis is on enhancing the play itself rather than directly targeting specific developmental outcomes. (p. 86)

As indicators of development, Kalkusch and Perren focus on children’s social competences and peer relationship quality. With a partly adjacent interest, Cekaite and Simonsson (Chap. 6, this book) conceptualize teacher-children interaction in terms

of ‘guided play’. Their analytical focus is on teachers’ questions, as educational strategies. Emphasizing, as a premise and rationale for their analysis, that “access rituals” (Björk Willén, 2016; Corsaro, 2015; Burdelski & Cekaite, 2022) cannot be taken for granted as mastered by all children (or all adults, for that matter), they analyze what questions educators ask to gain access to play in education. Like children who may have difficulties gaining access to play, this analysis reminds us of the importance of not presuming that all children at all times can play and are allowed to participate in play. In terms of the education of ECEC teachers—and other adults working with children—we should neither underestimate the difficulty that adults may have in gaining access to play with children. Contributing to illuminating how different access strategies play out is therefore of interest to the research field of play in education as well as to the development—and education for working in—educational practices with children.

In her work based on a PlayWorld approach, Bredikyte (Chap. 7, this book) addresses “the development of play autonomy in individual children and collaboration among the players” (p. 124). This analytical focus, rephrased in terms of participation, implies that this process denotes the duality between independence and dependence, and taking part (gaining something from the collective) and giving something to the collective (giving contributions). This dynamic relationship again implies the problem with common-sense notions such as dependency and independence being dichotomous and educational practices nurturing one or the other. Analyzing play sessions (cf. Kalkusch & Perren, Chap. 5, this book), Bredikyte clarifies how such activities are set in motion, play out, and are analyzed. Typically, a PlayWorld project, encompassing a number of play sessions, goes on for several months. Following such activities over an extended time gives important contributions to understanding what develops in children through participating in this educational arrangement. What Bredikyte emphasizes is the importance of cultivating children’s play autonomy through creating a play culture in the classroom. Hence, looking at how teachers can support children, it is evident that, through participation in play, children’s autonomy is developed.

Based on related theoretical perspectives, namely a cultural-historical framework, Li (Chap. 8, this book) explores interactions in play between children and parents in the home environment. She poses the question of how particularly fathers promote toddlers’ sense of agency (Hilppö et al., 2017) through imaginative play. Through her analyses, she demonstrates how children carry and use experiences of play from other contexts in their interactions with parents. It is here that tensions can arise when experiences diverge, and the adult must interpret and understand what the child is expressing. Li proposes the concept of *agentic imagination* to highlight the need for adults to acknowledge toddlers’ agency and motives in play while also addressing their own demands.

In the chapter by Pursi, Poulter and Lipponen (Chap. 9, this book), the authors explore how imaginary play can provide a space for children and adults to jointly encounter and make sense of life, death, and grief after the loss of a parent. Drawing on a cultural-historical approach and using video observations from a bereavement camp, the chapter demonstrates how imaginary play expands young children’s

experiences of loss and creates opportunities to sustain connections with deceased loved ones. Through examples of joint play between adults and children, the authors illustrate how imagination transforms difficult emotional realities into new possibilities for understanding and relating to grief. The analysis highlights how play functions as a creative, aesthetic, and collective space where existential questions can be explored with care and sensitivity. Importantly, the chapter underlines the role of adults in recognizing and facilitating these encounters, challenging normative views of children's grief as solely cognitive or developmental. Instead, imaginary play emerges as a powerful cultural practice for both children and adults to co-construct meaning, foster agency, and sustain emotional bonds in the face of loss.

The importance of adults engaging with children in play and even in some cases, helping children begin the play, is studied by Heldal and Hagen (Chap. 10, this book). Based on empirical data generated in a refugee camp, the authors present three narratives of ECEC personnel and children's interactions. These narratives, taken in tandem, show a trajectory of play opportunities for a child—from starting to collaborate with an adult (and from this interaction opening up possibilities for social experiences in general), to starting to play, inviting the adult as a partner in the play-project, and to establishing a platform for play that has “room for new peers” in role-play.

In conclusion, this chapter has highlighted the critical importance of adult-child interactions in play, emphasizing their role as sites for co-constructed meaning-making, the negotiation of agency, and the transformative potential of imaginative engagement. By addressing the challenges of dichotomous thinking and situating play within relational, mediated, and dynamic processes, we have set the stage for a deeper exploration of the complexities of adult participation in children's play across diverse contexts. Taken together, the studies reported in this book contribute rich insights into processes of adult-child interaction in play, how adults access and participate, and/or why they choose not to do so. The studies are also highly illuminating when it comes to what develops in and from the play in which adults and children engage together.

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Part II
Reviews and Conceptual Discussions

Chapter 2

Ethical Dimensions of Teacher-Child Play Interactions in Preschool



Jeffrey Trawick-Smith and Kwangwon Lee

A play-centered curriculum is not a laissez-faire curriculum in which anything goes [but one] in which teachers take an active role in balancing spontaneous play, guided play, directed play, and teacher-directed activities.

(Van Hoorn et al., 2014)

Uh-oh, here comes Ms. R. Now she's going to ask us, "What are you playing?" and then you have to answer, and then she just talks and talks and talks, and we can never finish the castle for Queen Wonder.

(A 4-year-old child in the block center of a preschool, warning a peer about an approaching teacher)

Introduction

Play has long been viewed as contributing to the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development of young children (Ahmed et al., 2023; Bergen, 2002; Garvey, 1990; Vygotsky, 1976). Beyond these contributions, play is believed to be what makes childhood joyful (Landreth & Homeyer, 2021; Stetsenko & Ho, 2015). For these reasons, the International Play Association (2014) has proclaimed that children have a fundamental right to play—a right that includes opportunities to engage in the open-ended, self-chosen, and emotionally meaningful activities that are observed in children around the world (Roopnarine et al., 2015).

There are three distinct perspectives on the role of adults in supporting children's play: (1) A *free play perspective* holds that children be allowed to play with minimal adult involvement, so that children can pursue their own play ideas and interests. (2)

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A *facilitating play perspective* is based on the assumption that many children in modern society are unable to play in ways that are most beneficial to their development (Bodrova & Leong, 2024). Early childhood teachers should implement methods to enhance play abilities in classrooms. (3) An *achieving learning goals through play perspective* emphasizes that play should be employed in classrooms to meet academic outcomes, which are receiving much recent attention in early childhood education (Pistorova & Slutsky, 2020; Weisberg et al., 2013, 2015; Wickstrom & Pyle, 2024; Yu, 2022). As children play teachers can guide learning in math, literacy, and other academic areas.

Efforts to promote play or to use play to enhance learning—aligned with perspectives 2 and 3, above—often include teacher participation in children’s play activities to model, prompt, or direct play and learning. However, ethical concerns have been raised about adult involvement in play (Brėdikytė, 2022; Brown & Freeman, 2001; Jensen et al., 2021). Too often, some argue, adult involvement “hijacks” or subverts children’s play, undermining emotional and cognitive benefits and rendering it a didactic, adult-directed behavior that is not true play anymore. An ethical tension exists for teachers, then, in deciding whether or how much to participate in children’s play in preschool classrooms. Tampering too often or too vigorously in play may threaten children’s autonomy and agency. Too little involvement may deprive them of adult interactions that can contribute to their development and learning. The purpose of this chapter is to explore ethical dimensions of teacher-child play interactions in preschool classrooms and to consider ways to address this dilemma. *Good-fit play interactions*—approaches to adult involvement found to enhance play—will be examined as potential approaches to overcome ethical concerns.

The Free Play Perspective

Play has been defined in various ways in the literature but has most often been described as an activity that is self-chosen and intrinsically motivated (Bateson, 1972; Garvey, 1990; Rubin et al., 1983; Trawick-Smith, 2020). Play is something children do on their own or with other children. It provides a respite from the stressors of real life and the scrutiny and guidance of adults (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019). An early play theorist, Huizinga (1955) argued that, “first and foremost play is a voluntary activity. [An adult’s] order to play is no longer play” (p. 51). Many children themselves express the view that play is something they choose to do without adult involvement (Einarsdottir, 2014). In fact, for some children, the very definition of play is an activity in which adults are not present (Pyle & Alaca, 2018). A child in one investigation articulated this view: “What is *not* play is anything a teacher tells you to do” (Theobald et al., 2015, p. 354.) So, many play theorists hold a *free play perspective*—a belief that play is something children should enjoy without adult participation.

Researchers have conducted studies to determine if this autonomous, free play is associated with important areas of child development. Results indicate that free play is related to social development (Fisher, 1992; Ghafouri & Wien, 2005; Jaggy et al., 2023; Pagani et al., 2010; Smits-van der Nat et al., 2024), creativity (Singer & Singer, 2008), problem solving (Rosen, 1974), general cognitive development (Carlson et al., 2014; Johnson, 1976), and academic performance (Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Gmitrová & Gmitrov, 2004). Investigators explain these findings by noting that, in free play, children engage in more “cognitive behavior,” such as asking questions or solving problems.

Many of these studies are correlational, meaning that free play is associated with areas of development, but a clear causal relationship is not established (Lillard et al., 2013). Still, this research has inspired a belief among many scholars that play contributes to child development and that children should be afforded opportunities to play independently in school and at home (Feitelson & Ross, 1973; Hewes, 2006; Houser et al., 2016; Pellegrini et al., 2007).

Many preschool teachers adhere to a free play perspective, believing that the role of adults in play is to provide space and materials and to supervise, observe, but not regularly participate in children’s activities (Davies, 1997; Kemple, 1996; Manz & Bracaliello, 2016; Shorer et al., 2019; Trawick-Smith & Dzuirgot, 2010a; Vu et al., 2015). Interviews confirm that some teachers are wary of interfering in children’s play and prefer to observe, rather than interact (Ivrendi, 2020; Tsai, 2015). For some researchers and teachers, adult involvement in children’s play may even be viewed as unethical, as it deprives children of that fundamental right to play, as asserted by IPA (Brigden, 2022; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2014; Hewes, 2006; IPA, 2014; Ryan, 2005).

The Facilitating Play Perspective

Do all children play in ways that best support their development? Several decades ago researchers began to ask this question, particularly in regard to children living in poverty. Play abilities, some argued, are another area in which children in families of low socioeconomic status are deficient (Feitelson & Ross, 1973). This concern gave rise to a *facilitating play perspective*—a view that adults should interact with children in ways that promote more beneficial play abilities. A variety of strategies were designed and studied to enhance play, most of which included some form of direct adult involvement in children’s activities.

Early researchers developed *play training* or *play tutoring* models. Although these approaches varied, the primary goal of these was to promote pretend play—that symbolic, make believe role playing that has been long been valued by child development theorists (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1976). The purpose of these methods was to enhance play itself, which, over time, would contribute other areas of development (Christie, 1983; Saltz & Johnson, 1974; Smilansky, 1968). Two features are common in play training strategies. First, adults provide an engaging

thematic play center to inspire make-believe—a pretend restaurant, for example. Second, adults then join play in these centers, sometimes even assuming make believe roles themselves to model complex play behaviors. Research indicates that such play training promotes play abilities, themselves, as well as cognitive (Carlson et al., 2014; Saltz et al., 1977), language (Smilansky, 1968), and literacy development (Christie, 1983; Pellegrini & Galda, 1982, 1993; Williamson & Silvern, 2018).

A more recent facilitating play approach, called *Tools of the Mind*, is based on Vygotsky's (1976) sociocultural theory (Bodrova & Leong, 2024). In this model adults interact with children in several ways to promote more “mature” pretend play. Thematic play centers are created based on children's interests and experience. Prior to play, adults guide children in planning their make-believe roles and the actions they will carry out in these centers. Depending on age, children are asked to actually draw or write a plan for the character they will pretend to be. During play, teachers interact with children to encourage them focus their activities on carrying out these plans. Research indicates that a Tools of the Mind model can promote play abilities and lead to growth in measures of executive functions—cognitive abilities related to self-regulation of behavior, thinking, and emotions (Barnett et al., 2008; Goble et al., 2021).

Positive outcomes of these facilitating play approaches, reported in the literature, suggest that adult participation in play is not only justified, but may be an important responsibility of teachers and parents, particularly for children who are at risk for challenges in play. In fact, from this perspective, *not* actively supporting play might be viewed as failing to meet an ethical obligation as a teacher.

The Achieving Learning Goals Through Play Perspective

Around the world there has been growing pressure for early childhood programs to achieve measurable academic outcomes. This has led to a reduction of play time in some schools and child care centers in favor of more direct academic instruction (Irani, 2023; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Pistorova & Slutsky, 2020). Alarmed by the disappearance of play in classrooms, some play researchers have designed methods for using play to achieve academic goals. In this approach, children are able to play in classrooms but in ways that meet math, literacy, or other goals, usually through direct adult involvement (Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

In an early approach to using play to meet learning goals, teachers infused children's play with literacy materials—books, signs, writing implements (Vukelich, 1991, 1993). Literacy-rich sociodramatic play centers were designed, and teachers then interacted with children to encourage and model literacy activities (Christie, 2021; Neuman & Roskos, 1992; Roskos & Christie, 2017; Roskos & Neuman, 1993). A teacher might equip a make-believe grocery store with markers and pens and prompt children to write signs or grocery lists. Books about topics related to the themes of play centers might be included—a book about doctors related to a make believe hospital center, for example. Such literacy play strategies have been found

to increase children’s knowledge of print, particularly when adults take an active role (Neuman & Roskos, 1992; Rand & Morrow, 2021).

In a more general approach, called *guided play*, adults engage children in play to promote many different learning objectives by asking open-ended questions, commenting on children’s activities, using new vocabulary, or pointing out unnoticed aspects of a problem (Weisberg et al., 2013). Researchers describe this method as, “offering an appropriate middle-ground pedagogical approach ... that incorporates elements of free play, discovery learning, and traditional pedagogy” (Weisberg et al., 2013, p. 104). Research indicates that such guided play can contribute to children’s learning, particularly in mathematics and language (Ferrara et al., 2011; Fisher et al., 2013; Han et al., 2010; Skene et al., 2022).

Perspectives on achieving learning through play are distinct from other viewpoints in that they are not focused on enhancing play itself. Play is a vehicle for achieving important school- or society-mandated goals for academic growth. Specific methods of enhancing symbolic make believe, positive peer interactions, or are emotional self-expression in play are not essential components of such approaches.

Ethical Concerns About Adult Participation in Play

Early childhood educators are guided in their work by sets of ethical principles that are adopted by various professional associations—the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2011), the British Association for Early Childhood Education (2011), Early Childhood Australia (2024), Early Childhood Education Teachers Union in Finland (2020), or the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (2022), to name a few. These statements of ethical conduct address major areas of professional practice, including respecting diversity of children and families and creating safe, nurturing, and responsive environments for all children. Such ethical principles also include narrower areas of classroom behavior, one of which is supporting each child’s right to play. But what does it mean to support play?

Advocates of each theory of play, presented previously—free play, facilitating play, and the achieving learning through play theorists—would define support for play in different ways. Each would consider their approach to be supportive of children’s play activities and view other methods to be inadequate or even unethical (Brigden, 2022; Brown & Freeman, 2001; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2014). Some of the ethical concerns of each group of theorists are considered next.

Ethical Concerns of Free Play Theorists

Advocates of the first play theory, the Free Play Perspective, believe that when adults become involved with children in play, their activities may no longer even be considered play. Colliver and Doel-Mackaway (2021) argue that most adult involvement deprives children of the two fundamental processes that make play beneficial and joyful—choice and autonomy. The very presence of adults in a play setting—to encourage particular play behaviors or guide learning—will alter its nature. Even guiding children who wish to play alone to speak or interact with peers may interrupt beneficial solitary pursuits and redirect them to activities they do not wish to engage in (Coplan & Rubin, 2021).

A commonly observed and particularly intrusive adult interaction, free play advocates note, is quieting play or discouraging behaviors that teachers consider undesirable (Brown & Freeman, 2001). This might include rough and tumble play, play fighting, or pretending to be superheroes or monsters, and play about death and dying. Such themes may hold important personal meaning for children and reflect the larger culture (Freeman & Brown, 2004; Galman, 2021; Paquette et al., 2023; Smith & StGeorge, 2023; Veiga et al., 2022). Even prohibiting gun play might be viewed as interfering in children's activities in cultures where guns are prevalent in the neighborhood or the media (Rich, 2003; Sutton-Smith et al., 1988).

Free play advocates also raise concerns that teacher involvement in children's activities will guide those of some cultural backgrounds to play in ways that are unfamiliar, less meaningful, or even confusing to them. For example, an emphasis of many American and European teachers on encouraging pretend play may not meet the needs of children who do not play in this way at home or in the neighborhood and prefer very different activities (Bornstein & Cote, 2019; Roopnarine, 2010; Roopnarine & Davidson, 2015). The very presence of an adult in play may be puzzling and uncomfortable for children of cultures in which adult-child relationships are formal and hierarchical (Abels et al., 2017; Chuang et al., 2018; Díaz & McClelland, 2017; Grau et al., 2009; Toro, & Nieri, 2018; Zhou et al., 2018). In some families, it is not considered appropriate for adults to interact with children in playful ways.

Free play theorists argue that adults are often ineffective in play interactions, whether they are trying to facilitate more mature play or to achieve learning goals. Pellegrini and Galda (1993) observe that, "when children and adults interact [in play], adults do most of the work" (p. 169). Sutton-Smith (1990) argues that adult attempts to enter children's play activities often lapse into "didactic play bumbblings" (p. 5). Efforts to guide children's play have been described as "hijacking" their activities (Gelormino & Patterson, 2016; Goouch, 2008). Kuschner (2012) expresses particular concern about using play to achieve learning outcomes, pleading that teachers and researchers, "not invoke the concept of play when talking about the academic goals of the school curriculum" (p. 1). Research confirms that some teacher interactions with children in play do not provide what children most need in the way of support (Trawick-Smith & Dzuirgot, 2010a, 2010b). Teachers may offer

the wrong amount or type of interaction needed to match play needs. In summary, free play theorists view adult involvement in play as an unhelpful and even unethical intrusion that violates a child's right to play.

Ethical Concerns of Facilitating Play Theorists

But what if children are unable to engage in the types of play that best promote development or can't play at all? It is the belief of advocates of the second play theory, the Facilitating Play Perspective, that it is an ethical obligation of teachers to support play in whatever ways they can, including direct guidance (Abuhamad & Soares, 2024; Bodrova & Leong, 2024; Thibodeau-Nielsen et al., 2020). These theorists point to evidence that many children in modern societies arrive in preschool lacking important play skills (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019; Charan et al., 2024). The play of some preschoolers more closely resembles that of toddlers (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). Such play deficits may be the result of a lack of opportunities to play in less safe neighborhoods (Carver et al., 2008; Keating, & Shangguan, 2024). Poor play development can also be due to less social or less active screen time at home (Hinkley et al., 2018; McArthur et al., 2022; O'Connor et al., 2017).

Children with disabilities, in particular, who are now enrolled in inclusive classrooms in many countries, may show significant limitations in play. This is especially true for some children with autism, who may benefit from adult mediation when playing with others. One main feature of autism is difficulty with social communication, a competency that drives social play interaction (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Due to this challenge, children with autism often prefer playing alone rather than with peers (Gilmore et al., 2019; Kellerman et al., 2020). Teachers can support their play with other children by identifying mutual interests, setting up play spaces, scaffolding play, and facilitating interactions that are meaningful and joyful (Lee & Trawick-Smith, 2024; Schertz & Horn, 2018). For example, teachers can initiate turn taking, a form of dyadic synchrony where a child and a play partner engage in back-and-forth social interactions, such as a game of rolling a ball back and forth. Such mediation can improve joint attention and language use for children with autism (Dawson et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2024; Schertz et al., 2018).

Some children with disabilities have difficulty accessing play for various reasons. Children with social communication challenges sometimes find it hard to join peer play groups already in progress (Beilinson & Olswang, 2003). Those with physical disabilities, like cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy, may need adult help with positioning, orienting, and mobility for play. Children with sensory processing disorder may dislike certain textural play activities, such as finger painting, but can be guided toward more comfortable activities like block building. Providing and guiding children's use of Assistive Technology can reduce barriers to play for some children with disabilities (Baker, 2014; Dell et al., 2017). Teacher support for play can involve manipulating lighting, sound, smells, textures, classroom organization and materials, as well as guiding play directly. In many countries, laws mandate that

teachers provide equitable education for children with disabilities (Ochoa et al., 2017). This should include, according to facilitating play theorists, adult guidance to ensure all children can play.

Early childhood classrooms are also becoming culturally and linguistically more diverse, given immigration patterns around the world. Research indicates that children who are of a different cultural background or who speak a different language than the one predominantly spoken in a classroom benefit greatly from interactions with peers in play (Arreguín-Anderson et al., 2018; Riojas-Cortez, 2000; Schmerse, 2021; White et al., 2021). However, such children may need teacher guidance in order to actively engage in activities with others (Baker, 2019; Washington-Nortey et al., 2022).

Research indicates that children who are less proficient in the predominant language of a classroom interact more often with peers when teachers became involved in their play and facilitate interactions (Dominguez & Trawick-Smith, 2018; Trawick-Smith et al., 2023). This is particularly true if teachers use words or phrases of children's home languages in these interactions and serve as a kind of translator for children of different linguistic backgrounds

Facilitating play theorists would argue that refraining from participating in play with children when they need assistance to play at all or in beneficial ways can be viewed as unethical—a failure to assure that all children have the right to meaningful play.

Ethical Concerns of Achieving Learning Goals Through Play Theorists

Advocates of the third play theory, the Achieving Learning Goals Through Play Perspective, note that a primary purpose of early childhood education—and the reason for devoting resources to fund it—is to promote learning and prepare young children for school. Such theorists value play, but argue that it should, “be made to work for academic education ... replacing the spontaneous experience of play with a more instrumental version” (Sundsdal & Øksnes, 2021, p. 1). Play, they believe, can be purposefully guided by adults to meet school readiness goals and promote long term academic success (Duncan et al., 2022; Józsa et al., 2022). From this perspective, passive “sit down and listen” approaches to early education are inappropriate for young children and viewed as “cognitive child labor” (Sutton-Smith, 1971, p. 13). But so are classrooms that offer purely wide-open play activities that have little educational purpose and include only “unfettered exploration ... leading to haphazard success at best.” (Weisberg et al., 2015, p. 9). Focused, purposeful participation by adults in play—asking questions, directing children's attention, prompting discovery—is the optimal role for teachers of young children.

Relying on free play alone, without purposeful guidance from teachers, may even be viewed as unethical, from this viewpoint, as opportunities for academic

learning—the main purpose of school—are missed. According to achieving learning goals theorists, this is of particular concern in classrooms serving children who live in poverty. In most countries, an achievement gap exists between children of low and those of middle or high socioeconomic status (SES) (Betancur et al., 2024; Chen & Li 2024; Dong et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2024; Sierens et al., 2020; Temple et al., 2022). Addressing this inequity is viewed by achieving learning goals theorists as an important ethical responsibility of teachers (Blackman, 2020; Schweiger, 2019). When low SES children play freely, without engaging in activities that enhance literacy, math, and other academic competencies, they are deprived of critical academic experiences. Teachers can participate in play to ensure children learn in these areas.

Approaches to achieving learning through play—called “playful learning,” (Baker et al., 2023; Ilgaz et al., 2018; Størksen et al., 2023) or “guided play” (Petersson & Weldemariam, 2022; Weisberg et al., 2013; Yu, 2022) are proposed as a resolution to the ethical dilemma of how and how much adults should participate in children’s play. When adults focus their involvement in children’s play on helping them learn specific skills and knowledge, they create the best of all play worlds—one that includes a degree of choice and autonomy while accomplishing the academic purposes of early childhood education.

Addressing the Ethical Dilemma: Good-Fit Adult Interactions in Play

The various play theorists discussed in this chapter base their ethical arguments on a fundamental question: What is the most important outcome when children play—self-expression and joy, enhanced play abilities, or academic learning? But must a teacher focus exclusively on one or another of these benefits? Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (2006) argue that play and learning should not be viewed as distinct processes but as integrated experiences. Children play to learn and learn to play, with no clear distinctions among these. Adults might support joyful childhood experience, the development of play itself, the learning of a new math or literacy skill, or all of these things at once. Nearly any classroom experience can become an opportunity for an adult to enhance many different abilities in play. Such an approach would assure that children receive needed adult support, learn school-related competencies, yet pursue their own independent play interests.

Research indicates that such an integrated approach to adult participation in play is both feasible and effective. In investigations of play in early childhood classrooms, (Pyle & Daniels, 2017; Pyle et al., 2017) found that many teachers interacted with children along a continuum from encouraging open-ended free play to engaging in collaborative teacher-child play to directly guiding play activities. In a single play enactment, adults might move in and out of various supportive roles, depending on what children need in play at the moment. Many teachers in this study

became involved in play based upon their observations of what children needed to continue playing or to acquire a new play or academic ability.

In another investigation, highly educated and experienced preschool teachers were recorded during indoor play time over the course of a year (Trawick-Smith & Dzuirgot, 2010a). Adult interactions were identified and could be categorized as *direct guidance*, *indirect guidance*, *active observation*, or *no interaction*. Children's play needs were also identified and were coded as *much need*, *some need*, or *no need* for adult assistance. Researchers found that most teachers provided more direct guidance when children had much need of support, indirect guidance when they needed some support, and observation or no guidance when no support from an adult was needed. In other words, these teachers most often provided *good-fit interactions*—those in which teachers matched their support to children's exact play needs. Findings of the study, showed that, directly following good-fit adult interactions the play of children often became more elaborate and organized.

Interviews with teachers participating in this study who were most successful in engaging in good-fit interactions reported that they conducted careful observation of children prior to involving themselves in their play (Trawick-Smith & Dzuirgot, 2010b). Only when they had observed and analyzed children's play needs would they engage in play interactions (or not).

Based on these research findings, a method of observing and responding to play can be implemented in early childhood classrooms. After creating rich indoor play environments and offering substantial classroom time for both open-ended free play and some adult-guided play experiences, teachers can step back and observe, asking themselves two fundamental questions: Do children need support in play? If so, how much and what kind? In some cases, no adult involvement would be offered. Other times, teachers would become involved with children, tailoring their interactions—with some or much assistance—to observed play needs. This might include interactions to support play itself or those to promote a particular learning goal. The following two vignettes illustrate this approach:

Vignette 1

Preschool children are playing at a water play table. Ben, a boy with autism, is standing nearby, quietly watching his peers, showing interest but not engaging with others. A teacher observes and allows Ben to watch his peers play for several minutes, which he seems to enjoy. Sensing that Ben might benefit from joining his peers in play, she eventually says, "Ben, did you see the toys in the water play table?" She picks up a blue rubber duck, one of Ben's favorites, and squeezes it, making water spurt out of its mouth. "Quack, quack!" the teacher imitates a duck, and Ben giggles. She places the duck back into the water and waits for Ben to pick it up, draw in water, and squeeze it. When he does this, the teacher repeats, "Quack, quack!" eliciting another smile from Ben. "Quack. A duck!" Ben says. The teacher takes the toy from Ben, refills it, and squeezes out water again. "Quack, quack!" she says, gently handing the duck back to him. A turn-taking game begins.

After a few exchanges, the teacher says to a peer watching nearby, “Ben’s making the duck quack. Do you want to take a turn?” The peer nods, takes the duck, submerges it, then squeezes, laughing and saying, “Quack.” The child hands it to Ben, who repeats the process and verbalizes the duck noise again. Ben’s attention turns to the peer and the two begin to engage in a back-and-forth exchange. The teacher backs away and watches this new, more social play interaction.

Vignette 2

A preschool teacher observes three children playing in a make believe ice cream stand. One is pretending to sell ice cream cones; a second child, a customer, asks, “How much for a chocolate one?” The child who’s selling looks at a large sign posted in the play center that lists flavors of ice cream and their prices. “I don’t ...” the child mutters and pauses. The teacher moves over briefly and says, “See the flavors written on the sign, Jelani?” He runs his finger over the print and says, “This says “chocolate,” and see the price?” He points to a number. “That’s a three,” the child says and tells her peer, “So, it’s three dollars and cents.”

The teacher now turns to a third child, who is not proficient in English, watching nearby and smiling, but not joining the play. The teacher allows the child to watch for a few minutes, then says, “Itsel, are you buying an ice cream cone?” The child smiles and nods. “Can you say, ‘Strawberry ice cream please.’” The child restates a simpler form of this English sentence. The teacher then says to the child selling the ice cream, “Norah, Itsel wants a Strawberry ice cream cone.” Norah eagerly offers her a make-believe cone. Itsel accepts it, and now joins the play. The teacher withdraws and observes.

The teachers in these vignettes vary their interactions in play based on their observations to determine what children need in the way of support. The type and amount of guidance they offer are based on these observations. In Vignette 1, the teacher observes Ben, the child with autism, first respecting his choice to just watch his peers for a while. Peer watching is considered an important first stage of social play (Fedewa et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2022; Parten, 1933). After a few minutes of observation, the teacher decides that Ben would benefit from joining his peers, so she guides him fairly directly in a turn-taking game, then facilitates his interactions with a peer. She takes an opportunity to encourage Ben’s social communication, which relates to a learning goal for him.

In Vignette 2, the teacher allows Itsel, who is less proficient in English, to first observe her peers for a time, then eventually guides her in joining them in play. He also prompts her to use a phrase in English, related to a learning goal. The teacher observes that Norah, who is more active and social in her play, would benefit from an interaction to promote literacy and numeracy, two other learning goals. Teachers in both vignettes observe first, then respond to what each child needs, enhancing social play, addressing learning goals, or simply allowing children to engage in self-chosen activity.

Challenges in Implementing Good-fit Play Interactions

Responding to play needs with good-fit interactions is challenging for teachers. Studies have shown that teachers' participation in play is sometimes a mismatch with children's interests and needs. Jensen et al. (2021) report that interactions of some teachers are "less productive" in supporting play. Some teachers, they observed, overly direct play, diminishing children's agency. In another investigation, teachers were found to sometimes provide, not only too much guidance, but sometimes too little (Trawick-Smith & Dzuirgot, 2010b). Interestingly, those with greater teaching experience and with higher levels of education were most successful in providing good-fit interactions. This suggests that both professional development—coursework, workshops, academic study—as well as coaching and other guided experiences with children in classrooms can contribute to teachers' abilities to effectively promote play development and learning (Meacham & Han, 2021; Sokolovic et al., 2021).

Providing professional development to enhance teachers' good-fit play interactions can not only promote their students' play and development but can also contribute to their ethical practice in the classroom. Good-fit interactions align with key tenets of codes of ethical conduct of various professional organizations. For example, the *Code of Ethics* of the British Association for Early Childhood (2011), prescribes that adults, "observe to understand and respond to children's current interests, stages of development, and levels of learning" (p. 4). The *Position Statement on Ethical Practice* of the Division for Early Childhood of the Council of Exceptional Children (2022) mandates that teachers, "observe, interpret, and respond contingently to the range of the child's needs" (p. 27). In these statements, teachers are urged to observe and understand what children are like and what they are doing—including their play—prior to becoming involved in their activities.

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Chapter 3

Beliefs About and Engagement Patterns in Father-Child, Mother-Child, and Allocaregiver-Child Play and Developmental Outcomes in Global Majority Societies



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Introduction

It is probably safe to say that much of what we know about maternal and paternal engagement in play and other stimulation activities (e.g., reading, telling stories) and early childhood development is predominantly based on families in high income countries such as Australia, Canada, United States, and those in Europe (e. g., Sweden, United Kingdom) (see Smith & Roopnarine, 2019; Roopnarine et al., 2024; Zosh et al., 2017). That said, we are slowly documenting young children’s playful activities with adults and isolate factors that promote and are barriers to such engagement in cultural communities across the world (see Foulds, 2023; Gaskins et al., 2006; Ng’asike, 2022). To more adequately meet the cognitive and social needs and aspirations of children, enhance the development of inclusive theories on play and early childhood education, and construct culturally valid early intervention and prevention programs and policies for families, it is imperative that we pay more attention to the current state of knowledge about parent-child and allocaregiver-child engagement in playful activities in global majority societies. These issues are intimately tied to charting pathways to addressing gender inequality in childrearing, reducing poverty, and enhancing sensitive parent-child interactions that promote optimal development in young children who live in economically challenging environments.

This chapter reviews some of the existing literature on beliefs about play, levels and patterns of father-child, mother-child, and allocaregiver-child playful and other stimulating activities and their developmental sequelae during the early childhood

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years (0–8 years) in cultural communities in Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America, and a few Asian countries. An attempt is made to introduce factors within complex, multilayered family relationships, sensitive care, and social and economic issues that influence play between parenting figures and children. As per suggestions made by Courtois et al. (2024), we use the term global majority instead of nonwestern to denote contexts in other parts of the world. This distinction is in the spirit of acknowledging the overwhelming concentration on play and childhood development in high-income countries in North America and Europe and to honor attempts to decolonize play and attending issues. At different times, we refer to cultural communities to avoid population level generalizations.

Conceptual Frameworks

In efforts to catalog the social and cognitive dynamics of maternal, paternal, and allocaregiver (e.g., grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings) engagement in playful activities with children and their meaning for childhood development, researchers have largely situated their work in evolutionary psychology, developmental psychology, early childhood education, anthropology, and neuroscience. To extend discourses in this realm, we briefly describe elements of cultural-ecological perspectives, the developmental niche model, parenting frameworks, and risk and resilience at multiple levels of the family system that have guided our own work and those of others who have explored the nature of parent-child and allocaregiver-child play in different cultural communities (Baumrind, 1996; Rohner, 2021; Rutter & Sroufe, 2000; Smith & StGeorge, 2022; Super & Harkness, 1997, 2002; Whiting & Whiting, 1975).

According to Vygotsky's (1997) cultural-historical approach, mental tools assist children in the mastery of skills at the interpsychological or social level between people and then at the intrapsychological or individual level. Relatedly, Whiting and Whiting (1975) in their cultural ecological model and through data gathered in their seminal ethnographic *Six Culture Study* on the social engagement of families with children in India, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Philippines, and the United States, identified a broad range of factors within (behavioral styles of adults, innate needs, children's learning environment, social systems, subsistence patterns) and external to the family (history, environment—climate, geographic terrain) that have immediate and long-term influences on how parents prioritize childrearing goals and execute parent-child responsibilities that affect child development outcomes across cultural communities. Building on these perspectives, Rogoff (2003) also stressed the need to interpret parent-child engagement activities in the context of cultural ways of knowing and thinking.

Following premises within the cultural ecological framework, Super and Harkness (1997, 2002) formulated the developmental niche model that focuses on caretaker psychology or parental ethnotheories about socialization, cultural setting, and customs. Ethnotheories or cultural beliefs about early socialization goals and

practices influence the implementation of daily care and stimulation activities and transactions between parents and children, and shape parental perceptions about the emergence of developmental milestones (see Roopnarine et al., 2024; Sigel & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2002). Ethnotheories about childrearing (e.g., co-sleeping, feeding patterns, early stimulation activities, role of play in childhood development, appropriate childhood behaviors) vary across cultures and are passed on intergenerationally but may be revised over time (e.g., through repeated contacts and interactions with other cultural groups). The setting in which childrearing occurs and cultural customs are equally as influential in guiding cognitive and social opportunities offered by adults to young children. However, both can present challenges to childrearing in the face of environmental disasters, scarcity of economic resources, humanitarian crises, and attempts to enforce rigid parenting practices. For instance, behavioral and psychological control can limit the types of play activities that children engage in, whereas poor economic conditions often force parents to make difficult choices in balancing time expended in providing learning opportunities for children through play, book reading and the like and meeting survival needs (see Bock, 2002; Chick, 2010; Foulds, 2023). As will be seen later, parental ethnotheories govern choices in playful activities with children and can moderate the associations between parent-child play and children's cognitive skills (Roopnarine & Jin, 2012).

Parental belief systems aside, we propose that engagement in playful activities with children cannot be viewed independently of the quality of parent-child relationships across cultural communities. The sensitivity hypothesis as articulated in attachment theory emphasizes the importance of warmth and consistency (appropriateness, completeness, and promptness) in the development of secure emotional bonds to mothers, fathers, and other caregivers (Ainsworth, 1989; Thompson, 2021). Likewise, principles in the parenting styles framework (authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful/rejecting) (Baumrind, 1996; Sorkhabi, 2005) and parental acceptance-rejection theory (Rohner, 2021) underscore the emotive qualities of parenting and care (warmth, demandingness/control, acceptance, rejection, hostility) as laying the foundation for meaningful parent-child engagement in cognitively and socially rich activities. This position is also reflected in models of parenting and early literacy skills development that stress the quality of sensitively attuned parenting stimulation activities (playing, reading, telling stories) for fostering the development of early language skills (Morrison & Cooney, 2002). At the heart of it all is the declaration that sensitive, democratic approaches to parenting provide a platform from which children can explore the object and social world through play while developing trust in those who care for them.

Not apart from sensitive parenting are multi-level risk and protective factors within (e.g., quality of couple relationship, family violence, social support, adverse childhood experiences, health, and adequate nutrition) and external to families (e.g., neighborhood collective efficacy, safety, cohesion, and infrastructure, quality of early childhood education settings) that have the potential of undermining or facilitating the nature and quality of caregiver play engagement with children that may then have cascading effects on childhood development (Masten, & Cicchetti,

2010; Rutter & Sroufe, 2000). Within a developmental psychopathology framework (Rutter & Sroufe, 2000), there is sufficient evidence that intrapersonal and interpersonal risk factors such as parental mental health, intimate partner violence, harsh and controlling parenting, and poor couple relationship have deleterious effects on multiple facets of childhood development (Coe et al., 2020). By contrast, positive parenting, partner support, emotionally close couple relationship, and neighborhood collective efficacy can act as protective factors against the negative consequences of poor or harsh parent-child engagement on childhood development. Put differently, parental engagement in playful activities and childhood development need to be considered in the context of intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships, along with country level human development indices and environmental conditions.

Parental Beliefs About the Importance of Playful Activities in Children's Lives

As mentioned already, parental ethnotheories about childrearing assume a significant role in guiding the structuring of socialization goals and practices (Sigel & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2002; Super & Harkness, 2002). Parents who hold positive beliefs about play and early childhood development are more inclined to promote play activities and provide play spaces for children. By contrast, the possibility exists that those who perceive play as perfunctory to childhood development may encourage more academic activities or have a laissez-faire attitude toward its value in enhancing childhood development (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). This in mind, parental ethnotheories about early childhood socialization, learning, and the acquisition of developmental milestones vary across cultures (see Hyun et al., 2022; Roopnarine et al., 2021). A caveat here is that much of the research in this area centers on maternal beliefs about the benefits of play for promoting the development of cognitive and social skills in children.

In high-income countries (e.g., United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, Australia), parents readily acknowledge that play is as an integral part of childhood socialization and is emphasized as a predominant feature of early cognitive and social development by educators and child development professionals. For instance, mothers in the United States differentiate between structured goal-oriented and unstructured play activities (free play), with some mothers attributing high academic value to unstructured play (Fisher et al., 2008; LaForett & Mendez, 2016). A survey of 3000 families from France, Germany, United States, United Kingdom, and Japan indicated that 94% of parents believed that time devoted to play contributes to learning (LEGO Learning Institute, 2002), and mothers and fathers in the United Kingdom rated play higher than academic activities in early learning (Waters et al., 2022).

Not unlike families in China and some ethnic groups in the United States (African Americans, Asian Americans), parental beliefs about engagement in playful

activities and the social-emotional and cognitive benefits children accrue from them vary markedly in global majority contexts. Parents in countries that are less economically secure are more likely to emphasize the development of cognitive skills through traditional modes of learning (e.g., direct instruction and rote memory) than through engagement in playful activities. For parents in the Caribbean region and some Latin American countries, play is not firmly embraced as a central mechanism to childhood development. Jamaican parents view play as “romping” a meaningless exercise in which children dispense of built-up energy (Kelly-Williams, 2021) and the marginal role of play in childhood development has been reported by parents and early childhood education teachers alike in other Caribbean countries (e.g., Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, St Vincent and Grenadines) (Kinkead-Clark, 2019).

Ambiguities about the developmental benefits of play are conspicuous among Yucatec Mayan (Gaskins & Miller 2009), Guatemalan (Cooney, 2004), Indian (Goncu et al., 2000), Ghanaian (Avorny, & Baker, 2024), and Ethiopian parents as well (Metaferia et al., 2021). A common struggle that parents face is the ability to decipher whether the emphasis on play absorbs valuable time that could be devoted to academic pursuits (Singh & Gupta, 2012). In a number of global majority contexts, parents have an underlying belief that play is an activity of childhood, that it is something children engage in naturally because it is enjoyable, that it keeps them healthy, and that it is sometimes mixed with work (Roopnarine, 2011; Roopnarine & Davidson, 2015). Additionally, in other settings (e.g., Turkey) fathers may see themselves as managers or supervisors of play (Ivrendi & Isikoglu, 2010). Yet in other countries, parents have more favorable attitudes toward academic than playful activities in nurturing the spirit of early childhood development (Rao et al., 2022) and some see their role as teachers rather than playmates to children (Lin et al., 2018).

Perceptions about a more direct relationship between play and learning have emerged in a few cultural communities. Chilean (Aldoney et al., 2022), Turkish (Babuc, 2015), Zambian (Lungu & Matafwali, 2020), Jordanian, and Syrian refugee mothers (Albatataineh, 2018) expressed views that highlight the salubrious effects of play on key aspects of childhood development. Chilean mothers, fathers, and educators attribute greater value to free play as opposed to structured play, and activities that involve electronic devices. Fathers placed more emphasis on play with electronic devices than mothers and educators (Aldoney et al., 2022). Along these lines, an analysis of a group of studies that involved 825 parents and primary caregivers in Bangladesh, India, Jordan, Lebanon, Mexico, and South Africa revealed strong endorsements regarding the favorable developmental benefits that preschoolers obtain through playful activities (Foulds, 2023). More specifically, 98% of parents opined that play contributed to the development of cognitive skills (100% of parents in Jordan, 99% among the Rohingya in Bangladesh, and 99% in Lebanon). Parents (94%) strongly believed that play helps to advance language development (100% in South Africa, 99% in Mexico, and 84% in Bangladesh), learning multiple languages, and problem-solving (80% of all parents) with some variations across countries (from 90% in Mexico and South Africa to 58% in Jordan). Equally impressive were parental views about connections between play and the development of socioemotional and creative skills (97%). Paradoxically,

74% of parents believed that studying was more important than play (93% of South Asians and 85% of South Africans), possibly suggesting that the press to expose children to early academic skills for later success in school is still palpable in some global majority contexts (see Kelly-Williams, 2021; Roopnarine et al., 2024).

A compelling feature in the analysis provided by Foulds (2023) is the confidence that parents displayed in their knowledge about play in influencing activities at home. This notwithstanding, parents pointed to safety concerns (accidents among children who play near to roads and in streets, child trafficking, proximity to cooking space and cleaning products) as barriers to engagement in play with children. Play spaces in small homes, limited time for play due to economic activities, and intergenerational differences in emphasis on play were also mentioned as deterrents to playful activities with young children. It is instructive that despite economic hardship and conflict and genocide, parents in some global majority contexts have such optimistic perceptions of the role of play in childhood development, accentuating the potential protective function of play in difficult circumstances (see Johnson et al., 2021, 2022).

Mother-Child and Father-Child Play in Diverse Cultural Communities

General Levels of Engagement Typically, researchers document the frequency, duration, and quality of parent-child play. Although detailed accounts of different modes of parent-child play in cultural communities in global majority contexts are limited compared to what is available in high-income countries, large-scale endeavors have documented overall percentages of mothers and fathers who engage in play relative to other early stimulation activities (reading, storytelling, singing, taking children outside) in the Caribbean and Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The shortcomings (e.g., maternal reports of father and allocaregiver play involvement, YES/NO responses, measurement invariance issues, reliability and validity of outcome measures) of these studies aside, they do provide a modest basis for understanding interest in play by multiple caregivers who negotiate harsh economic and living conditions daily (e.g., inadequate housing and sanitation, unstable jobs, poor access to health care, unequal access to early childhood education). It should also be mentioned that the number of children who live with fathers vary across regions: 61% in Latin America and Caribbean to 96% in the Middle East and North Africa (Evans & Jakiela, 2024).

Utilizing the UNICEF-Micro-Indicator Survey data, Roopnarine and Yildirim (2018) calculated the percentages of mothers and fathers (10,976 families) who engaged in playful activities with preschool-aged children across Barbados, Belize, the Dominica Republic, Guyana, Jamaica, and Suriname. Mothers who engaged in play activities with children ranged from 49.7% in Suriname to 71.1% in Belize. By comparison, fathers who engaged in play activities was lower--ranging from 16.3%

in Suriname to 40% in Belize. As with the Caribbean region, gendered patterns in percentages of parents who engaged in play activities were also evident in African families. Again, using the UNICEF-Micro-Indicator Survey data, Yildirim and Roopnarine (2019) found that across several African countries (Algeria, Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Central African Republic, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Swaziland, Togo, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe, $n = 90,397$ families) mothers outpaced fathers in engagement in play. Moreover, parental play engagement was higher in the North Africa (e.g., Algeria) than in other regions such as in Lesotho and Guinea Bissau (below 5% for both parents). Mother-father differences in stimulation activities (playing, reading) were also visible across 69 global majority communities (Evans & Jakiela, 2024).

A striking aspect of these findings are the low percentages of mothers and fathers who engaged in other cognitively rich activities with children across African countries: 13.4% of mothers and 6.9% of fathers read books, 28.4% of mothers and 12.3% of fathers told stories, and 25.2% of mothers and 11.2% of fathers named, counted, or drew things with children. On a more promising note, in a sample of 2298 South African households, more than 80% of fathers engaged in playful activities and assisted their children with doing homework (Morrell et al., 2016), and 93.4% of mothers in Ghana reported playing with preschoolers and 63.7% took them outside. A high percentage of Ghanaian mothers also read and sang to children (Wolf & McCoy, 2019).

Discrepancies in engagement in play between mothers and fathers were reported in another large-scale survey conducted in 28 countries (127,000 families; Montenegro, Belize, Belarus, Jamaica, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Thailand, Albania, Kazakhstan, Macedonia, Syrian Arab Republic, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Mongolia, Iran, Tajikistan, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Central African Republic, Ghana, Yemen, Gambia, Ghana, Yemen, Gambia, Togo, Côté Devore, Guinea Bissau) (Bornstein & Putnick, 2012). An examination of maternal and paternal engagement as an aggregate of activities that included play, storytelling, singing, and taking children outside revealed wide country-level differences. Across countries, 60% of mothers played with, 25% read books to, and 64% took children outside (Bornstein & Putnick, 2012). In a subsequent study of families in 62 global majority countries, 39.8% of children received high stimulation from mothers and 11.9% from fathers, with more maternal stimulation occurring in Europe and Central Asia than Sub-Saharan Africa (70.5% versus 14.6%)—a trend observed for fathers too (Cuartas et al., 2020). A consistent pattern is that households with high levels of maternal engagement was accompanied by high levels of paternal engagement in play in countries such as Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Evans & Jakiela, 2024).

Taken together, maternal and paternal engagement in stimulation activities that included play were more prevalent in countries with a higher than a lower Human Development Index (e.g., long and healthy life, a decent standard of living). It is not difficult to see that in economically strapped global majority contexts, mothers and

fathers may have to devote more time to economic activities than to engagement in play or taking children outside. Increased time spent in economic activities by parents may also increase the participation of allocaregivers in play, thereby lowering estimates in early engagement activities obtained for mothers and fathers, which may be an artifact of a lack of availability. Furthermore, in Caribbean and African cultural communities, differences in engagement in play between mothers and fathers could be attributed, in part, to traditional beliefs about gender roles and responsibility for early caregiving, limited father contact due to mateshifting and childshifting that emanate from having offspring with multiple partners in nonmarital relationships, immigration, and more directly to beliefs about the role of play in early childhood development (Roopnarine & Jin, 2016). We turn next to paternal and maternal engagement in specific modes of play.

Time Spent in and Engagement in Different Modes of Play It has been asserted that fathers prefer to engage in play activities than basic caregiving (Roopnarine et al., 2024). Among Aka foragers in the Central African Republic, fathers spent 23% of their time in play with infants compared to 27% in emotional caregiving (e.g., displaying affection), (Hewlett, 1987). Lese fathers spent more time in play (18%) than EFE fathers (7%) (Fouts et al., 2013), and Hadza fathers in Tanzania played with children more than did mothers (Marlowe, 2005). There were no mother-father differences in overall levels of time investment in play in Kadazan families in Malaysia (Hossain et al. 2007) or among parents in southern Brazil (da Cruz Benetti & Roopnarine 2006). Other assessments of families primarily in Latin America (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Dominican Republic, $n = 22,070$) suggested that, with the exception of Colombia, maternal and paternal engagement in hours of play per day/week with children were quite similar across countries. Time in play far exceeded that spent in reading to children (Bosch & Heras, 2022).

Turning to modes of play, a study conducted in southwestern Turkey that asked fathers to report on their involvement in academic (reading, counting, drawing), socio-dramatic (participating in pretending with children) and physical play (Ivrendi & Isikoglu, 2010) showed that those who had laudatory views about the role of play in learning were more likely to engage in all three modes of play with children. Fathers with higher family incomes, those in a two-parent household, and who worked part-time engaged in more play activities with children than those with lower incomes, who lived in extended households, and worked full-time. Fathers engaged in more sociodramatic and physical play with boys than girls, mirroring gender-typed roles in care investment and the treatment of children in the broader Turkish society. Observations of Turkish fathers in a playground discerned two themes in play investment with children: father activeness and father passiveness. Activeness involved shared engagement between fathers and children (e.g., going down slide with child, joint collaboration with mother in activities with child) and passiveness encompassed assisting children to climb the slide, offering affection, and talking with the mother while children are playing. These activities were further categorized as father being either a “playmate” or “follower” (Ünlü-Çetin, 2020).

Overall rates of maternal and paternal engagement in different play activities were on the low end in a few Asian countries. Observations conducted in the homes of Thai families indicated that maternal and paternal engagement in fantasy play, constructive play, and games with rules with preschoolers were exceedingly low (on average less than one incident over a two-hour period) (Roopnarine et al., 2019). The same can be said for mother-infant and father-infant play in India (Roopnarine et al., 1990). Yet social affiliative behaviors (touching and hugging, smiling and laughing) along with verbal interactions were on par with those in high-income countries (see Roopnarine et al., 2019). It could be that parents in some cultural communities use other techniques, besides play, to arouse children's imaginative tendencies and overall cognitive and social interests in their social and cognitive worlds (e.g., talk stories, cultural rituals, festivals, dance) (Chaudhary & Shukla, 2015; Ng'asike, 2018; Tuttle, 2018).

An area of parent-child play that has received a good deal of attention is engagement in rough stimulating activities. Rough and tumble play has vigorous components such as tossing in the air, bouncing, tickling, lifting, and limb manipulation, all escalating in intensity as children mature (Smith & StGeorge, 2022). At the base of it, rough and tumble play, characterized as a mixture of competition and cooperation, is embedded in warmth, control, touch, and reciprocal exchanges, characteristics often observed in sensitive caregiving. It has been purported that rough play exchanges could also evoke fear and pleasure in children (Smith & StGeorge, 2022; StGeorge & Freeman, 2017).

From the observations of mother-child and father-child interactions embedded in attachment theory decades ago (Lamb, 1977) to more contemporary assessments of children in the "Risky Situation" laboratory procedure in high-income countries (Paquette & Bigras, 2010; Paquette & StGeorge, 2023), it has been proposed that rough stimulating playful exchanges between parents and children contribute to the development of attachment to fathers. Traditionally, fathers have shown a greater predisposition toward rough and tumble play than mothers, and the activity appears more pervasive in high-income countries (United States) than in some majority global contexts (Roopnarine, 2011). It is also true that the gap in engagement in rough and tumble play between mothers and fathers has narrowed noticeably (Roopnarine, 2011). How prevalent is rough and tumble play between mothers and fathers and children across cultural communities in global majority contexts? Does it assume a central function in the development of attachment bonds to fathers?

Low prevalence of rough and tumble play between mothers and fathers has been recorded in a few cultural settings. Observations of mothers and fathers in New Delhi, India (Roopnarine et al., 1993), in Taipei, Taiwan (Sun & Roopnarine 1996), in Chiang Mai province, Thailand (Tulananda & Roopnarine, 2001), and among AKA hunter-gatherer in the Central African Republic (Hewlett & Macfarlan, 2010) demonstrate that father-child rough and minor physical play were low or relatively absent in these cultural communities. Interestingly, low rates of rough play occurred in combination with other activities in mainland China (Anderson et al., 2017). Whether rough and tumble play between fathers and children contributes to the development of attachment bonds to parents remain unclear and join other calls

to examine what constitutes sensitive stimulation activities that lead to the development of secure emotional bonds to adults across cultural communities (see Keller, 2018).

Levels of Allocaregiver-Child Play in Diverse Cultural Communities

In a number of countries (Caribbean and Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia) childrearing occurs in settings that adhere to collectivistic principles in which family harmony, loyalty, and emotional support are expected and in which multiple caregivers (grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings) care for and engage in physical, social and cognitive activities with children (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Roopnarine & Davidson, 2015). Allocaregiving that involves grandparents, siblings and other kinship and nonkinship members can be direct (physical care, feeding, carrying around, involvement in play groups, teaching) or indirect (provisioning for children) (Page et al., 2021). Under some circumstances, passive care such as “watching over” children while they play can be viewed as meaningful investment, especially if allocaregivers lend protection and guidance to children when needed during their engagement in different activities (Emmott & Page, 2019). Taking into consideration that assessment models of early parent socialization have expanded to include the contributions of diverse caregivers to childhood development, an attempt is made herein to catalog the engagement patterns of allocaregivers in playing with children in a few cultural communities.

It is not uncommon for levels of care and engagement in early stimulations activities (e.g., playing, reading, singing) performed by nonparental caregivers to exceed that of mothers and fathers in some cultural communities. Beginning with a study of fathers, mothers, and allocaregivers that used the Family Care Indicator (FCI) model that incorporated six activities (singing songs, telling stories, playing, excursions outside the home, shared reading, and learning activities), it was estimated that fathers engaged in fewer stimulation activities with children (1.3) than other adult household members (1.6) across 69 global majority contexts. Rates of stimulation by fathers and other household members were not significantly related (Evans & Jakiela, 2024). Using the same measures, it was also determined that levels of allocaregiver (over 15 years of age) involvement in stimulation activities were higher than that of fathers (Evans & Jakiela, 2024) and most frequent in Latin America and the Caribbean (23.2%) and least frequent in the Middle East and North Africa (15.4%) (Cuartas et al., 2020).

Our own analysis (Ong’ayi et al., 2020) of playing, telling stories, and reading to children in Turkana, Kakamega, and Bungoma counties in Kenya shed further light on allocaregiver engagement in play versus reading and singing to preschoolers. On average, 12.7% of mothers engaged (4.3% of fathers) in playing with, 13.3% (5.3% of fathers) engaged in reading to, and 19.3% engaged in telling stories to children

(7.9% of fathers). By comparison, the percentages of allocaregivers who engaged in playing with (73.3%), in reading to (27.1%), and telling stories to children (39.8%) eclipsed those for mothers and fathers. A mixture of allocaregiver nurturance and involvement in play with children has been observed in several other cultural communities in India, Africa (Bor of South Sudan), and Asia (Chaudhary & Shukla, 2015; Tuttle, 2018).

It should be pointed out that even when paternal engagement in stimulation activities is low as in communities in Sub-Saharan Africa than other regions of the world, stimulation activities by allocaregivers appear similar across regions, which underlines their role in playing with and caring for children in global majority contexts (Evans & Jakiela, 2024). In other words, allocaregivers should be viewed as assuming a complementary rather than competing role in working alongside or jointly with mothers and fathers in providing stimulating activities for children through play.

Developmental Outcomes

Beliefs About Play and Childhood Development There is growing awareness about the need to explore the mediating and moderating function of parental beliefs about play, among other factors within the family system (depression, partner support, mealtime behavior, intimate partner violence) on the associations between parental engagement in play and children's social and cognitive skills. As intimated earlier, parent-child play occurs in multi-layered, dynamic relationships within family systems.

A study of Ethiopian families assessed associations between paternal support for play and time spent with parents in activities at home (e.g., mealtime behavior) with preschool-aged children. Parental support for play was positively related to executive function and inhibitory control (Metaferia et al., 2021). High appropriation of the value of free play, structured play, and electronic play by mothers and fathers in Chile were also positively correlated with frequency of engagement in play activities by children (Aldoney et al., 2022). These studies were largely correlational in nature and did not include assessments of whether parental support for play mediated or moderated associations between time in play and executive function and inhibitory control.

The moderating effects of maternal and paternal beliefs about the cognitive benefits of play on relations between time children engaged in play and their early academic performance were determined among Caribbean immigrants in the United States (Roopnarine & Jin, 2012). Among these parents who immigrated on average 13 years to the United States, there was overwhelming support (over 90% of mothers and fathers) for play as a strong mechanism for early childhood development. Mothers, but not fathers, endorsements of the cognitive benefits of play moderated the associations between children's time in play and their number, letter and word,

and expressive skills. Preschoolers of mothers with firm beliefs about the cognitive benefits of play, and who invested more time in play, performed better on cognitive tasks than their counterparts who invested less time in play. Noteworthy is that children whose mothers had less complimentary views about the benefits of play for childhood development and engaged in high levels of play performed less well on cognitive tasks.

Adult-Child Play and Children's Cognitive and Social Skills

There is good evidence that mother-child and father-child engagement in different modes of play are associated with socio-emotional functioning, language skills, and less behavioral difficulties in children in high-income countries (Cabrera & Roggman, 2017; Robinson et al., 2021; Roopnarine et al., 2019). A short synopsis is provided of the associations between mother-child and father-child play and children's social and cognitive skills in high-income countries, which is followed by a discussion of a limited and scattered literature on similar associations among families in global majority contexts. Because so much of the research on play and childhood development outcomes has focused on mothers, we pay special attention to father-child play and children's social and cognitive skills (see, Bornstein, 2006; Schneider et al., 2022).

With an eye toward activities that are couched in sensitivity, nurturance, reciprocity, cognitive stimulation, positive regard, and support, Robinson et al. (2021) found that father-child (0–10 years) creative play, combined play, free play, locomotor play, puzzle play, rough-and-tumble play, structured and semi-structured play, toy play, and video game play were connected to children's academic achievement. At the same time, creative play, free play, structured and semi-structured play, and toy play were related to children's emotional/behavioral functioning (Robinson et al., 2021). A review of 78 papers (Amodia-Bidakowska et al., 2021) provided similar positive results. Father-child play during the first three years of life was linked to children's social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Employing longitudinal data (N = 4904 families) from the Bangladesh Early Years Preschool Program (Spier et al., 2018), Bhutan's National Early Childhood Care and Development Evaluation Study (Save the Children, 2015), Cambodia First Read (Pisani et al., 2018), Quasi-experimental Longitudinal Study in Tigray Region in Ethiopia (Seiden et al., 2018), and Rwanda's Advancing the Right to Read Program (Iwamoto et al., 2019), Cuartas et al. (2023) examined links between family stimulation activities (playing simple games, reading books or looking at picture books, telling stories, singing songs to or with children, including lullabies, taking children outside of the home, for example, to markets or to visit relatives, naming objects or drawing things, teaching something new to children, like new words or how to do something, teaching the alphabet or letters to children, and playing counting games or teaching numbers to children) and numeracy, literacy, motor, socio-emotional, and executive function skills in children. After controlling for covariates,

(e.g., children's sex, age, mothers' age and education, household wealth, availability of learning materials), appreciable levels of stimulation from mothers, fathers and other caregivers were associated with better early numeracy, literacy, socioemotional, motor, and executive function skills, though the effect sizes were generally small (Cuartas et al., 2023). Unfortunately, separate assessments of associations between play with children and the five outcome measures were not available.

Two studies conducted in the Caribbean region and Kenya attempted to provide some insights as to how play contributes to children's early literacy and social skills relative to other stimulation activities such as reading and telling stories. Analyzing UNICEF-Micro-Indicator Survey data for Belize, The Dominican Republic, Guyana, Jamaica, and Suriname (10,976 mothers and fathers), Roopnarine and Yildirim (2018) assessed the individual associations between mother-child and father-child play, reading, and storytelling and children's early literacy skills. Arguably, because reading and storytelling are inherently rich in language use, they were better predictors of preschooler's literacy skills than play per se, but findings were inconsistent between mothers and fathers and across countries. Although an identical pattern was noticed for mothers and fathers in Kenya, allocaregiver stimulation activities were more instrumental in contributing to children's early literacy skills development than those offered by fathers (Ong'ayi et al., 2020).

Summary

This overview provides a mere glimpse into mother-child, father-child and allocaregiver-child play and developmental outcomes in global majority contexts. In as much as adults' beliefs about the role of playful activities in molding the cognitive and social development of young children remain nuanced, there is increasing recognition that adult-child play contributes to childhood development even in the most difficult of circumstances in global majority contexts. That parent-child and allocaregiver-child play engagement enriches the cognitive and social lives of children is also demonstrated in representative samples of children who live in fragile economic environments in cultural communities around the world. The latter assertion should be interpreted with caution, because the data are inconsistent, and the effect sizes of the benefits of play for children's social and cognitive skills are small in some cases. With few exceptions, mother-child, father-child, and allocaregiver-child play have been studied independent of family process variables, regardless of country economic standing. How might decision making between couples, interpartner support, parental well-being (e.g., depressive symptoms), among other factors within the family mediate the associations between play and childhood development?

A Few Final Comments

In poorly resourced communities in global majority contexts, families face multiple challenges within and external to the family in meeting the developmental needs of children. There is little doubt that parent-child playful activities have a durable link to the development of cognitive and social skills in young children worldwide. Further, play provides a platform for the encouragement of sensitive, child-directed engagement by mothers, fathers, and allocaregivers across cultural communities. This is aptly demonstrated in attempts to facilitate growing and learning through play across Latin America and Caribbean countries. The Care for Child Development approach, developed by World Health Organization Global, Pan-American Health Organization/World Health Organization and UNICEF, employs trained professionals who provide sustained support to primary caregivers to combine play with nurturing care (UNICEF, 2017). As an example, Paraguay's [Juguetes para toda la vida](#) (Toys for life) is tailored to encourage playful activities between caregivers and children through the use of household materials. Across programs, emotional bonds to and play with fathers are emphasized.

Undoubtedly, research on mother-child, father-child, and allocaregiver-child play and childhood development across cultural communities would be strengthened and findings rendered more useful if assessment models were a bit more sophisticated. Simply assessing bivariate relations between adult engagement in different modes of play and children's cognitive and social development falls short of teasing out how diverse factors within and outside of the family system work together or against mother-child, father-child, and allocaregiver engagement in different modes of play to affect childhood outcomes. This is particularly crucial for identifying risk and protective factors and childhood development in cultural communities with high rates of poverty, underdeveloped health care systems, concerns about intimate partner and community violence, bifurcated maternal and paternal roles, environmental challenges due to climate change, and poor housing and neighborhood infrastructure.

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Chapter 4

Young and Old Interacting in Intergenerational Play Spaces: New Research Possibilities for Grandparents and Children Interacting in Play



Ann Farrell

*We don't stop playing because we grow old;
we grow old because we stop playing.*

George Bernard Shaw

Abstract Increased research and policy attention is focussing on young children and older people interacting in intergenerational play spaces (Cartmel & Worch, *Playwork practice at the margins: Research perspectives from diverse settings*. Routledge, 2021; Deszcz-Tryhubczak & Kalla, *Children's literature and generational relationships: Encounters of the playful kind*. Springer, 2021; Kernan & Cortellesi, *Intergenerational learning in practice: Together old and young*. Routledge, 2019). Settings such as Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) along with playgroups, museums and parks are being investigated as intergenerational spaces in which young and old interact around play. Older generations may be grandparents, grandfriends and older 'significant other' adults in the lives of young children and families. International organisations such as the OECD (Family database. *Informal care arrangements*. <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/PF3-3-Informal-childcare-arrangements.pdf>, 2021) and UNICEF (The special role of grandparents. <https://www.unicef.org/parenting/child-care/special-role-grandparents>, 2024) show the importance of young children and older generations engaging in shared experiences. ECEC claims to work collaboratively with families, yet grandparents or significant older people may be relegated to informal auxiliary or supplementary or care such as transporting children to and from ECEC settings and providing complementary care to that provided by parents. The OECD (Family database. *Informal*

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N. Pramling et al. (eds.), *Adults in Play with Children*, International
Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 44,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-99629-0_4

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care arrangements. <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/PF3-3-Informal-childcare-arrangements.pdf>, 2021) identified grandparents or grandparent figures as key players in the informal care of young children, with an OECD average of 26% of birth to 2 year olds and 6 to 12 year olds using informal care, typically provided by older ‘significant others’ such as grandparents/grandparent figures. This chapter provides an international analysis of research and practice in intergenerational settings in which young children and significant older people interact around play, with mutual benefits for learning, health and wellbeing. Framed by Nancy Fraser’s (Social justice in the age of identity politics: Redistribution, recognition, participation. SSG Sozialwissenschaften, USB, Köln, 2008) understandings of recognition, representation and redistribution (cf. Vincent, Nancy Fraser, social justice and education. Routledge, 2020), the chapter explores the possibilities of young children and older people as co-learners in intergenerational learning and living settings.

Introduction

International research and policy attest to adult-child interactions as key contributors to child outcomes and life chances. Six consecutive reports published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) affirm quality interactions between adults and children for a strong start to life and learning. The latest report, *Starting Strong VI. Supporting interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care* (2021), included 26 countries and jurisdictions, 56 curriculum frameworks, and more than 120 different types of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. Large-scale OECD policy research is corroborated by systematic reviews (cf. Houen et al., 2022; Howard et al., 2024) that show the contribution of adult-child interactions to children’s learning and development. Despite this corpus of evidence, less is known of the specifics of adults and children interacting in play and even less is known of older adults (be they grandparents, grandfriends or ‘significant other’ older adults) interacting with young children in play. This is an area ripe for new research.

A recurring theme in OECD countries is ECEC’s claims of intergenerational play, whereby adults (typically educators) and children interact in play settings, play is seen to promote democratic participation, co-construction of knowledge through exploration of the social and physical environment and development of social and physical skills. Indeed, there is anecdotal evidence of ECEC welcoming older generations, such as grandparents, to its services, and making space for older people to interact with children around specific activities such as cooking, arts and crafts, reading and storytelling. Despite laudable rhetoric around the inclusion of all generations, fine-grained studies of grandparents and older generations, as participants in intergenerational play in ECEC, are relatively scarce. It is, therefore, ripe for large-scale comparative research by the likes of the OECD and fertile ground for smaller scale *in situ* nested studies.

Research into grandparents, to date, is replete with studies of grandparent provision of childcare for their grandchildren (Baxter, 2022; OECD, 2021), work driven largely by empirical interest in the workforce participation of their adult children and the health benefits accruing to grandparents who interact with grandchildren (Bordone & Arpino, 2016; Danielsbacka et al., 2022). Such interest is directed at the roles of grandparents in providing informal, auxiliary, formal and custodial care of children, rather than on the nuanced interactions between grandparents and young children in the play contexts of home, community and ECEC, let alone what actually happens when they interact in play.

Given that research into grandparent childcare eclipses the prospect of *in situ* study of grandparent-grandchild interactions, this chapter moves now to international policy and research to demonstrate the importance of grandparents along with the relative lack of empirical evidence of grandparents (or grandparent figures) interacting with young children in play. It calls for practice-based research that affirms play in adult-child interactions and generates new possibilities for meaningful interactions between young children and grandparents in the contexts of their everyday lives.

Grandparents Defined

Working within the discipline of phylogenetics (i.e., the tree-like depiction of how species relate), Sheard et al. (2020) refer to ‘grandparents’ as a kinship category, a salient social category due to grandparent investment in the care of grandchildren and their agency in sharing wealth and cultural knowledge with younger generations. Their comparative study of ‘grandparent terms’ in 134 languages in Pama–Nyungan (an Australian family of hunter–gatherer languages), found at least four separate terms for grandparents that, over time, formed a single lexical category to denote grandparents.

So too, anthropological scholars, for generations, have focussed on grandparents in kinship studies (Godelier, 2011; Lévi-Strauss, 1969; Morgan, 1871), their interest being classification of kinship criteria, the structure of society and the normative practice within kinships. Miller and Garvey (2022) making the distinction between kinship as a *category* and kinship as an *experience*, comprising a series of fluctuations across the life span (which, for contemporary grandparents, is a longer life than for past generations).

Grandparents in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Contexts

Not only are there fluctuations across the lifespan, there are major fluctuations for kinship groups at a global level, due largely to global migration, precipitated by geopolitical upheaval and impending climate change. The United Nations

Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) (cf. Kaczmarek & Ono, 2022) found that the number of international migrants rose steadily from 173 million in 2000 to 281 million in 2020, constituting 2.8% and 3.6% of the global population, respectively. In 2020, women accounted for 135 million of migrants (3.5% of the world's female population) while men accounted for 146 million (3.7% of the global male population).

With global flows of people between continents and countries, many grandparents are dislocated from their cultural and linguistic heritage, the participation of their grandchildren in ECEC perhaps a still-point in the life of the family. Internationally, ECEC policy has turned its attention to supporting cultural and linguistic diversity (known by the acronym CALD) for children within culturally safe and inclusive ECEC services (OECD, 2013).

New initiatives have emerged and existing networks strengthened to address the challenges of CALD in ECEC: for example, the Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training (DECET) network was established to bring together European organizations to research and promote diversity in ECEC, acknowledging the multiple (cultural and other) identities of children and families. Another example is the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) established in 1998 in the Netherlands to connect early childhood professionals across Europe and Central Asia towards social inclusion and quality care for young children. So too, the USA developed the significant CALD initiatives documented by Tazi and Wasmuth (2015).

The challenges of CALD are considerable for young children and families, including grandparents. Young (2024), in writing of Nordic perspectives on linguistic and cultural diversity, noted “the complexification of linguistic and cultural diversity in our increasingly globalised, interconnected world presents societal organisation with a series of complex challenges, including education-specific challenges. How to support children for whom the language of the home is not the language used in the education context constitutes a key challenge. It is key because language lies at the heart of relationships, socialisation and learning” (p. 369).

In Australia, Gide et al. (2021) raise the need for a CALD workforce in ECEC, with one-third of people in Australia is born overseas (and may speak languages other than English at home), to enable the sector to recognise and support the potential benefits of such a workforce for children, families and social cohesion in Australia.

To return to kinship groups and cultural and linguistic diversity, grandparents may also have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds to their age peers and/or to their grandchildren, with different expectations around food and eating, celebrations and festive occasions, discipline, academic achievements, extra curricula activities and use of digital media (cf. Döring et al., 2022). With respect to the matter of the digital contexts of children's lives, a systematic review of digital play in the early years (Chu et al., 2024) indicates that digital technologies form the context their participation in everyday contexts. The review plots three generations of children's use of digital technologies: the first generation (1980s to early 2000s); the second generation (2010 advent of the iPad and increased independent digital activity by children); and the third generation (post-digital integration of technologies with children's socio-material activities). Of interest in intergenerational research

are the ways in which young children and older generations interact within and across the three generations of digital usage.

How do grandparents navigate the language and cultural practices expected of a grandparent within linguistically and culturally diverse families? How do grandparents interact with grandchildren in increasingly digital play contexts?

A policy upshot is that societies and ECEC services need to re-evaluate the role of grandparents, attend to the support they need, and systematically integrate kinship and grandparental care into education and family policies.

Grandparent Terms

Given the culturally and linguistically diverse contexts of grandparenting, the terminologies or terms-of-address used to refer to grandparents vary. Grandmothers, for example, can be known as: Bubbe, Coco, Gaga, Gigi, Garminy, Golli, Grandma, Grammy, Jadati, Jaju, Lala, Lola, Lovey, Maa Maa, Marnaw, Memaw, Mimi, Oma, Ouma, Mimi, Nan and Nanna. Conversely, families may not use any such terms and may prefer their own given name or another nomenclature. Whatever term is used to denote a grandparent, there remain pervasive community-sanctioned images of grandparents, that usually orient to dominant normative parenting and grandparenting.

Popular and social media, for example, are awash with idealized images of grandparents as kind, nurturing, patient, committed to family and with spare time and resources to spend on their grandchildren. In contrast, advocacy groups report that grandparents feel undervalued and resentful, having been accused of contributing to adverse child outcomes such as child obesity (National Seniors Australia, 2024).

Romanticized rhetoric around grandparenting (as that around play) is not confined to the popular media. Indeed, it can be espoused by leaders in ECEC. The USA's National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) published Nemeth's (2015) piece "Magic happens when grandparents care for grandchildren", while UK's Buchanan and Rotkirch (2018) note "As caretakers of many of their grandchildren, who will be our future citizens, grandparents are guardians of all our tomorrows" (p. 131). So too, Australia's peak body, Early Childhood Australia (ECA) (2023) published Cowley's piece on grandparents nurturing relationships, highlighting that "Grandparents have an invisible thread of connection to their grandchildren that is as strong as a cable of steel and as flexible as a bungee rope" (p. 1).

Grandparents in Action

There is compelling evidence that grandparents (be they biological or adoptive grandparents or grandparent figures) are active in the care of young children (Baxter, 2022; OECD, 2021). Across the OECD (2021), grandparents have been found to be

older, live longer and have fewer grandchildren than in past generations. For families who use informal care, 26% use grandparents to pick up children from ECEC services and help out in those services, assist with groceries or meals and read stories. Some grandparents live with their grandchildren in multigenerational households and some are primary carers of their grandchildren. Others are geographically isolated from their grandchildren and rely solely on digital communication rather than face-to-face interaction with their grandchildren. Yet others are estranged from their grandchildren and have neither digital nor face-to-face interaction with them. So too, many potential grandparents stay in the workforce for longer than in the past, often with insufficient resources, career interruptions and financial insecurity that mitigate against flexible work and leisure and/or informal care or interaction with young children. Moreover, some aspire to be grandparents but have little prospect of doing so.

Grandparent Health and Wellbeing

The health and wellbeing of grandparents in relation to their involvement with grandchildren is a growing area of practice. In Australia, for example, community organisations, such as Playmatters (2024), advocate for the benefits of intergenerational play initiatives for the health and wellbeing of older people. In the research arena, a systematic review of the grandparent health and wellbeing conducted by Danielsbacka et al. (2022) focussed on: (1) custodial grandparent families, where grandparents raise grandchildren without parental presence; (2) three-generation households, where grandparents live with adult children and grandchildren; and (3) non-co-residing grandparents involved in the lives of their grandchildren. In summary, the most negative health and wellbeing results were for custodial grandparents and three-generation households, and the most positive results were for non-co-residing grandparents.

So too, there is a related body of research addressing the influence of grandchildren on the care trajectories of ageing grandparents (cf. Rapp et al., 2023). Rapp et al. (2023) drew on the *Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe* (75,296 observations from 11 industrialized countries, 2004–2018), to show that the presence of grandchildren significantly increases the likelihood of having grandparents live at home: the probability of paid home care significantly increases, while the probability of care home admission falls significantly. Moreover, the number of grandchildren in families was found to have an indirect impact on long-term use of care.

In Europe, provision of grandchild care by grandparents is widespread. Bertogg (2023) found its prevalence and intensity to vary across European countries alongside gendered patterns of care within those countries (cf. Bordone & Arpino, 2016). Igel and Szydlik's (2011) analysis of the *Survey of Health, Aging and Retirement in Europe* (2004–2018) concluded that improved health status and increased life expectancy of elderly people mean that grandparents and grandchildren share more

time together and accrue active benefit from doing so. In turn, grandparents assist their adult children by looking after the grandchildren, operating as key service providers of childcare, especially for mothers engaged in the labour market. The survey revealed significant country differences in the occurrence and intensity of grandchild care, with grandparents in southern Europe engaging less often but more intensively in childcare, in contrast to northern Europe where grandchild care is provided more often but less intensively. Moreover, the degree to which grandparents engage in childcare relates to the institutional and normative characteristics of childcare provision within the particular jurisdiction and in relation to the labour market participation of both parents and grandparents therein.

Grandparent Impact on Children's Health and Wellbeing

Grandparent impact on child and family health is also a growing research area, for example, within the USA's National Institutes of Health (NIH) (cf. Coall & Hertwig, 2010; Sari, 2023). Reviews undertaken by Coall and Hertwig (2010) show the effect of grandparents on their grandchildren's cognitive and verbal abilities, mental health, and overall wellbeing, across more-and-less industrialized societies and show the influence of living conditions and societal norms in shaping grandparent roles. In larger families, resources for children might be limited by the need to divide them among so many family members. Likewise, they found that the presence of other kin, and a grandchild's birth order, can influence the degree of closeness in the relationship between grandparent and grandchild.

Sari (2023), in turn, focussed on the influence of grandparents on grandchildren's wellbeing, highlighting the influence as under-researched. With grandparents living longer and having fewer grandchildren, grandparents have been found to play expanded roles in their grandchildren's lives than in past generations. Given that grandparents are increasingly shaping their grandchildren's health and wellbeing, Sari (2023) argues for expanded research on the complex dynamics of grandparent-parent-grandchild interactions, and as such, gives impetus to the argument for the research being mounted in this chapter.

Turning to Australia, the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) conducted three consecutive national family surveys, the most recent *Families in Australia Survey 3* (Baxter, 2022) (2383 respondents self-identified as grandparents with an over-representation of females), building on the previous *Families in Australia Survey* that also focussed on the impact of COVID-19 on grandparents and families (Carroll et al., 2021). The 2022 survey found that two-in-five grandparents with a grandchild aged under 13 years provided some childcare for their grandchildren, a key motivation being a desire to connect and build relationships with the younger generations, but principally, to support their adult children in paid employment. Other international research has focused on the lived experience of grandparents and grandchildren during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kekeh et al., 2024).

Baxter (2022) identified multiple reasons for grandparent childcare: providing childcare while parents worked or studied (64%), the proportion providing childcare was higher if the youngest grandchild was under 10 years rather than 10–13 years; providing childcare to give parents a break (45%); providing childcare while parents undertook other activities such as sport or social events (32%); and other reasons (15%). Just over one-in-four grandparents with a grandchild aged under 13 years provided childcare at least once per week, more frequent for younger grandchildren. Grandparent childcare is more often casual/occasional (62% of those providing childcare), compared to regular (39%) or school holiday (26%) childcare, with one-in-five grandparents providing a combination of all of these care types, such as school holiday care as well as occasional care. Of the grandparents not providing childcare, 41% indicated that would like to care for their grandchildren but cannot and 28% indicated that they had other grandchildren they would like to care for but cannot.

Rights of Grandchildren and Grandparents

In most OECD countries, grandparents as well as grandchildren have rights. While the rights of children, articulated in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* ([UNCRC], 1989) have, for decades, been well known with respect to their rights to provision, participation and protection, less is known of the rights of grandparents, the recent work by Holdgaard (2021) and Sandberg (2021) notable exceptions.

Depending on jurisdiction, grandparents in OECD countries typically have the right to see their grandchildren and to participate in their education, as long as their rights do not usurp those of the parent. If the matter goes to court, the court considers the **best interests of the child**: the benefit of a child having a meaningful relationship with both parents and/or grandparents; the need to protect the child from harm; the views of the child, depending on their age and maturity; practical difficulties and expenses involved in spending time and communicating with the grandparent; capacity of grandparent, their health, age and financial circumstances; and family violence involving the child or a member of the child's family. In short, the best interests of the child is balanced against those of the grandparent and parent.

Children's rights to participate in play is well documented. Lagerlöf et al. (2023) work from this premise to highlight children's rights *in play* from the perspective of Play-Responsive Early Childhood Education and Care (PRECEC) and the UNCRC, considering whether children are included, seen as participants with agency to contribute to play and supported to play in ways that are recognised by other play participants.

How are the rights of both children and grandparents enacted and in their everyday lives? What of the rights of grandparents and grandchildren to interact in play? How might ECEC and other contexts enable such interactions in meaningful ways and how might they be researched?

Intergenerational Programs

The last decade has seen rise in intergenerational programs for younger and older generations, typically learning in co-located facilities, combining aged care and childcare/school services. Sitting within the practice-based framework of ‘intergenerationality’ (cf. Hatzifilalithis & Grenier, 2019), intergenerational practitioners in Australia (Cartmel et al., 2021), India (Dsouza et al., 2023), and Israel (Cohen-Mansfield & Muff, 2021) have championed intergenerational programs. Usually, they are structural initiatives driven by concerns over the increasing number of ageing populations, the need to tackle ageist stereotypes and the health trajectories of older people (cf. Cohen-Mansfield & Muff, 2021; Dsouza et al., 2023; Jarrott et al., 2021; Kamei et al., 2022). So too, intergenerational initiatives have been propelled by a desire to foster greater social connection between old and young (Lee et al., 2021).

In Australia, Cartmel and colleagues (2018, 2021) have long-standing engagement and research in intergenerational, co-located programs, their work showing the mutual benefit accruing to young children and elderly people who interact in the same intergenerational setting. So too, intergenerational leaders such as Fitzgerald (2023) call for “Making grandfriends an intergenerational imperative” (p. 1) and Tan Ler Min (2024) advocating for the mutually beneficial transfer of knowledge and skills from one age group to another.

Most intergenerational research focusses on participant satisfaction with the program (Kamei et al., 2022) and the social, emotional, and behavioural outcomes generated within the program (Cohen-Mansfield & Muff, 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Jarrott et al., 2021). A recent review of intergenerational support undertaken by Murayama et al. (2021) identified the need for intergenerational programs to create opportunities for older people to provide support to younger people, in order for support to be mutually beneficial. A policy corollary is the potential benefit for both aged care and childcare workers.

A related focus is on “intergenerational solidarity” (Zlotnick et al., 2020, p. 670), the exchange of material, social and emotional support and care between family generations. Zlotnick et al. (2020) provided a framework for analysing interventions promoting intergenerational solidarity in 11 countries, early analysis showing the outcome of social wellbeing across countries, yet revealing the need for a cohesive approach to evaluation of outcomes.

What are the features of intergenerational learning and living contexts? The work of Kernan and Cortellesi (2019) highlights the learning relationships fostered between young children and older adults and the contexts (comprising architecture, planning and functioning) in which they can flourish. They advocate for intergenerational encounters in public spaces as “polyvalent spaces” (a term borrowed from chemistry and taken up in architecture and design) to denote spaces that can accommodate different purposes, whether culturally responsive storytelling or intergenerational play hubs. These design concepts are particularly relevant to co-located services, but may be applied also to more organic opportunities in home, community and ECEC contexts.

Early Childhood Education and Care as Settings for Intergenerational Play

As discussed earlier, ECEC claims a long-standing commitment to intergenerational play, whereby adults (teachers/educators/caregivers) and children interact in play settings. So too, ECEC ostensibly welcomes older generations such as grandparents to its services, particularly those who have caregiving responsibilities for grandchildren, often providing opportunities for them to interact with children around specific activities which draw upon the life experience of grandparents. Despite rhetoric around including all generations, fine grained research with grandparents and older generations as participants in intergenerational play in centre-based ECEC would be timely. As noted earlier, while there are practice-based examples of intergenerational play in playgroup contexts (cf. Playmatters, 2024) and in co-located aged care and children's services (cf. Cartmel et al., 2021), there is a need for fine-grained empirical evidence of intergenerational play in regular centre-based contexts.

Australia's peak body in ECEC, Early Childhood Australia (ECA) (2023) espouses "Principles of play" as a collective responsibility for older people in children's lives having "a role in understanding, protecting and valuing the importance of play for every child in every community" (Principle of Play 6). The capacity of play to be interactive relates to adult responsiveness to children's actions in play. This stance is inherent in the work of Lagerlöf et al. (2023) into adult responses to children's actions in play and possibilities for children's perspectives and narratives to be shared and acted upon.

In various countries, national early years curriculum/learning frameworks espouse the importance of play involving both adults and children. In Australia, for example, the national early learning framework, *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Framework for Australia V2.0* (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022) emphasises play-based learning and the intentional role of educators in extending and enriching children's learning through play. The framework has been designed for use by early childhood educators and teachers, approved providers working in partnership with children, families, other professionals, schools and community members who inform educational programs and practices that are place-based and relevant to the community. It is underscored by ethical, socially just and inclusive principles for children's learning that:

- build secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
- develop partnerships
- are respectful of diversity
- embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives
- commit to equity, inclusion and high expectations
- consider sustainability in all its forms
- engage in critical reflection and professional learning
- exercise collaborative leadership and work as a team
- (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022, p. 14).

While play is central to high level frameworks such as *Belonging, Being and Becoming* (2022), the everyday practice of play involving adults and children requires closer examination and, as such, is a prime site for research into older people (such as grandparents) and young children interacting in play.

Conclusion

The chapter has identified increased interest in grandparent involvement with their grandchildren (albeit by dint of their adult children's workforce participation). It has revealed the need for empirical evidence of grandparents interacting with grandchildren in the play contexts in which they operate.

A possible theoretical framework for tackling the issues raised in this chapter is Nancy Fraser's (2008) social justice and education framework, with its three-fold focus on recognition (cultural dimensions), representation (political dimensions), and redistribution (economic dimensions) (cf. Vincent, 2020). Fraser's framework has potential to illuminate Intergenerational play by addressing justice issues such as "parity of participation" (Fraser, 2007, p. 27), the social arrangements that enable different players to participate in social interactions and the political corollary to potentially dismantle institutionalized barriers that prevent participation.

Fine-grained, *in situ* research into grandparents and grandchildren interacting in play favours the use the research methods of observation and conversation in the everyday naturalistic settings of home, community and ECEC. Such research stands to yield insights into how each may be represented and recognised in their play interactions and how power and agency may be redistributed through their interaction. So too, should such research be part of a larger-scale comparative research (such as that conducted by the OECD or similar bodies), there is potential to shed light on different systems, policy contexts and legislative frameworks that promote intergenerational play.

In conclusion, the chapter calls for research, in everyday settings, that affirms play in adult-child interactions and generates new possibilities for meaningful interactions between young children and grandparents in the contexts of their lives. Moreover, it has the potential to affirm age-friendly inclusive contexts and opportunities that bring old and young together in mutually beneficial play-based interactions.

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Part III
Empirical Studies

Chapter 5

Adults' Involvement in Social Pretend Play in the Context of Early Childhood Education



Isabelle Kalkusch and Sonja Perren

Introduction

The question of how to best support children's play in early childhood education remains a topic of ongoing debate, both in practical settings and scientific discourse. Perspectives on adult involvement in social pretend play range from viewing it as disruptive interference that hinders children's play (e.g., Korat et al., 2002; Lindqvist, 2001), to the opposite view that adult engagement can enhance the quality of play, thereby fostering children's learning and development (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Enz & Christie, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978; Weisberg et al., 2013).

This chapter first outlines the function of social pretend play for children's development, followed by an exploration of the theoretical foundations for adult involvement in play, with a focus on social pretend play. Finally, findings from the *releFant* Study are presented. In this study we used an experimental design to highlight the impact of different levels of adult involvement—such as active play support versus providing materials—on children's engagement in social pretend play, and to examine how these educational approaches support children in their development of their social competences and peer relationships.

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N. Pramling et al. (eds.), *Adults in Play with Children*, International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 44, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-99629-0_5

Social Pretend Play and Its Relevance for Children's Development

Development of Pretend Play

When we think of children's play, we often envision scenes of pretend play. For instance, a child spinning a spoon in a pot at a toy kitchen, then setting the table, and serve the imaginative dinner. Alternatively, we might picture a child building a castle out of pillows and blankets, creating swords from sticks, or simply swinging an invisible one. Early pretend play actions usually become visible around 15 months (Smith, 2010) and become more frequent and complex between the ages of 3 and 4, peaking around age 6 (Piaget, 1962). Around the same time that pretend play emerges, children also start to engage in social play. Early research on social play identified a progression from onlooker behaviour and parallel play to associative play and eventually cooperative play (Parten, 1932; Singer, 2016). When other people—peers or adults—join in this play it leads to social interaction within the pretend play. We then refer to it as social pretend play (Howes & Matheson, 1992). The themes of (social) pretend play are diverse, ranging from everyday scenarios (i.e., observations of adult life or own experiences) to fantastical ones (i.e., often inspired by stories and figures from children's books or TV shows). So, pretend play includes activities such as make-believe, sociodramatic play, or role-play (Hauser, 2013; Weisberg et al., 2013) and it is a central play activity for preschool-aged children (Smith, 2010). The symbolic function of pretend play is a key feature that sets it apart from other forms of play (Fein, 1987; Lillard et al., 2013). In pretend play, objects, actions, words, or even people can represent something else. Nevertheless, despite active research efforts, there is no unified definition of pretend play in the scientific literature. Several authors identified based on developmental theorists like Vygotsky, Elkonin, and Piaget different features of social pretend play throughout a normative development (e.g. Hauser, 2013; Smilansky, 1968; Smith, 2010; Thompson & Goldstein, 2019). From these we considered the following five as central: performing pretend actions on oneself, objects, or others (decentration), using objects or imagination to transform reality (decontextualization), maintaining specific roles (role-taking), linking individual pretend actions into sequences (sequencing), and engaging in metacommunication (planning). Generally, these features are considered to increase in complexity in the order mentioned (Thompson & Goldstein, 2019).

In children's play different levels of those features can be observed. For example, a child might display early signs of decentration, such as picking up a bottle, saying "baby" and feeding the doll (cf. Hauser, 2013). At the same time, this sequence also demonstrates initial action combinations. Table 5.1 provides a description how different levels of these features might look like in play, which were created based on their descriptions in the literature (e.g. Hauser, 2013; Smilansky, 1968; Smith, 2010; Thompson & Goldstein, 2019). The higher the level in all these features, the higher the quality and competence of a child's pretend play.

Table 5.1 Levels of social pretend play quality and competence

	Lower level	Higher level
Decentration	Child plays as-if it is eating with a spoon.	Child directs play action to other child
Decontextualization	Child uses a phone to alarm the firefighters	Child uses an imaginative phone to alarm the firefighters
Role taking	Child is wearing a crown but is not acting like a royal person.	Child is acting continuously in his/her role as a doctor (e.g. addressing peers as patients with appropriate language)
Planning	Child is pretending in its play but does not communicate its play actions.	Child communicates to co-players future play actions: "Now we have dinner and afterwards there is a fire starting and we ring the fire alarm."
Sequencing	Child is playing single sequences, e.g. pretending to eat soup.	Child first goes to shop to buy groceries, then cooks in its toy kitchen, then is preparing the table and is finally sitting down to eat.

Functions of Pretend Play

The reason why adults should engage in children's play is often justified by the positive impact of play on development. At the same time, there are various theories about the function of play, which could lead to different approaches in how adults intervene.

Stagnitti (2003) states the perceived value of play for children's development is strongly linked to how play is perceived. The theoretical review by Mellou (1994) traces its origins to philosophical studies, like Schiller's surplus energy theory and Lazarus' recreation and relaxation theory. Modern theories focus more on the psychological and social functions of play in children's development (Mellou, 1994): For example, psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theories (e.g., Freud, 1961; Erikson & Erikson, 1998) emphasize play's role in managing emotions and mastering the environment, while arousal modulation theories (e.g., Berlyne 1960; Ellis, 1973) associate play with exploration and stimulation regulation. Neuroscientific research highlights the intrinsic motivation and cognitive benefits of play, such as improved attention, memory, and stress regulation (Liu et al., 2017). Bateson (1955), in his metacommunicative theory, highlights that during pretend play, children differentiate between the imagined intentions and the real purposes of actions and objects, while simultaneously managing both levels of understanding. Vygotsky (1967, 1978) views play as crucial to social development, particularly through the zone of proximal development, where children achieve tasks with the support of others. In contrast, Piaget (1962) sees play rather as a by-product of cognitive development. Vygotsky argues that the symbolic function of pretend play helps children understand the social world and attributes to play the potential to create a zone of proximal development. He states, "What the child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do independently tomorrow." (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 211).

Development takes place between independent and assisted performance (Bodrova & Leong, 2007), where children, with the help of a more knowledgeable other or through the enriching context of social pretend play, can achieve tasks they cannot yet accomplish on their own (Vygotsky, 1978).

These theories suggest multiple possible links between pretend play and children's (social) development. Smith (2010) presents a systematic framework of these associations, considering Vygotsky and Piaget's perspectives: (1) play as a driving force of development (*crucial*), (2) play as one of several developmental pathways (*equifinal*), and (3) play as a by-product of development (*epiphenomenal*). A review by Lillard et al. (2013) assessed empirical evidence across various developmental domains. They found that a crucial link is possible only for language, narrative, and emotion regulation, while for reasoning an equifinal relationship is supported. For theory of mind, social skills, language, narrative equifinal associations are still possible. In terms of creativity, intelligence and theory of mind, however, the epiphenomenal connection is the best supported one, while it remains a possible connection for reasoning, social skills and language as well. The authors argue that more rigorous studies, with better experimental designs, are needed to clarify these relationships. Thus, while social pretend play may support social development, its role is more likely equifinal than crucial. The key factor, however, may be the quality of children's social pretend play (Bodrova et al., 2013; Elkonin, 2005).

Roles of Adults in Play

We imagine a situation one might experience in an early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting: *A group of children is crowded around several materials (e.g. scarves, wooden sticks ...). One girl is telling another one that the blue scarf is the water, but the girl looks like she does not understand.* Do we continue to observe, or do we rather take part? How do we take part? The approach adults take when engaging in children's play depends partly on the theoretical perspective they follow regarding the role of play in development. If play is understood as a byproduct of other processes, playful activities may be seen as an appropriate activity for children, but rather not be actively promoted as learning opportunity. In contrast, if play is seen as a driving force for development, it may be considered as itself as a valuable activity for children's development and learning. Additionally, there is a concern that adult intervention may disrupt the nature of play, transforming it into a more structured activity. So, how adults engage in children's play is partly shaped by the underlying theory guiding their actions, e.g. whether they view play as merely instrumental or as an essential developmental process on its own.

Several researchers have explored the various roles that educators can adopt and their impact on children's play (Johnson et al., 1987, 2005; Kontos, 1999; Vu et al., 2015). Johnson et al. (2005) categorizes these roles into rather precarious roles (e.g., uninvolved, redirector, and director) and supportive roles (e.g., co-player, play leader, onlooker, and stage manager). Gaviria-Loaiza et al. (2017) conducted a

qualitative study with 11 early childhood educators. The observed roles educators take in children's play varied based on their level of involvement:

- **Onlooker:** Educators observe children's play without active participation. They may monitor from a distance, offering safety-related comments or engage in occasional verbal interactions by asking questions about the play.
- **Stage Manager:** Educators assist by preparing materials and suggesting themes without directly engaging in the play. Their involvement is supportive but not integrated into the play itself.
- **Co-Player:** Educators take on minor roles within the children's play, often seen in social pretend play. For example, they may act as a patient, allowing children to lead the play while subtly guiding interactions.
- **Play Leader:** Educators influence the direction of the play by introducing new ideas or themes, often related to real-life experiences. They maintain a minor or equal role in the play while helping expand children's vocabulary and experiences.
- **Director:** Educators take an over-controlling approach, directing children's actions and dictating play scripts, limiting children's autonomy.
- **Redirector:** Educators interrupt play to shift attention toward other topics or academic concepts, which can sometimes be disruptive if not aligned with the flow of the play.

Behaviours that indicate less involvement, such as moving back and forth, were found to negatively affect children's play engagement (Singer et al., 2014). According to Tajik and Singer (2021), this finding suggests that the availability of educators supports children's emotional security during play. In a study by Vu et al. (2015) involving 30 early childhood educators, a higher level of teacher engagement, particularly in the role of a co-player, was linked to a greater likelihood of cooperative pretend play. In an observational study among 80 daycare or kindergarten groups in Switzerland, it was shown that during more cooperative types of children's play, dramatic play and games with rules, teachers were more likely to assume the proactive role of co-player (Rüdisüli et al., 2024).

Further Gaviria-Loaiza et al. (2017) discovered that taking on roles such as co-player or play leader boosted children's social interactions with peers and increased the level of social play. Moreover, children's receptiveness was highest when educators took on the roles of co-player or play leader. Both roles, co-player or play leader, are associated with sensitive and responsive behaviours (e.g., verbal responses to play actions), while the play leader role further enriches children's play experiences. In the co-player or play leader roles, educators can assist children in reaching higher levels of play than they could achieve independently (Gaviria-Loaiza et al., 2017). An educator's active participation in play can also enhance the complexity of the play's narrative (Fleer, 2015; Hakkarainen et al., 2013) and thus provoke more higher levels of social pretend play's features.

To evaluate the role of adults in educational settings, e.g. based on their involvement from passive to active, we simultaneously must consider the role of children. Both the child and the educator can be proactive (Perren et al., 2021a). This means that an educator can exhibit either low or high levels of initiative, just as the child

Table 5.2 Adults' role in play by child's and educators' level of initiative

		Educator's role	
		Initiative high	Initiative low
Child's role	Initiative high	Child-centred	Child-dominated
	Initiative low	Educator-centred	unregulated

can. This interaction creates four distinct quadrants that can be used to categorize the different roles an educator may assume, depending on who holds the initiative in the play situation (Table 5.2). This framework can assist the understanding and structuring adult involvement in children's play. Additionally, it provides a basis for examining and validating these roles with empirical findings from relevant studies, as mentioned earlier.

In sum, educators can take on different roles in children's play, with the co-player and play leader roles proving especially beneficial for enhancing play quality. This highlights that children's play may greatly improve with more active adult involvement that is attuned to their needs and ideas.

Approaches for Promoting Social Pretend Play

For promoting social pretend play there are two common approaches in ECEC: the provision of role-play material and pretend play tutoring. Providing material supports the child rather in the sense of a prepared environment, while pretend play tutoring includes interaction with the adult.

The active involvement of adults in children's play has recently been captured by the term "guided play", which can refer to various forms of adult-supported play. According to recent research, guided play is characterized by three key features: (1) a clear learning goal, (2) children's agency in directing their play, and (3) adults adapting their strategies with sensitivity to children's interests and needs (Skene et al., 2022). These elements combine aspects that are widely recognized in ECEC research and practice as beneficial for children's learning and development. Social pretend play tutoring, understood as an active involvement in children's social pretend play, shares many of the key features of guided play. However, the concept of a clear learning goal in play tutoring may differ slightly. Instead of focusing on specific social, emotional, or cognitive skills, play tutoring primarily aims to foster children's engagement in high-quality pretend play. Such play might encompass performing pretend actions on others (decentration), using imagination to transform reality (decontextualization), maintaining roles continuously (role-taking), linking several individual pretend actions into sequences (sequencing), and engaging in metacommunication (planning). The emphasis is on enhancing the play itself rather than directly targeting specific developmental outcomes.

The features of guided play, and by extension pretend play tutoring, draw on several theoretical frameworks and empirical studies in child development and

educational research (Skene et al., 2022). According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), interactions with educators and peers are central processes in children's learning and development. These interactions are most effective when they are grounded in positive and reliable relationships, as emphasized by attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1988). Such relationships enable children to explore their environment confidently and foster a sense of autonomy and competence, which are core components of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Slot et al., 2017; Sroufe, 2000). This theory underscores the importance of activities that provide opportunities for children's agency. In these activities, children can experience autonomy, develop a sense of competence, and feel a sense of belonging within a group. These experiences are highly motivational, as they meet fundamental psychological needs, promoting deeper engagement and fostering intrinsic motivation for learning and development. Guided play also draws on Vygotskian theory, which posits that the guidance of a significant other is crucial for creating the *zone of proximal development*. This zone allows children to accomplish tasks they cannot yet perform independently, laying the foundation for adult support in children's learning and development (Vygotsky, 1987). From research on interaction quality in ECEC we know as well of the importance of support that includes responsiveness to children's needs, fostering their autonomy, and promoting self-regulation (Perlman et al., 2016). Educators who create a positive climate, demonstrate sensitivity, regard child perspectives, and provide behavioural guidance significantly contribute to children's learning and development. Additionally, engaging in activities that facilitate learning, providing qualitative feedback, and modelling language are key components of effective educational practice (La Paro et al., 2012; Perren et al., 2016).

Pretend play tutoring can take various forms, including parallel play, outside play tutoring, and inside play tutoring (Scharer, 2017) with more or less active initiative and involvement of the adult. In parallel play, adults engage alongside children without direct interaction, while outside play tutoring involves offering support without actively participating in the play. Inside play tutoring, however, involves adults actively participating and scaffolding the child's engagement through their role behaviour, enriching the play experience (Burkhardt Bossi et al., 2009). Johnson et al. (2005) identified specific play-supportive strategies that adults can use to enhance the quality of pretend play. These strategies include actively engaging in roles within the play, encouraging children's play actions using props or verbal cues, modelling play actions to demonstrate potential scenarios, and incorporating children's ideas into the play (see also Perren et al., 2019). These approaches not only support the child's agency but also enrich the play experience, making it a more dynamic and collaborative learning opportunity. This adult-child interaction fosters intersubjectivity—a shared understanding between the adult and child—recognized as beneficial for promoting learning (Berk et al., 2006; Wood et al., 1976). Symbolic play has been shown to promote longer joint attention and more frequent use of gestures in caregiver-child interactions compared to functional play (Quinn & Kidd, 2019), supporting both imaginative experiences and social communication.

To maximize the benefits of pretend play tutoring, it is essential to consider the child's current play quality and adapt strategies as the child matures (Hakkarainen et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 1987). The goal of these strategies is not to directly teach social skills but to promote the quality of children's social pretend play, which in turn fosters social development and peer relationship quality. High-quality social pretend play challenges children, allowing them to take on complex roles, such as a doctor interacting with patients, which guides them to demonstrate more elaborate social behaviours than in non-pretend contexts (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Social pretend play also provides opportunities for positive peer interactions, such as sharing and taking turns, and for experimenting with different social behaviours (Ashiabi, 2007). These pretend scenarios push children to step beyond their usual behaviours, helping them extend and refine their social skills, making social pretend play an ideal environment for social development.

Besides the educator and the children, the environment of the educational setting is conceptualized as a developmental source. This concept was introduced by Reggio Emilia and is known under the term: Environment as third educator. Thus, the material found in the educational environment, their organization and arrangement, but also the structure of the room itself are considered to impact children's learning. Regarding social pretend play the provided role-play material might be a stimulus (Trawick-Smith et al., 2015). Providing role-play material is a common practice that might initiate children's engagement in social pretend play. Play material varies in its level of structure: realistic material with the higher level of structure (e.g. fire-fighter's helmet) to completely unstructured material (e.g. wooden sticks or blocks). In a study with four different sets of play material and play settings (i.e. unstructured material only; unstructured and realistic material; thematically structured area with realistic material; thematically open area with realistic material) higher frequency and quality in children's pretend play was observed in settings that included at least some realistic material (Dodge & Frost, 1986). Unstructured play material challenges children more in their play behaviour (e.g. decontextualization; McLoyd, 1983) since its function is not predetermined. Trawick-Smith et al. (2015) explored the influence of specific play materials on the quality of children's play. Their findings indicated that children demonstrated relatively high-quality play, incorporating symbolic actions with non-realistic objects such as blocks (e.g. Duplo bricks) and pretend play items e.g. (simple human figures), while the overall frequency with the most complex play material was relatively low. Unstructured material seems to be more challenging: before it can be used in play its symbolic meaning has to be negotiated (Umek & Musek, 2001). Another limitation of providing play material as approach for promoting pretend play is, that it might rather stimulate imitative actions than promote pretend play quality (Smilansky, 1968). In contrast, most of the research examining social pretend play has employed a play tutoring approach (Berk et al., 2006; Christie, 1983; Craig-Unkefer & Kaiser, 2003; Gmitrova, 2013; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). The theoretical foundation of active support in children's play support the importance of sensitive adult involvement in children's play. Following this reasoning as well as theories on the function of pretend play for development, pretend play tutoring offers a rich and adaptable approach

to early childhood education, promoting both the engagement in play and finally the development of key social competencies in a supportive, child-centred environment. Several qualitative studies have highlighted the positive impact of participating in children's play, either as a play partner or leader, on their development (e.g., Hakkarainen et al., 2013; Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2020; Lindqvist, 2001).

The Impact of Adult Support in Social Pretend Play on Children's Social Development: Results from an Experimental Study

For the beneficial function of social pretend play on children's social skills a high-quality level of the play is considered crucial (Bodrova et al., 2013; Elkonin, 2005). Thus, we investigated in the *releFant* study (1) approaches of promoting social pretend play and their effect on children social pretend play quality and competence and (2) whether this promotes children's social competences and peer relationship quality. For both questions, we explored whether children with a low (local) language proficiency profit more or less from the intervention. We expected that pretend play tutoring promotes children's social pretend play quality, while providing roleplay material and pretend play tutoring increase the frequency of social pretend play. The increase in children's social pretend play quality and competence was expected to increase children's social competences and peer relationship quality.

To answer these questions, we summarize the results from several publications of our research group.

Participants and Procedure

The *releFant* study was conducted between September 2017 to July 2019 (two waves). In the recruitment procedure, 171 playgroups from the German-speaking part of Switzerland with a predominantly middle-class population were selected randomly and asked to participate; of these, 29 playgroups confirmed their participation. After the pre-test, two playgroups (total $n = 6$ children) had to be excluded due to very low participation rates. The study sample consisted of 27 Swiss play groups, from which 215 children received written parental permission to participate. These educational institutions are commonly attended by 3-to 5-year-old children. The educational aim of these play groups is to give the children an opportunity to play with their peers under the care and guidance of a trained playgroup educator. An experimental approach was used with three condition groups and a pre-, post- and follow-up test (cf. Fig. 5.1). Each play group was randomly allocated to one condition group: play tutoring (intervention), material (half-dose) and control group. The two parts of the study, intervention phase and testing phase (pre-,

Table 5.3 Characteristics of condition groups

	Standardized set of roleplay material	Adult interaction
Play tutoring	Yes	Pretend play tutoring
Material	Yes	Standard
Control	No	Standard

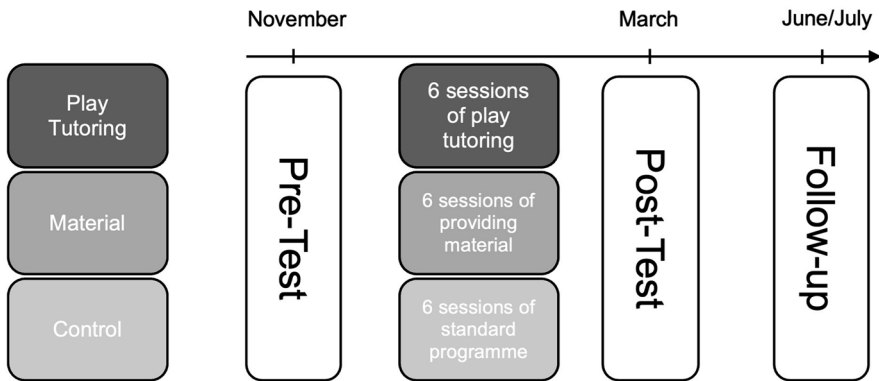


Fig. 5.1 Design of releFant Study

post- and follow-up) were executed by two separate research teams (to keep the experimenters blind to the condition affiliation of the tested children).

In the intervention phase the play groups were visited by a researcher six times, on a weekly basis, and provided with the condition-specific program during a 30-minute play session. Table 5.3 gives an overview of what the conditions entailed. Play sessions in all condition groups were videotaped (6 sessions wave 1, approx. 2 sessions wave 2). Using standardized observation tools, this video material was then assessed in terms of adult’s active pretend play support (scoring procedure developed by the research group based on Bodrova et al., 2013; Gmitrova, 2013; Smith, 2010), children’s frequency of play activities (based on the five types of play described by Whitebread et al., 2012), and children’s social pretend play quality (scoring procedure developed by the research group based on e.g. Thompson & Goldstein, 2019).

Description of the Pretend Play Tutoring

The intervention was based on a standardized manual with the theme “Let’s Play Firefighters” and was accompanied by a matching set of role-play materials. Each session followed a similar structure: planning, play and reflection phases. The planning phase was used to establish children’s prior knowledge regarding the play

theme and the function of the role-play material. The play locations (e.g. fire station) were defined, the play course interactively planned, and single play actions and sequences modelled in collaboration with the children. Before the play phase started, the roles were jointly shared out by the educator and the children. Within the play phase, the play tutor herself took the role of a firefighter, or, in a later stage, of a princess or doctor. In this active role, the play tutor supported the children by modelling play actions, prompting interactions between the children or with objects, extending the course of the action, and enlivening her role with emotional expressions. To keep the intervention procedure standardized, certain prompts were fixed (e.g. driving with the fire engine, fighting the fire, applying first aid for the princess, prince or firefighters); at the same time the tutors were flexible enough to adapt the story to children's ideas and needs (e.g. following a child's suggestion to rescue the cat from the tree by including it in the story line). In each session, the content was extended, and new, matching role-play material included. The first three sessions tended to be similar in their structure, to give the children time to get used to the theme. But each session included small extensions to the play plot, to maintain children's interest in the activity. The main story line in the first session was that someone phones the firefighters, who answer the call, climb onto the fire engine and fight the fire. The second session also thematized the life of a firefighter in the fire station, and in the third session the fire engine broke down and had to be repaired. New roles were added in the fourth and fifth sessions, and new plot elements were introduced: a princess or prince who had to be rescued from a burning castle, and finally a doctor who provided first aid for the princess, prince or firefighters. This introduced additional interactive roles, and the play's plot gained in complexity. The play sessions were ended by indicating that the firefighters were now tired and had finished their working day. All role-indicating props were removed, and the session concluded with an interactive reflection phase (e.g. "What did the firefighters do today?").

The control group received no additional material or adult interaction; this means that the playgroup educators were instructed to interact with their group as in any other playgroup session. In the material group, participants were given a standardized set of roleplay material by a research assistant giving minimal instructions. The instructions for the playgroup educators were to act as they would in a standard play group session. The set of roleplay material included both structured items (e.g., helmet, vest, garden hoses) and unstructured materials (such as yellow, red, and orange silk scarves, and wooden blocks), all primarily centred around firefighter-related themes. For each play session, except the final one, new materials were introduced according to the social pretend play tutoring schedule. Starting from session four, the roleplay materials expanded to include items for additional themes, such as princess/prince and doctor roles (e.g., crown, cloak, and medical kit).

The play tutoring was conducted by research assistants who held university degrees in pedagogical studies. Prior to implementation, they received training based on the standardized manual and were supervised during the first implementation phase (using the video material). In both the material and control group, the adults involved were playgroup educators with a varying degree of pedagogical

education. These sessions were also videotaped, and the adults' interaction behaviors were assessed during the analysis process with a focus on active play support (for further details see results section).

Measures

Standardized tests and educator questionnaires were used in pre-, post- and follow-up tests to assess children's social-emotional skills: theory of mind (Extended Theory-of-Mind, EToM, Henning et al., 2012), emotion understanding (German version of the Intelligence and Developmental Scales—Preschool, IDS-P, Grob et al., 2013) and behavioural social skills, empathy and peer relationship quality using the educator questionnaire (Holistic Student Assessment, Malti & Noam, 2016; BIKO, Seeger et al., 2014; Self- and Other-oriented social COMPetences, Perren, 2007).

In addition, children's social pretend play quality and competence was measured with different approaches (Jaggy et al., 2020). Children were tested to assess their social pretend play competence (The Tools of the Play Scale, ToPS, Seeger & Holodynski, 2016) and educators reported children's social pretend play competence (Perren & Sticca, 2019). ToPS is a highly standardized role-play assessment for 3- to 7-year-old children for social pretend play competence. It assesses the quality of children's usage of substitution of objects and role-taking, substitution of play actions, substitution of role-speech, and substitution of emotions. One prompt is set for each item by the examiner and if needed additional ones are added. The reported social pretend play competence assesses with three items the overall quantity, the social quantity, and the level of children's pretend play (e.g., "how often does the child show pretend play with others). The three items were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale (i.e., 0 = never, 1 = seldom, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often, 4 = always).

For assessing children's social pretend play quality during play a standardized manual was developed. This is based on characteristic features and steps of pretend play's normative development (Thompson & Goldstein, 2019). For assessing adults' active pretend play support a coding manual was developed and adapted by our research group on the basis of behavioural strategies suggested by several studies of children's social pretend play (Bodrova et al., 2013; Gmitrova, 2013; Smith, 2010). In Table 5.4 characteristics of these observation measures are displayed.

Results

To answer the first research question, we investigated whether providing role-play material and active adult support during play promotes pretend play quality in a group of preschoolers and finally social pretend play competence. The study sample

Table 5.4 Characteristics of observations measures active pretend play support and social pretend play quality

Instrument	Categories	Values
Active Pretend Play Support (ICC = .94)	<i>Prompting</i> , e.g. using verbal or nonverbal prompts to initiate interactions or pretend use of objects	1 = none of the indicators was observed 2 = one indicator was observed a few times
	<i>Verbalization</i> , e.g. use of questioning and language modelling techniques	3 = half or more of the indicators were observed several times
	<i>Modelling</i> , e.g. playing along and demonstrating play actions and interactions	4 = most indicators were observed several times
	<i>Following</i> child interests, e.g. their suggestions and play ideas	5 = all indicators were present and frequently observed
	<i>Emotion expression</i> , e.g. demonstrating emotions	
Social pretend play quality (ICC = .82)	<i>Decentration</i>	0 = no decentration 1 = self-related 2 = object-related, 3 = other-related play
	<i>Decontextualization</i>	0 = no decontextualization 1 = imitation 2 = object substitution 3 = fantasy transformation
	<i>Role-taking</i>	0 = no role-taking 1 = role-taking without role-conformity 2 = role-taking with some role-conformity 3 = sustained role-taking and role-conformity
	<i>Sequencing</i>	0 = no sequencing 1 = limited script elements 2 = several actions without a script 3 = flexible application of a script

used for the first part of the question was from the first study wave. The sample consisted of 101 preschoolers (50% girls; $Mage = 43.02$ months, $SD = 5.94$) from 14 Swiss educational play groups. In a first step, mean differences were evaluated between the experimental conditions for a group's play activities, e.g. pretend play frequency, as well as for social pretend play quality and adults' play support during play sessions. The main hypotheses were tested at the group level by aggregating the children's individual scores to group means for each play group to each of the six time points of play sessions ($n = 80$; four sessions could not take place), using linear regression models with sandwich estimator for the standard error.

As expected, active pretend play support was the highest in the play tutoring group, medium in the material group (i.e. some play support was provided by the educators) and the lowest in the control group (Fig. 5.2). In both, material and play

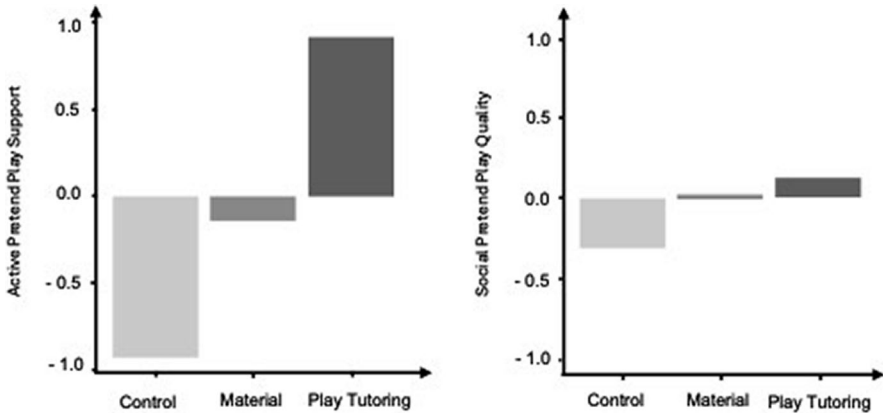


Fig. 5.2 Means of active pretend play support and social pretend play quality by condition groups. Mean scores were z-standardized

tutoring group, the frequency of pretend play was significantly higher than in the control group. Regarding social pretend play quality, the material group scored significantly lower than the play tutoring group, but significantly higher than the control group (Fig. 5.2). Play tutoring was also beneficial for children with limited local language proficiency (Perren et al., 2021b). Further analyses showed that differences in social pretend play quality between the control and material group was explained by the active play support of the adults (Kalkusch et al., 2020). To examine effects on children's social pretend play competence latent change score models were used with data from both study waves ($n = 211$). While there was no intervention effect on children's tested social pretend play competence (ToPS), the findings showed that the reported social pretend play competence increased most strongly in the play tutoring group in comparison to the control group but not in comparison to the material group (Jaggy et al., 2023). The change in children's reported social pretend play competence was as well related to their social pretend play quality during the play sessions (Kalkusch et al., 2022).

Second, we investigated, using data from both study waves, the impact of the intervention on children's social skills and peer relationship quality. The findings from latent change models indicate that play tutoring in comparison to the control group is effective in promoting children's behavioural social skills (i.e. behavioural regulation, cooperative behaviour, sociability, setting limits) and peer relationship quality as reported by their educators. Furthermore, compared to children in the material group the play tutoring group showed as well more positive change in certain behavioural social skills (i.e. behavioural regulation, prosocial behaviour) and peer relationship quality (Jaggy et al., 2023). However, no significant intervention effects were found on children's social-cognitive (e.g. theory of mind) or social-emotional skills (e.g. emotion regulation). The positive effect of social pretend play quality on children's peer relationship was particularly strong among children with low local language proficiency (Perren et al., 2021b). Further details about the results can be found in the referenced publications.

Discussion

In this study, we used an experimental design to examine the effects of different levels of adult involvement—such as active play support versus the provision of role-play materials—on children's engagement in social pretend play. We explored how these educational approaches contribute to children's development of social competences and peer relationships.

The findings suggest that while the provision of roleplay materials certainly encourages children to participate more often in social pretend play, it is the active involvement of adults through play tutoring that significantly enhances the quality of such play within the current situation. When comparing three conditions—play tutoring, material provision, and a control group—it became evident that the quality of children's pretend play improved more when adults took an active role, rather than simply providing materials or allowing unstructured interactions. By solely providing role-play material the educator engages rather in a role as stage manager, who is supportive for children's but does not take over an active role. While in the play tutoring the adult engaged rather in a role as play leader—sometimes switching to a co-player—who is actively participating in the social pretend play. However, it is important to note that results concerning children's overall competence in social pretend play were mixed. With regard to the reported competence, it increased significantly more in the play tutoring group than in the control group, but not in comparison to the material provision group. So, that children's higher level in pretend play becomes more distinct across situations it might be necessary to include play tutoring on a regular basis in ECEC daily routine. Additionally, the missing effect of the play tutoring in comparison to the material group could be attributed to the fact that even in the material group, a certain level of active play support was provided. Thus, already the achieved level of active support by the educators might be enough to benefit children's level of social pretend play. There might be a saturation point in the support given—whereby increased support does not necessarily translate into higher quality play. This suggests that one must find the balance between free play and support. The two are not mutually exclusive, as the findings of Wustmann Seiler et al. (2022) demonstrate as well: Teachers who provided more time for free play also reported playing the role of tutor more frequently and therefore providing more frequent support for children's play activities. Conversely, teachers who provided less time for free play were more likely to act as classroom managers, focusing more on addressing children's social-emotional and behavioural issues (Wustmann Seiler et al., 2022). In educational settings which are balancing free play and support activities rather than engaging in educator-centered activities the child might more often take an active role. We suggest, that play with active and supportive involvement of the adult is a child-centered activity. In a child-centered activity both the child and the adult are high in his or her initiative (Perren et al., 2021a). Creating pretend play situations of higher quality or complexity is more challenging for children's social behaviour. This increases the developmental potential of these situations (Bodrova & Leong, 2007) and thus is a chance to promote children's development in early educational settings through a highly child-centered activity.

Finally, social pretend play offers children a valuable opportunity to develop their social skills and strengthen their peer relationships, particularly when adults are actively involved. This is especially beneficial for children with limited language comprehension, as they may find it more challenging to engage with peers in structured or verbal activities. The symbolic nature of pretend play allows them to express themselves and interact with others in a more accessible way. Thus, adult's active involvement in social pretend play is well-suited to support children's development of social skills and the quality of peer relationships in an age-appropriate way. In sum, our research suggests that social pretend play should have a prominent role in each ECEC curriculum.

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Chapter 6

Guided Play, Child Agency and Learning: Educator Strategies in Adult-Child Play



Asta Cekaite and Maria Simonsson

Introduction

Play is a social activity that takes many shapes and forms. It is researched from various perspectives that highlight its multiple functions and potentials. Play is strongly associated with children's activities and childhood, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 31) states that play should have a central place in the life and education of children, as it is important for their development, learning and well-being. It also has a prominent position in early childhood education in Sweden, where the intrinsic value of play (including free play) is emphasized and acknowledged (Curriculum for the Preschool, Skolverket, 2019).

In this chapter, we explore the conditions and characteristics of *guided play* in an early childhood education and care context in regular preschools in Sweden. Guided play can be conceptualized as an activity where the educator is present to support children's play by directing them in ways that can be conducive to learning—learning of social and cultural skills, language, concepts, among others (Schwartz & Minkov, 2022; Cekaite & Simonsson, 2023). Thus far less is known about how guided play can be conducted in ways that achieve young children's exploratory participation and take care of their interests, while sustaining the entertaining 'flow' characteristics of play. In this chapter, we are interested in examining and presenting findings about concrete—successful and unsuccessful—methods educators have used to guide young children's play.

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N. Pramling et al. (eds.), *Adults in Play with Children*, International
Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 44,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-99629-0_6

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Attention to guided play is motivated by the multifaceted functions of play. Developmental evolutionary perspectives argue that play is a universal social activity that is crucial for humans and for some non-humans (Pellegrini, 2011). The learning and developmental interpretations and potentials of play have received theoretical and empirical attention in studies on young children. Sociocultural theory, particularly, has emphasized the importance of sociodramatic play for discovering and interpreting the social world (Vygotsky, 1978). An important aspect of play involves intrinsic motivation, the experience of ‘flow’ and what can be viewed as situated full engagement (Sawyer, 1997; Pellegrini, 2011).

Notably, studies on children’s peer interactions reveal the intricate social fabric of play—its highly social character, fragility, and its situatedness in the social order of the peer group (Goodwin, 1990). For instance, gaining access to play is something that is not to be taken for granted; it requires children’s social and linguistic competencies and elaborate “access rituals” (Corsaro, 2015; Björk-Willén, 2016; Burdelski & Cekaite, 2022). Play is also associated with negotiations, as participants may have different wishes and ideas concerning its trajectory. Participation in sociodramatic play in particular is dependent on multimodal semiotic configurations, where language use together with embodied actions and the material context constitute important resources for engaging, negotiating, and coordinating joint play activities (Björk-Willén, 2016; Karlsson & Nasi, 2023). However, while the importance of play is acknowledged in early childhood educational contexts, there are a number of aspects that make its social, learning and developmental potentials not easily attainable in some situational configurations involving children’s peer groups.

In this chapter, we explore and discuss ways in which educators can participate in children’s play and guide it so that it develops as an activity that is conducive to children’s learning. The data consist of video recordings of teacher-guided play activities that were developed to create rich linguistic and cultural environments for 2–5-year-old children in preschools in Sweden. Guided play activities were designed in close collaboration between teachers and researchers during action-based interventions aimed at constructing child-oriented participatory language learning practices in ethnically and linguistically diverse ECEC settings.

Specifically, we explore teacher questions—the frequent and prevalent interactional resource used by teachers in situations of guided play—and present concrete examples of (successful and unsuccessful) interactional strategies. In our analysis, we take into account how children’s actions and perspectives can be implemented in early childhood pedagogy (Bateman & Cekaite, 2023; Church & Bateman, 2019). Theoretically, the present chapter is informed by the sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), and the ecological perspective on language learning (van Lier, 2004; Schwartz & Minkov, 2022). These perspectives highlight the importance of “scaffolding” actions in young children’s interactions with adults as more competent members of the community of practice. They also put emphasis on learners’ engagement, autonomy, and motivation as essential in the learning processes.

Previous Research on Children's Play

Studies that have examined the social and interactional organization of children's play are important in contributing to our understanding of its intricate social fabric. Corsaro (1979) was one of the first to identify so-called "access rituals", i.e., children's strategies to approach and enter their peers' ongoing play. Drawing on ethnographic observations and analysis of children's social interactions, several studies show that in contrast to the common understanding that explicit requests to enter play (e.g., "Can I play with you?") are successful, children's strategies that involve observation ('circling around'), offering play-relevant artefacts and designing access moves that incorporate play-relevant acts are successful strategies for gaining access to play (see also Karlsson & Nasi, 2023). As demonstrated in a seminal study on children's peer interactions by M.H. Goodwin (1990), play activities are not neutral, but are inextricably related to the negotiation of social order. Bateman's (2012) study of preschool playgrounds shows how young children's negotiations of play space lead to extended language use, argumentative sequences, and rearrangement of social relations.

Other kinds of negotiations in coordinating spontaneously evolving play trajectories (especially in role/sociodramatic play) are realized through "in-" and "out-of-frame" talk (Cekaite et al., 2014). Out-of-frame talk is talk through which participants describe, present and inquire about play actions, whereas in-frame talk is talk about the play characters (mom, Superman, baby) the participants take on. Both in- and out-of-frame talk can contribute to children's learning. Preschool activities can also be exploited in playful ways. For instance, teacher talk seeps into play and child-appropriate (Corsaro, 2015) educational language use through interpretative reproduction, including learning content and teaching roles (Cekaite & Evaldsson, 2019). The use of artifacts, including literacy-related artifacts such as the alphabet, can be conducive to children's play and literacy by providing a material context for simple metalinguistic discussions and exploration of characteristic features of heritage language varieties in multilingual peer groups (Björk-Willén, 2016). While children's bilingual competences can be exhibited in their play repertoires and negotiations of play scenarios (Kyratzis, 2014), children who are language novices (e.g., novices in the societal language) may experience difficulties in gaining access or participating in peer play, partly because of their as yet limited language knowledge. As demonstrated by Blum-Kulka and Gorbatt (2014), teachers' interactions with beginner learners and young children serve as necessary devices for engaging and including young children in social activities.

In all, previous research on children's peer interactions, and specifically peer play, demonstrates that play is prevalent, but also a complex and demanding social activity. The potentials of play for learning can be exploited through adult participation in play.

Adult-Child Play in Educational Settings

Play and playworlds have been shown to provide rich opportunities for teachers to engage children in practicing language, as well as discovering and learning child-relevant social and cultural themes and actions. Recent research on learning and play has called attention to explicit pedagogical ways in which children's play can be adapted to include educators as active participants in play within the semiotically rich environments of the educational institution. An activity of guided play has been developed to describe activities aimed at teaching educational content by incorporating elements of free play and collaborative discovery, while sustaining children's emotional involvement (Weisberg et al., 2016; Samuelsson, 2020; Cekaite & Simonsson, 2023). According to Weisberg et al. (2016), guided play can serve as an educational activity that is characterized by children "owning" play, exercising their autonomy, while adults are there to provide guidance and support. Adult participation requires awareness concerning how to sustain interaction that has its 'flow' and children's play initiatives are respected. As suggested by Weisberg et al. (2016), guided play can take two forms: (1) adults can take an active role in play; they create an environment to implement various learning goals and participate in play in ways that ensure children's agency and autonomy in shaping the activity; (2) adults do not act as play participants, rather, they observe children's play, comment and ask questions. In these ways, the adult can arouse children's interest, and guide interaction (explicitly or implicitly) to incorporate learning content. In young children's (toddlers') interactions, attentive teachers can support and guide their participation, offering support by using social strategies to include silent, peripheral children into play (Pursi, 2019).

Importantly, guided play can serve as a social and material site, where children from various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds "can be simultaneously scaffolded in both language and cultural learning" through playful engagement in a designed sociocultural setting where artefacts, cultural actions, language and concepts are interwoven (Cekaite & Simonsson, 2023). Play with children with as yet limited language knowledge places specific demands on educators. In their supportive interactions with children, educators can create a rich linguistic environment by commenting on and labelling their own and children's actions. Some of the ways in which educator-child activities can combine play and language learning are described by Schwartz and Minkov (2022), who have studied teacher-led play during heritage language (HL) teaching in Israel in bilingual (Hebrew and Russian) preschools. They show how teacher-led pretend play successfully drew on a fantasy script, entertaining material props, and discursive strategies that invited children's initiatives and teacher-child collaborative actions. By relying on these resources and the script routine, teachers were able to sustain children's interest in the activity, use and solicit "appropriate and diversified vocabulary", and model the target language. However, sustaining children's autonomy and enjoyment in play, while enriching it with educational content, is not an easy task for educators, and a question arises as to whether explicit teaching strategies constrains the improvisational and emergent character of play (see for instance Cekaite & Simonsson, 2023).

Taking a related perspective, one of “play responsive education” (Lagerlöf et al., 2023), adults’ participation in play can contribute to children’s socialization into democratic citizens. It is argued that adults listening to and responding to children’s actions in play can facilitate children’s perspectives and their agency, with important implications for their ability throughout life to participate in and contribute to culturally and societally important practices (Lagerlöf et al., 2023; see also Kultti, 2023).

In all, previous research suggests that educators need to be sensitive to how their actions relate to children’s spontaneous play and encourage children’s voluntary and joyful exploration and playful participation. Some strategies that educators in early childhood education use to guide children’s attention, excitement and agentic participation in educational activities involve educators using positive emotional cues to build up exciting, suspenseful scenarios in relation to educational content in, for instance, book reading activities (Strid, 2024). They arouse children’s curiosity and support voluntary participation and playful discoveries. Yet other resources involve educators’ sensitive uptake and responses to children’s discursive initiatives, even if they have a rudimentary linguistic shape. For instance, in a bilingual preschool, educators listened and responded to children’s initiatives, connecting them to the linguistic and material environment, and transforming children’s talk and their interaction into everyday learning situations (Anatoli Smith & Cekaite, 2023). By taking into account previous research on educators’ interactional strategies, we suggest that guided play where adults are active participants can provide an important social resource that can contribute to (monolingual as well as multilingual) children’s learning of social, communicative and cultural skills (e.g., Blum-Kulka & Gorbatt, 2014).

Method

Setting and Participants

Several preschools in Sweden and their teachers took part in a participatory action research project (Close collaboration with preschool teachers and their work within the ULF (Utbildning, Lärande, Forskning/Education, Learning, Research) project, as well as the financial support from Swedish National Agency for ULF are gratefully acknowledged) together with researchers. Preschools in Sweden are state financed and their work is regulated by the national curriculum, which foregrounds a holistic view of children’s learning and development. Play activities are considered important both socially and as a context for development and learning (Curriculum for the Preschool, Skolverket, 2019). The preschools in the study were located in areas of low socioeconomic status, characterized by high levels of unemployment and a dense immigrant population. The majority of children (aged 1–5) were learners of Swedish as a second language. Their first languages included Tigrinya, Arabic dialects, Somalian, Kurdish dialects, Romani, Serbian, Russian, Spanish, French, English, and others. Only a small number of children had Swedish

as their native language. The aim of the action research collaboration was to identify and design teacher-guided activities that could enrich children's linguistic environment and enhance their agentic participation and engagement with language and other cultural resources. The aims were to create play activities that were conducive to language use both with the teacher and between the children, and to boost children's active participation in play (The study was conducted after ethical vetting by a regional ethical review committee. Staff and parents were given written and oral information, and those who wished to participate in the project signed a consent form (for parents, this consent also included their children)).

The analysis of guided play activities is informed by Conversation Analysis, an analytical perspective that pays attention to participants' verbal and embodied meaning making and social actions manifested on a turn-by-turn basis. The analytical categories evolved inductively during collaborative work within the action research group. Teachers' and children's actions were analyzed in relation to their functions, i.e. asking, exploring, testing knowledge, initiating, rejecting, or aligning with the question and the play script; extending and elaborating the initiatives of others; engaging in individual or joint play.

Educators' Ways of Guiding Play Through Verbal and Social Strategies

By examining educators' and young children's play—how language, artifacts and gestures were used to guide, respond, anticipate and direct children's play—we highlight both conducive methods and pitfalls that arose when educators participated in and guided children's play. We pay particular attention to educators' questions that were recurrent during teacher-guided play situations. In addition to outlining how educators' guiding actions steer children's language use, we are interested in how educators' moves project further play, or, on the contrary, lead to play being abandoned.

Staging Play: Initiating Play as a Joint Activity

Since play is a complex social activity to start as a joint course of action (educators mentioned that the children "have not yet found their play"), educators used linguistic, embodied, and material resources to get children's play activity off the ground. They created a rich linguistic and visually available material environment that could guide the child's understanding of the educator's play actions. In Extract 1, the educator is seated in the 'kitchen play' corner. She calls James because he is not engaged in any other (play) activity and tries to include the child in play (see Burdelski & Cekaite, 2022). She looks inside the box of toys that can be useful in kitchen play, picks some and labels them verbally "we have a saucepan here", introducing a play scenario.

Extract 1

1	Educator:	We have a saucepan here. What else do we have here? ((picks out a saucepan, points at the box of toy “food”))
2	James:	((picks up a piece of meat, turns it in her hand a little, puts it briefly in the frying pan, then on the table, picks it up again))
3	Educator:	Meat, yes, you have to season it, then you have to have a saucepan. A frying pan or a pot so you can fry the meat. ((takes a frying pan out of a box))
4	James:	((takes the frying pan from the educator, lifts it up and down, puts it on the table, finds a lid and puts it on))
5	Educator:	Can you put the frying pan on the stove?

The educator’s way of guiding the child into play involves a multimodal contextual configuration (Goodwin, 2018), that is, language that verbally labels the material artefact (“we have a saucepan here”, line 1), and a question (“what else do we have here?”) that together with her gesture—pointing at the box of toys—invites the child’s play initiative and creates a rich linguistic environment. The educator guides the child’s attention toward the material artefacts that are relevant to continue and extend play within the “cooking” script (line 1). James responds by following the play script that is suggested by the educator’s question—he finds a piece of meat in the box of toys and “cooks” it (line 2). The educator attentively observes the child’s play actions and joins in verbally. She labels the item as “meat” (line 3) and gives an elaborate description of actions relevant to cooking, providing the child with both rich and nuanced lexical, and cultural knowledge. For instance, the educator describes how meat needs to be seasoned and cooked; it is fried in a frying pan or cooked in pot. When James continues to play silently with kitchen toys, using a frying pan (line 4), the educator guides James’s play by labeling and invoking another activity-relevant action by using a question—i.e., she asks the child to put the frying pan on the stove (line 5).

In Extract 1, we see several successful ways of guiding play. Notably, the educator introduces lexically rich information by using discursive moves that overlap with her play acts, and is able to engage the young child in play. Initially, the educator makes a proposal about an exciting play scenario, making it interesting and inviting the child to join in. Although the child participates nonverbally, he shows his understanding of the educator’s talk, which is made rich by lexically labelling toys, and describing a range of cultural actions. The activity can potentially stimulate the child’s ideas about play, what can be relevant and exciting, and how to develop this play scenario.

The Affordances of Questions in Guiding Play Interactions

Next, we will discuss the educators’ questions and their purposes: questions used to get orientation, include, teach, propose, or assess the children’s actions and knowledge.

Guiding Play Through Questions that Request Children's Opinions

The educators participated in and guided children's play by designing questions that requested children's opinions and suggestions, and that conformed to, revised or developed their responses, and explicitly or implicitly suggested a new step in their joint play. Play guidance was thus accomplished in an entertaining, and democratic way—on an equal footing with the children—which contributed to the 'flow' of the activity. The educators coordinated the children's attention and engaged in joint play actions by directing them toward something they could explore together.

In this situation (Extract 2), the educator engages in two younger boys' play in a sandbox and guides their play by using questions, informings (tellings that introduced new information, Anatoli Smith & Cekaite, 2023), and material resources (toys). Samir (2.5 years old, Bosnian home language, a beginner speaker of Swedish) and Mikael (3 years old, Swedish speaker) are sitting in the sandbox, playing with a big car each. The educator has been observing their individual play from some distance when she approaches them and uses toy cars as possibilities for joint play and interaction that gradually unites both boys and the educator.

Extract 2

1	Educator:	Now we'll see, we turn it upside down. Does it look OK under the car? What do you think Samir? Does it look OK below? ((turns the car upside down and shows Samir))
2	Samir:	No. ((looks at the car))
3	Educator:	Look, what does Mikael think? Does it look OK? ((shows the underside of the car))
4	Mikael:	No.
5	Educator:	No. It actually looks a little bit sick. What do you think we should do?
6	Samir:	Ride the stables.
7	Educator:	Go to the stables? Yes, but we'll paint a little first. ((takes a wet leaf and 'paints' under the car)) Look, well, now the wheels work, I think. Check.
8	Mikael:	No, it doesn't work ((work)). ((tries to spin his car's wheels))
9	Educator:	Nah. But a little bit, anyway, I think.
10	Samir:	But but... can it... broken? ((points at another car))
11	Educator:	This one? Is it broken too? How did that happen? Did it get better? Have you fixed it?
12	Samir:	Yes.
13	Educator:	Is it fixed? That's lucky.
14	Samir:	Now it fixed.
15	Educator:	Is it fixed?
16	Samir:	Not mine.

Initially, the educator's talk aims to get the children's attention and to introduce play-relevant actions ("now we'll see, we turn it upside down", line 1). She also asks (with open-ended, and closed Yes/No question formats) for the children's perspective on how to develop play "does it look OK under the car? What do you think Samir? Does it look OK below?" (line 1). The educator's talk (i) directs the children's attention to the underside of the car and a specific play content—building cars and (ii) follows up on both boys' responses ("Look, what does Mikael think? Does it look OK?", line 3). Importantly, the educator uses multiple strategies that build on each other; she guides the boys' play by (i) confirming the children's views, (ii) by requesting and implicitly suggesting the next step in their joint play and (iii) by using an inclusive plural pronoun "we": "It (the car) actually looks a little bit sick. What do you think we should do?", line 5). Notably, these questions do not examine the children's knowledge but make it possible for them to present their opinion about the development of play, and positions the educator on an equal footing as a participant in the play. In this way, the educator establishes a consensus regarding an emergent play content, and the conversation expands toward a common problem solution, rather than an explicit exchange of lexical terminology. Questions are directed to both children, who in this way are engaged in the same course of action—examining and repairing cars.

The problem-solving process is guided by the preschool teacher, and the toy cars constitute both semiotic (Selander & Kress, 2010) and communicative resources (Csibra & Gergely, 2009). The educator guides play using everyday language: the car "looks a bit sick", which is then expanded using subject-relevant 'decontextualized' language: the car is "broken". By talking about the cars' condition, the children and the teacher orient themselves toward the same goal and sustain a common play framework within which they all contribute specialist vocabulary (concepts) in Swedish, such as wheel, break and repair (lines 10, 11). The educator's embodied actions and vocabulary choices establish a rich supportive semiotic context for expanding the children's language and their conceptual understanding that cars may need to be repaired. Notably, Samir, who is a beginner speaker of Swedish, takes an active role in the play. He responds to the educator's questions, follows her guidance (e.g., her question-based suggestions) and takes an active part in play negotiations, where his talk (his car is not repaired yet) furthers the joint development of their play (lines 8–14).

Extract 2 illustrates several successful ways in which the educator guided young children's play. Notably, the educator's discursive moves build on each other: questions are directed at both children; they are formulated to present a possible course of play, inquire about the children's perspective, and confirm it, or revise it slightly. The educator performs play actions herself and verbally requests the children's attention and assessment—i.e., requesting and generating their active involvement in play ("Look, well, now the wheels work, I think. Check", line 7). The play situation is also characterized by the use of rich language that overlays play actions, thereby presenting an emergent and informative context for language learning.

Questions for Orientation

When educators approached children’s ongoing play, they needed to get an overview of what the play was about. By using open-ended questions such as “what are you doing...” that required the child to describe their actions, the educators allowed the children’s initiatives to emerge, and they were able to collect information that was relevant to access and join the ongoing play with relevant play moves. The educators also used a Yes/No question format that allowed them to narrow down the response options and adapt to the children’s language skills (see also Burdelski & Cekaite, 2022 or Cekaite, 2020). In this way, the educators were able to adapt to the ongoing play, while allowing the children to steer the development of play themselves. This strategy to gain access to ongoing play resembles what Corsaro (1979) has described as children ‘circling around’ and collecting relevant knowledge about their peer play to be able to make a proposition and access ongoing play.

The educator’s use of initial open-ended orientation questions is demonstrated in Extract 3. The educator is sitting in the ‘kitchen play’ corner where Celeste (3 years old) is playing alone.

Extract 3

1	Educator:	What are you doing now Celeste? ((observes Celeste))
2	Celeste:	Mmmm ((mimics microwave, opens and closes it))
3	Educator:	Are you cooking in the microwave oven? The oven.
4	Celeste:	((finds an orange cap, gives it to Educ., observes Educ. actions))
5	Educator:	What is it? Something good? Something to eat? Ssuup. ((looks into the cap, pretends to eat from it))
6	Celeste:	Ssuup. Neh. ((looks into the cap, pretends to eat))
7	Educator:	What is it then? What have you baked? ((looks into the cap, establishes mutual gaze with Celeste, smiles))
8	Celeste:	Ssuup. ((pretends to taste))

The educator asks Celeste an open-ended question about what she is doing (line 1). It is also a way to get an indication of whether Celeste wants to cooperate. When Celeste does not answer but continues the ‘cooking’ play as she makes noises reminiscent of a microwave (line 2), the educator continues her attempts to join the play by posing additional questions (“Are you cooking in the microwave oven? The oven”). The educator’s questions change from open-ended to a so-called closed, Yes/No question format that allows her to narrow down the response options and adapt to the child, who may as yet have limited language skills. This steering discursive format is successful—Celeste responds in an embodied way by handing over a cap (line 4). The educator then asks another clarifying question that can help understand the child’s ongoing nonverbal play—she wonders whether the contents of the cap are edible: “What is it? Something good? Something to eat? Ssuup.” (line 5). The educator’s questions provide possibilities for the child to respond and describe or show what she is doing. In this way the educator can learn about the child’s perspective on her ongoing play. The questions “Something good?”, “Something to

eat?” not only probe the child’s perspective, but also (potentially) guide the play trajectory—they introduce the act of eating, which is mentioned verbally and demonstrated bodily (“ssuuup”, line 6). In addition, the question format both guides the child, and provides possibilities to respond.

The child is clearly observant of the educator’s actions and questions, responding to them as relevant to her play: she recycles—repeats the educator’s actions, communicating in an embodied way—pretends to eat, looks into the cap, i.e., she appropriates and follows the adult’s adjusted play action trajectory. In this way, the adult guides the child’s play as a culturally significant activity. In line 7, we see a similar discursive organization of play: the educator’s questions “What is it then? What have you baked?” are coordinated with her play—looking into the cap, plus close interaction with Celeste through mutual gaze and smiling. Although the child does not respond verbally, there is a close coordination of their play actions as the girl pretends to taste (“ssuup”, line 8).

As demonstrated in Extract 3, the educator’s questions—in open-ended and closed formats—together with embodied actions contributed to the continuation of the adult-child play for a while. The educator aligned with the child’s play acts, addressing the child’s initiatives. Her actions provided new material, including linguistic forms, for the development of “cooking” play and reacted to the child’s initiatives dialogically, creating a situation conducive to language learning. The child had opportunities to withdraw from the situation and start a different play activity or use different play artefacts. Despite her verbal objections, she continued the cooking play, adjusting to the educator’s actions and suggesting her own trajectory.

Inclusive Questions

The educators used what is referred to here as ‘inclusive’ questions to initiate and develop joint play, both as a child-adult, and as children’s peer activity. Some of the question formats that the educators used involved inquiries such as “are you going to play with Armand?”. Formulated as a Yes/No closed question rather than a directive, they displayed the educators’ sensitivity to the children’s perspectives by presenting possibilities to express their stance. This is demonstrated in Extract 4, where Henry (3 years old) stands by himself in a room, looks around but does not engage in any activity and does not approach other children. When the educator sees this, she asks the child several inclusive questions.

Extract 4

1	Educator:	What are you doing then Henry? ((Armand follows the interaction between Henry and the educator))
2	Henry:	Mm
3	Educator:	What? Have you found someone to play with? (pause) Are you going to play with Armand? Are you coming? Armand he is here.....He is sitting there. ((when educator mentions Armand’s name, he smiles. Educator and Henry go to the table where Armand is playing))

The educator's first question to Henry is guiding and open-ended; she inquires what the child is doing, orienting to the importance of the child's perspective (line 1). Henry's response is difficult to interpret, and the educator inquires again, this time more specifically addressing the relevance of joining a play activity ("have you found somebody to play with?", line 3). She guides the child to play with a child who is already engaged in play ("are you going to play with Armand?"). Formulated as Yes/No questions, the educator provides the child with possibilities to accept or reject her proposal. The educator's inclusive guidance is formulated as a series of clear Yes/No questions that inquire about Henry's willingness and the child's perspective and accommodates his language skills. The educator also uses movements to guide the child toward a peer who is willing to play (line 3), where the two children and the educator continue playing together.

What is notable in the analysis of the educator's inclusive questions, is that it is not simply peers who can be rejected in terms of access to play—the children are agentively able to reject the educator's inclusive efforts (see Extract 5 below). Here, Mason and Tomas (both 3 years old) are playing separately in a kitchen play corner, where the educator is also present, making herself available for children's play.

Extract 5

1	Educator:	Are you going to cook something for Mason then? (pause) Treat him to some food?
2	Tomas:	No!
3	Educator:	No, can't Mason have a taste?
4	Tomas:	No, because I'm making many pancakes.
5	Educator:	Yes, but in that case, there's enough for everyone? If you make many? Can everyone have a taste, maybe Mason can have a taste?
6	Tomas:	((plays by the stove, does not respond))

Here, the educator tries to guide the two children's individual play trajectories by encouraging interaction between them. She issues an inclusive question "Are you going to cook something for Mason then? (pause) Treat him to some food?" (line 1). The educator inquires of Tomas about his plans, implicitly suggesting a particular play trajectory together with a peer. Simultaneously she provides the recipient child with possibilities to produce a negative response. This possibility is exploited by the child as he rejects the educator's proposal (line 2). The educator continues her attempts to include Mason in joint play and to transform Tomas' play from individual to dialogic (lines 2–5). She makes several linguistically elaborate, informative argumentative questions ("Yes, but in that case, there's enough for everyone? If you make many? Can everyone have a taste, maybe Mason can have a taste?"), which spell out multiple arguments in favor of including Mason into Tomas' play. Since questions, rather than directives that tell children to do something, provide the

child recipient with possibilities to reject the proposition, child agentic participation takes place here as the educator's inclusive attempts are rejected several times, and Tomas' individual play is sustained.

Teaching and 'Examining' in Play: The Caveats of "Knowledge Display" Questions

One of the ways in which the educators attempted to guide the children's play that could be productive in expanding and enriching the situated learning context was to use questions that were "school like" and carried an interactional design of "knowledge display" discourse, structured as classroom "Initiation—Response—Feedback" sequences (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). By using knowledge display questions, e.g., "what is this?", the educators tried to create learning opportunities, for instance, learning of new concepts. Questions of this kind created extended knowledge examination in focused exchanges, and thus contributed to highlighting specific lexical concepts. However, they could also disrupt the play trajectory. In Extract 6, the educator sitting in the kitchen play corner interacts with a child who is playing with toy food items.

Extract 6

1	Educator:	What is this (thing)?
2	Adele:	Fish.
3	Educator:	Fish yes. Are you going to eat fish?

The educator wonders "what is this (thing)?" (line 1) that Adele has in her hand. The educator's question here examines the child's knowledge of the concept. She responds correctly—"fish" (line 2) and the educator confirms his response "fish, yes" (line 3). By asking and receiving a correct response about a verbal label, the educator is reassured that the child knows the lexical concept. The educator then asks a follow-up question "are you going to eat fish?". This question implicitly suggests a specific play trajectory that the child and the educator can interact about and develop joint play around. In this way, the play situation can constitute a language development conducive site that integrates both knowledge of lexical concepts and dynamic, improvisational, play trajectories.

The educators' attempts to guide the children's play and learning by using knowledge display questions (in an I-R-F sequence) is a sensitive issue that can lead to an interactional breakdown of play in that knowledge exchange takes priority for the educator. This is the case in Extract 7, where the educator's questions develop into an extended teaching sequence that results in Dylan (3 years old) abandoning interaction with the educator. During this episode, they are sitting in the kitchen play corner.

Extract 7

1	Educator:	What is this (thing)?
2	Dylan:	Apple.
3	Educator:	Is it? (pause) I think it is something else. It looks like an apple but what else could it be, something other than an apple?
4	Educator:	A to:-
5	Dylan:	Toto
6	Educator:	Toto
7	Dylan:	(...)
8	Educator:	A to-
9	Dylan:	A tomato.
10	Educator:	Strange that it looks like a tomato. It might not be a tomato. This one is green instead, there are small leaves. It's not easy to see.
11	Dylan:	It is apple!
12	Educator:	It is an apple. Mm. (pause).
13	Dylan:	Now I will cook.

When Dylan discovers a toy tomato among the food items, the educator issues a knowledge display question “What is this (thing)?” (line 1). Dylan responds “apple” (line 2) probably because the toy tomato looks somewhat like an apple. The educator is not satisfied with the child’s response; in a school-like manner she rephrases her initial question, implicitly criticizing his response “Is it? (pause) I think it is something else. It looks like an apple but what else could be, something other than an apple?” (line 3). She does not openly criticize the child’s response, but phrases it as her opinion, and then provides an extended account that both acknowledges the child’s response and poses a new question. Here, we can see that the educator is primarily focused on the correct lexical labelling of the toy, rather than on play actions.

The educator’s questions interrupt the ongoing play with the tomato and try to focus the child’s attention on the correct lexical label by giving various clues (lines 3–10). The educator tries to elicit the correct label “a to-” by using a designedly incomplete utterance, which is associated with teaching exchanges, including multilingual environments (Abreu Fernandes & Melander Bowden, 2022).

The educator’s incomplete utterance ‘to-’ is eventually recognized by the child as a knowledge display request (I-R-F sequence), and the child responds, now correctly, “a tomato” (line 9). Notably, the educator continues her explanatory talk about the toy, explaining the features of the artefact as an apple or a tomato (line 10). The play activity is halted and is transformed into an examination and learning focused exchange. This informative learning sequence does not further their joint play. The child withdraws from the conversation with the educator, as she explicitly changes the focus from a discussion about the toy; the child simply states “Now I will cook” (line 13).

Exploratory Questions

Some of the guiding actions that educators used with the aim of integrating play and learning were shaped as exploratory questions. They probed children's experiences and knowledge (see also "knowledge display" questions, Extracts 6, 7). Generally, this type of question was informed by didactic ideals of exploring and learning about the world together with the child. However, when the educators used such questions in play, their talk and conversational exploration could become extraneous to the play, which was an embodied and material activity. This case is demonstrated in Extract 8. Here, an educator is sitting close to several children who are playing individually in a "construction" corner (Malin, Swedish home language, Amira, Arabic home language, Zulu, Tigrinya as home language). Guided play starts off with the educator's inclusive question that presents play as a joint action (see the use of collective, inclusive "we", line 1) and adopts the children's perspectives by incorporating actions together with lexical labels that are relevant to the children's ongoing play with toy trains.

Extract 8

1	Educator:	Where should we go by train?
2	Amira:	Gamleby.
3	Malin:	Yes! Gamleby.
4	Amira:	There is many in Gamleby.
5	Educator:	There is a lot to see in Gamleby. Have you been to Gamleby?
6	Malin:	Yes, a lot!
7	Educator:	Several times. Zulu have you been to Gamleby?
8	Zulu:	((nods, then looks at other children))

When two children (Malin and Amira) answer the educator with "Gamleby" (lines 2, 3) they at least verbally engage in a joint playful course of action by responding to the educator's "out-of-frame" talk aimed at planning joint play. Amira continues along the play plot, contributing a thematically relevant, but grammatically incorrect response "There is many in Gamleby" (line 4). The educator uses the opportunity to correct Amira's talk "There is a lot to see in Gamleby". She provides correct language "input" and asks a follow up, exploratory, question "have you been to Gamleby?" (line 5).

Despite the initial attempt to include herself and other co-present children in joint play, the educator asks questions that are exploratory and knowledge-oriented rather than progressing play-relevant actions. These questions and the dyadic exchange between the educator and specific children constitute an extraneous conversational activity. Other co-present children ignore the educator's questions and continue their individual play trajectories. Even the teacher's attempt to involve Zulu in the ongoing conversation by directing the same information request question "have you been to Gamleby" (line 7) does not lead to joint play. The child responds with gestures and continues to observe what the other children are doing (line 8).

As demonstrated, the educator's exploratory questions for guiding the children's knowledge and play orient toward gaining insights into children's perspectives. They are, however, characterized by the caveat that this kind of discourse can transform into a conversational activity that is extraneous to the flow of play.

Concluding Discussion

In this chapter, we explored situations of adult-guided play in their interactions with young children, with a focus on those who have as yet limited language skills (e.g., beginner learners of Swedish, young children). In the action-based collaboration between preschool teachers and researchers, we have examined various ways in which the teachers guided children's play so as to create conditions conducive to children's social, linguistic, and cultural learning. As demonstrated, the teachers asked many different questions during guided play situations. While some question formats were successful in initiating, sustaining and guiding children's play, other question formats contributed to a shift in play focus or brought play to a close.

Educators' guiding actions in various situations were important in order to assist the young children in creating play situations that extended beyond embodied actions. While young children's play activities might rely largely on embodied actions (that became meaningful in the local spatial-material context) and engaged in individual play, adults' guidance provided possibilities for joint and coordinated play with educators, or with peers, to evolve. Such play was reliant on coordination of a shared course of action in developing a play scenario, a certain degree of improvisation, and adults' sensitivity to the children's perspectives and agency.

Educators exploited and reshaped the spatio-material conditions of the play environments and used activity-relevant play artifacts that invited and supported the children's interactions. Play actions combined material and verbal features that contextualized action trajectories and constituted a richer linguistic and social environment. Their talk aimed to promote social interaction and targeted the children's vocabulary, and their productive and receptive lexical skills. Educators used multiple question formats (together with embodied actions and artefacts) for various social purposes when guiding play. Notably, the educators' talk and various question formats could influence and shape the play activity in various ways. Some discursive strategies were more prone to lead to the abandonment of play rather than its progression.

Some of guiding questions were used to initiate play by setting a stage/introducing a play scenario (Extract 1) and inviting the children to join in (Extract 2; inclusive questions). Guidance was accomplished by using verbal definitions together with embodied demonstrations, questions that suggested and invited the child to join a specific play trajectory, with close monitoring of the children's actions and perspectives.

Various formats of educator questions enabled and invited children's different actions and participation. Knowledge examination or knowledge display questions were educationally motivated to discover what children did not know. The educators checked and trained the children's knowledge (Extracts 6, 7). However, when used

in play interactions with children, these types of questions contributed to glitches in the flow of the activity and occasioned the disruption of play. Similarly, questions that aimed at creating joint knowledge-exploratory situations with adults (Extract 8) could constitute an extended conversational exchange that was extraneous to the play activity and could result in children withdrawing from play with the educator.

Successful discursive ways of guiding children's play involved the use of question formats and follow-up actions that did not necessarily examine children's knowledge but focused on learning about the children's plans for the play activity instead. The educators used questions that requested children's opinions about their play and provided an overview of what the play was about. Such open-ended questions allowed the educators to collect information that was relevant for joining the children's play as competent participants (Extracts 2, 3). Open-ended questions were re-designed into Yes/No closed questions, when children needed support in formulating their responses (e.g., when their language knowledge was limited). Based on the children's responses, the adults constructed guiding acts that could incorporate lexical concepts in ways that were integral to the ongoing activity. Children's agency was also taken into account because they were provided with possibilities to evaluate and assess the adult's actions (Extract 2). In this way, the adults took the children's perspectives into account and were able to create enticing joint play situations that sustained the flow and constituted activities conducive to language learning. The educators guided and coordinated play by using and inviting so-called "out-of-frame" talk, which is linked to "context-independent" language use. Guided play thereby served as an "opportunity space" (Cekaite et al., 2014) for children's social and language learning.

In all, the present study highlights the importance of attending to the detailed ways in which the participants' talk and embodied actions, situated within the material context of the educational institution, provided for or constrained ways to contribute to children's social, linguistic, and cultural learning. The study points out the potential pitfalls in creating egalitarian dialogue and highlights the ways in which educators can adopt a democratic guiding role in adult-child play in preschool.

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Chapter 7

Anatomy of Adult-Child Collaborative Play: A Case of Narrative Playworld



Milda Bredikyte 

Introduction: Theoretical Framework

This chapter explores the collaborative play of adults and children in-depth and as an ongoing process of the child's play experience, which does not end with one or two play events.

In the cultural-historical school of thought, the period before school aims for children to achieve play autonomy (*игровая самостоятельность*). The expectation is that children will become masters of their play activities, capable of creating engaging, ongoing games, sharing roles and responsibilities, following play rules, and constructively resolving conflicts. Play starts with exploration and experimentation and moves towards conceptual learning through advanced play activities. The ongoing flow of play in the classroom allows not to divide a child's life into separate parts but to organically integrate all orientations into a coherent and continuous fabric of their life. Children's play culture helps preserve the logic of their world and aligns with the nature of child development and learning (Bredikyte & Hakkarainen, 2023).

As Vygotsky (2016) once pointed out, play is the context and the vehicle for a child's personality development and learning at this age. Children's play autonomy leads to a sustainable 'children's world' (Davydov, 1988) or 'children's culture' (Mouritsen, 2003) in the classroom. Children's culture is, first and foremost, a culture of play and exploration. It is a prototype of an adult culture, and children practice living and communicating as humans. A specific object of young children's play at 3–7 years of age is human relations and human values manifested through relationships (El'konin, 1989).

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N. Pramling et al. (eds.), *Adults in Play with Children*, International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 44, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-99629-0_7

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Several critical theoretical concepts behind play autonomy should be mentioned and explained. According to cultural-historical theory (Vygotsky, 1997; El'konin, 1999, 1989; Zinchenko, 2010; Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010; Smirnova, 2017; Zuckerman, 2021; El'konin, 2022; Kudryavtsev, 1997; 2022; Bredikyte & Hakkarainen, 2023), a child's *development and learning are collective* because the source of development is social interactions (between children and between children and adults). The process of personality development has a *creative character*. If we aim at personality development, it requires a great deal of effort on the part of the child himself, resulting in *self-directedness* and *self-regulation*.

Considering this, I argue that children's culture and children-generated content should dominate the classroom. Children need time and space to process their genuine experiences and *learn to build a community life* of their peer culture. Joint exploration, experimentation, and play are the most appropriate ways to do this.

What is the content of children's culture nowadays? Has it not shifted from child-generated content to adult-provided content? The early childhood curriculum often focuses on different areas of development and a set of skills/competencies listed there (Miller & Almon, 2009; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019). Skills are necessary, but focusing on separate skills does not necessarily lead to personality development. However, educators are left to navigate the most appropriate ways of developing personalities.

Previous Research

Research on play in kindergarten classrooms and teachers' attitudes towards play in different countries show that adults constantly try to turn children's play episodes into deliberate teaching moments (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019) rather than capturing children's play intentions. When teachers are asked why they do this, they typically respond that children need to learn 'essential things' besides play. These 'essential things' are usually subject matter knowledge and academic skills.

Despite the scientific recommendations to consider young children's specific developmental and educational needs (Miller & Almon, 2009; Yogman et al., 2018; Zosh et al., 2017; Pramling et al., 2019a), the recognition and praise of recent approaches to early childhood education, such as 'conceptual play worlds' (Fleer, 2018), the 'wonder approach' (L'Ecuyer, 2018), the idea of an 'unhurried child' (Clark, 2023), play responsive pedagogy (Pramling et al., 2019b; Pramling, 2022), the Reggio Emilia approach, a considerable amount of the traditional view of schooling persists in the everyday practices in different countries (Rao & Li, 2009; Camilli et al., 2010; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Hassinger-Das et al., 2019; Utami et al., 2024). Teachers working in Lithuania stress that they feel pressure from the parental community to focus on their children's academic achievements and prepare them for school (Brėdikytė, 2022).

Children and teachers pursue different interests when this happens in an early childhood classroom. Successful education becomes problematic in such a conflicting situation, and establishing a sustainable play culture becomes impossible.

Adults, teachers, and parents often think that children learn nothing through play or that what they learn is not essential. Why, despite the claim that future society will require different skills and competencies, do we still tend to do things the usual way? Is it possible that a sensitive teacher does not notice what interests young children and what they try to explore and learn while playing and experimenting?

Joint play, imagination, and narrative creation help children process their genuine experiences and contribute to their peer culture (Mouritsen, 1998; Singer & De Haan, 2019). The adult's role in supporting these activities is crucial but remains challenging. The adult should be a partner and mediator of cultural forms of play and storytelling (Vygotsky, 1997; Fleer, 2021; Brėdikytė, 2022), but the didactic position remains popular.

Edwards (2021) highlighted the diversity of conceptions and practices of play in different cultures and countries. Her analysis highlighted three different orientations toward play practices: (1) self-organized children's play, (2) adult-organized didactic play, and (3) something in between—collaborative play, where adults participate with children as equal partners. Educators constantly debate which play strategies (free play, didactic play, or collaborative play) benefit children's development and learning and which should receive more attention.

All these play activities are intertwined, often occurring in parallel, and need to be recognized and given appropriate attention in a child's life. They develop different mental functions and abilities in children. Importantly, they demand various pedagogical support and intervention methods from ECEC professionals. I see them as organically coherent and dynamically changing, and attention should be given to each one, considering the situations that arise and the children's developmental and educational needs without disrupting the logic of their world.

At the Play Research Lab, we have spent 20 years helping students discover the most appropriate ways to support child development and learning through play. Trusting Vygotsky's claims and many other scholars, play is the activity that "leads a child's development" and creates the zone of proximal development for the child; we focused on the collaborative play of children and adults. Gradually, a Narrative Play and Learning Pedagogy emerged, and a Narrative Play and Learning program (NEPL) was created. It has its roots in cultural-historical psychology and was inspired by Vygotsky's works on children's imagination, creativity, and play (Vygotsky 1966/2016; 2004), Davydov's (1988, 1989) research team's work "Concept of Preschool Education," Lindqvist's playworlds (1995), and Cole's fifth dimension (2006). Narrative Play Pedagogy was experimented with and developed in Silmu Playlab (Kajaani), and in 2012 it was transferred to Lithuania. Narrative Play Pedagogy has been described elsewhere (Hakkarainen, 2010; Bredikyte, 2011; Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2018). Recommendations for practical application are described in the Narrative Environments for Play and Learning (NEPL) guidelines (Bredikyte, 2017). The main defining principles of the program are (1) adult participation in the construction of a narrative playworld; (2) the playworld is based on a

storybook containing moral dilemmas; (3) adults participate in roles in play; (4) playworld adventures are created in dialogic form between adults and children; (5) children’s ideas lead the playworld adventures; (6) the playworld is not a replication or dramatization of the storyline but an improvised recreation and continuation of the story.

The primary purpose of Narrative Play Pedagogy is to ‘maximize the developmental potential of play’ (van Oers, 2018) and support the development of the player’s community in early childhood classrooms.

Method

In this chapter, I will discuss collaborative play, where adults play with children (Hakkarainen et al., 2013; Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2019) as play partners, aiming to respond to children’s interests and developmental and educational needs. I will showcase how different play practices—free play and spontaneous self-regulated learning episodes—can be present, embedded, and intertwined in collaborative play. I aim to demonstrate how sensitive pedagogical strategies can assist adults in initiating collaborative play that involves all children, guiding their spontaneous learning and encouraging the development of individual play themes.

All the play sessions took place in the PlayLab environment, where ethnographic data was collected for eight years through video and audio recordings, photography, and written observations. We analyzed the data using qualitative research methods.

After each play session, we analyze the course of the play activities by watching the videos, primarily with the overarching goal in mind—the development of play autonomy in individual children and collaboration among the players. We do so by paying particular attention to the *dialogic structure* of play interactions, the *character of the initiatives*, and *rhythm—certain ‘emotional wavering’* (Sujetaitė-Volungevičienė, 2021) in play episodes. For convenience, we introduce abbreviations to describe the character of the participants’ initiatives:

Character of the initiative	Interpretation of abbreviation
Child’s initiative (ChI)	An idea proposed by a child, an action initiated
Child’s response (ChR)	A child’s verbal or action response to a suggestion or action by others (adults or children)
Child’s theme (ChTh)	A personal theme for play that is important to the child
Joined play initiative (JPI)	Adults and children or several children share the initiative
Adult guided joint play (AGJP)	Collaborative play activity, where adults guide play events
Adult initiated event (AIE)	A playworld event initiated by an adult(s)
Adult initiative (AI)	Idea or action initiated by the adult(s)
Adult support (AS) (AH)	Adult support for the children’s initiatives and help when needed
Adult encouragement (AE)	Adult encouragement of child’s/children’s initiatives

Per the university's ethical committee requirements, all participants provided informed consent. All parents were informed about the study, gave their children written permission to participate in the activities, and approved the publication of the results. All adults, students, researchers, and parents also signed informed consent forms.

Analysis of Results

In the following paragraphs, I will discuss three play episodes from two days of play sessions from a Narrative Playworld adventure.

I will analyze how adults initiate play, involve the children, guide spontaneous learning, and encourage them to develop their individual play themes. I will analyze the interactions between players and the character of their initiatives and single out critical incidents that helped preserve the activity's flow and children's engagement.

Narrative Playworld: Rabbit Rescue

The Narrative Playworld was created in the university's Play Lab. Seven to fifteen children (ages 1–6) visited the Play Lab once a week. The children come with a parent, usually a mother, and stay for four hours. Two or three researchers and 7–10 students organize play activities with the children. The episodes described in this paper come from a more extensive Narrative Playworld named Rabbit Rescue, documented through video data and written observations, including student diaries during one semester. The play theme was developed over several months.

The Narrative Playworld started with reading a book about rabbits and a bear in a morning circle. After reading the book, several children became interested in rabbits. We did not expect that reading the book would inspire children to play right now, but we tried to understand the issues and phenomena that interested them. The interest of the children inspired the theme and subsequent Playworld events. Several children had heard and seen on television that cyclones had caused floods in Southeast Asia, resulting in many disasters. The discussion about the floods among three children prompted planning for the first adventure of the Playworld:

In the analysis, the first day's narrative adventure (NA) is divided into two episodes based on changes in events triggered by critical incidents that changed the course of events.

Episode I. News of the Rabbit Disaster and the Decision to Help Them

The following week, during morning circle time, the students told the children what happened to the Rabbit family:

A flood destroyed a rabbit's house, and Daddy Rabbit and his two sons were swept out to sea. Mother Rabbit was left behind under the ruins of the house.

One 5-year-old boy, Amos, suggested running to save the Mother Rabbit and the collapsed house. The adults (researchers, students, and several parents) supported the suggestion.

The sequence of interactions:

- Adults initiated a narrative play event to raise children's interest and hoped for a response—(AIE)
- Children responded: A 5-year-old boy, Amos, suggested saving the Mother Rabbit—(ChI)
- Adults encouraged children to realize their initiatives—(AE)

Episode 1 (continued in a different room). Rescuing Mother Rabbit and hearing the news about Father Rabbit

After the morning circle, they all went into the next room where the injured Mother Rabbit—the researcher in the role of the rabbit—was lying under the collapsed roof. The children (even the oldest) were slightly lost when they saw Mama Rabbit lying there, but with the encouragement of the adults, they began to rescue her. Several boys and students lifted the collapsed roof and tried to repair the house. Two girls tended to Mama Rabbit's injured leg, and the youngest girl, encouraged by a student, brought food from the kitchen for Mama Rabbit. The three youngest children, along with the mothers, observe.

When Mama Rabbit recovered, she told the children that Papa Rabbit and two small rabbits had been taken to the sea.

"*We should sail to rescue them!*" exclaimed a five-year-old boy, Amos (the same one who proposed saving Mother Rabbit). The idea was supported by adults (students, parents, researchers).

"*But how do we sail?*" was the student's question to the children.

"*We need a boat! We should build a ship!*" several children responded.

The sequence of interactions:

- Adults encouraged (AE) children when they saw that they were lost.
- Children reacted:
 - Several boys, Amos and Anti, and two students repaired the house—(JPI).
 - Two girls cared for the injured Mother Rabbit—(ChI).
 - One girl, encouraged by a student, brought food for the wounded Mother Rabbit—(ChI) (AE).
- The three youngest children, under two, went to play with their mothers—(3ChTh).
- Adults supported them—(AS).
- Mama Rabbit said a flood swept Father and his children out to sea—(AIE).
- Children reacted—a 5-year-old boy suggested rescuing Father Rabbit and his two sons—(ChI).
- The adults supported the children's initiative—(AS).
- The student asked: How do we sail?—(AI).

The first episode has five critical incidents, three created by adults:

1. the news about the flood that destroyed Rabbit's house.
2. a five-year-old boy's suggestion to save Mother Rabbit and the house.
3. a message that the flood swept Father and his children out to the sea.
4. a five-year-old boy's suggestion to sail and rescue Father Rabbit and small rabbits.
5. the student's question: How do we sail?

The children's interest in floods suggested the idea for the first adult-initiated play event—the flood destroying Rabbit's house. By carefully observing and listening, adults picked up several ideas from children's play, everyday utterances, and discussions. They created a “dramatic” event—the *first critical incident*—to pique children's interest and waited for their response. A 5-year-old child's proposal to save Mother Rabbit created the *second critical incident* and moved the play forward. Mother Rabbit's statement that Papa and two small rabbits had been taken to the sea created the *third critical incident*. The *fourth critical incident* was a 5-year-old boy's suggestion to rescue Father Rabbit, extending the narrative play adventure. The student's question became the *fifth critical incident*, directing the children toward solving the problem. All critical incidents are concentrated in the first episode, which lasts about ten minutes. The children then took the initiative.

Episode II. Getting Ready for the Journey

Two four- and five-year-old boys started searching for a cardboard ship we already had in a Play Lab, but it had been broken during previous play adventures. Along with two students, they began to repair it. The children took glue, cardboard boxes, and scissors, cut the boxes, and, with the help of the students, glued large patches to the sides of the ship to fix them. One boy thought the glue was not strong enough and suggested using a stapler. Another boy brought some tape to make it even stronger.

Initially, some of the younger children watched the ship being repaired. However, after several minutes, they left to develop their play themes—cooking and the hospital. The three-year-old girl who had offered Mama Rabbit food returned to cooking in the kitchen, while the two girls who had been treating Mama Rabbit started treating the animals and dolls. They were joined by the other two girls playing family, who brought their sick children (dolls) to be treated.

The five younger children not involved in fixing the ship started developing three separate free-play activities, focusing on personal and individual themes. After some time, the play of the four girls merged.

The sequence of interactions:

- Two boys, aged four and five (ChI), searched for a cardboard ship and, with the help of two students (AH), repaired it (JPI).
- The four-year-old girl returned to cooking in the kitchen (ChTh).
- Two girls started treating (ChTh) the animals and dolls.
- Two girls began family play (ChTh) and joined the doctor and family play (JPI).

Unlike in the first episode, the children initiate the activities in the second episode. Their activities respond to the critical incidents adults undertake in the first episode.

The two older boys took it upon themselves to repair the boat so they could sail to rescue Father Rabbit and the children. They continue the storyline of the narrative play. The two boys needed adult help, and two students supported them and provided technical assistance. This is an example of how, in collaborative play activity, episodes of spontaneous *teaching and learning* occur. It is essential that learning takes place in the frame of narrative play adventure 'inside' of play activity. Such learning episodes during play occur regularly, especially between older children. Meanwhile, the younger children have started to develop play themes that are important to them: cooking, family, and healing.

Thus, narrative play allows children to develop individual play themes (ChTh) moreover, to move towards play autonomy. In the second episode, this occurs when the four girls engage in doctor and family play together. This is free play; the girls develop play themes that are important to them and link these to the adventure of narrative play.

After a week, the narrative play adventures continued. Younger children sometimes need to remember what they played the week before, but this time is different. The oldest boys remembered well that they had repaired the ship and wanted to leave immediately after the morning circle.

Episode III. We are Sailing to Save the Rabbits!

After one week, the Rabbit Rescue adventure continued. During morning circle time, some children remembered the ship and the upcoming trip and immediately began preparing.

With adult help, the older children made life jackets, and the younger children loaded things on board for the trip. Although the youngest children did not quite understand what had happened to the rabbits, they also wanted to sail together.

Ten children between the ages of 1.5 and 6 set sail, with a father as skipper, four students as crew, and a mother as crew member. Three researchers helped keep the ship afloat, held out the sails, and 'acted out' the wind, passing clouds and setting sun.

After sailing around the corridor for 7 minutes, the travelers decided to spend the night on an uninhabited island (an adult suggestion). The offer suited everyone. The children got off the boat and chose different play activities.

A five-year-old boy with a skipper decided to go hunting (the boy had a gun with him) and search for gold on the uninhabited island (a boy's idea). Two students joined them, and the four spent another 20 minutes looking for gold around the university building.

Three younger children went to prepare supper for the travelers. A six-year-old girl left for the painting area with her younger sister. They painted the ship and the travelers. The three youngest children played beside the boat, climbing in and out of the boat, climbing "mountains" (big soft cones), hiding in tents, and pretending to "sleep." Two students played with them.

The sequence of interactions:

- Older children made life jackets (ChI), and adults helped (AH).

- Younger children loaded items (ChI) on board for the trip, and adults provided support (AS).
- The youngest children also wanted to sail (ChI) together.
- For seven minutes, everyone was sailing in a boat (AGJP).
- Adults suggested (AIE) to spend the night on an uninhabited island.
- Children supported (ChR) the idea.
- A five-year-old boy, Amos, with a skipper (father in the role), decided to go hunting (ChI), and two students (JPI) joined them.
- Three younger children went to prepare supper (ChI) (ChTh)(JPI)for the travelers.
- A six-year-old girl left for the painting area (ChI) with her younger sister.
- The three youngest children played (ChTh) beside the boat. Two students supported them (AS).

The narrative adventure (NA) of the third episode, which took place a week later, was inspired by the critical incidents of the first episode, from which the children's play initiatives emerged.

On the second day of the Narrative Play Adventure, the adults (the researchers) organized and led the play (AGJP), as all participants, children and adults, wanted to participate. Eighteen participants took part in the boat trip to save Daddy Rabbit and his children: nine children, four students, three researchers, one mother, and one father.

The researchers' adult-guided play lasted seven minutes, after which they offered to stay overnight on an uninhabited island. After getting off the boat, the children engaged in free play. As in the first episode of the previous day, the adults who guided the children moved in to support and help them carry out their plans. The narrative adventure-inspired play of the different children lasted between 20 and 40 minutes.

The Rabbit Rescue continued for another two weeks until the whole family was reunited and could return to their rebuilt home. The ideas of the older children inspired all the significant events. Each time the children came to the Play Lab, they were full of new ideas that became the starting point for further adventures.

For example, after a trip to an uninhabited island, a five-year-old boy, right after entering the PlayLab, took a World Atlas off the shelf and began studying where the tidal waters might have washed up Daddy Rabbit and his two little rabbits. He was convinced they had all escaped in a small boat and landed on the other side. After examining the atlas, he finally found the continent of Australia and firmly declared that the rescued rabbits were there. Several children suggested calling Australia on a cell phone to talk to Father Rabbit. Mama Rabbit did so and could speak to Father Rabbit because his phone was working again. Father Rabbit said they were planning to take a big boat back home. When the children heard the news of the rabbits' return, they decided to meet them. The two older kids returned to the World Atlas to find out which way the rabbits were going and where the best place to meet them would be. They found a small island in the Atlantic Ocean and decided it was a good meeting place. Mother Rabbit called Father Rabbit to inform him of their meeting

place. Once again, preparation for the trip started. This was the second trip on a boat, so the children were very confident and eager to do everything independently. They realized that more than one boat was needed, as all players wanted to go. The children constructed one more boat from big cardboard boxes available in the Play Lab, and all left to meet Father Rabbit and his two sons.

The analysis of written observations and video material allows researchers to capture the changes in the dynamics of the play activity. Based on the children's ideas, the adults organized a joint adventure lasting 10–15 minutes each time. After that, the play split into different directions, and the children continued to develop themes that were important to them independently.

Discussion of Results

The *analysis of the sequence of interactions* reveals that adult-children's interactions are carried out in a dialogic structure. Adults took the initiative 6 times in the three analyzed episodes. However, their initiatives aimed to create *critical incidents*, capture children's interest, maintain their involvement, and move events forward. More often, the character of adult initiatives was to encourage, support, and help (8 times) the children. This allowed children to express their ideas, freely choose activities, participate or leave, and return when the activity interests them.

In the first episode, the adults initiated three critical incidents. These were the news of the destroyed Rabbit house, the Father Rabbit and his children being taken to the sea, and asking how to go and rescue Papa Rabbit. Three apt initiatives were enough to get the children to develop solutions and engage in collaborative play. Further adult participation took the form of encouragement, support, and help. Encouragement means that adults support a child's initiative or idea and thus encourage them to act. In collaborative play, adults try to encourage initiatives that contribute to developing a *collaboratively constructed play* narrative. This kind of indirect guidance does not diminish the children's initiative but gives them more confidence to carry on what they have started.

For example, in the first episode, this happens when the adults enthusiastically accept a 5-year-old boy's suggestion to save Mother Rabbit. The boy's suggestion was the most appropriate one to move the play's action in the right direction, and the adults' encouragement prompted the other children (who may not have had the courage) to go along. As a result, all the children, even the youngest ones, went to rescue Mother Rabbit.

The adults' more active encouragement followed a few minutes later and turned into support and slight helping when the children went into the next room and saw Mother Rabbit pinned down by a collapsed house. At that moment, all the children became confused, and then the adults encouraged them with words and actions by joining in lifting the roof, when all the children joined in and together freed Mother Rabbit. Notably, the adults did not take the initiative from the children and only helped to realize the original idea of saving Mother Rabbit.

Another form of active help was when students worked with children to repair a boat. They helped cut and sew cardboard, glue, or staple the sail. The children could not do all the repairs themselves, so the students guided them through the repairs, showing them how to fix the boat and what tools to use. Although the students did the most critical repairs, they did not let the two boys stand back and watch. They asked the children what to do first and what to do afterward; they asked them to glue, staple, and cut, and they showed them how to use a stapler and where to staple the parts of the boat.

Analysis of the footage shows that the children did many new things in this episode and learned a lot. However, the learning came from the children's initiative, as they were keen to fix the boat to rescue Father Rabbit and his sons. This is an example of spontaneous learning and teaching embedded in play. Sometimes, the children learn how to do something independently based on their observations, and sometimes, they help each other learn something new. In our case, the students helped the boys, but only to the extent that they did not know how to do it themselves. From the video observation, this was a team effort, and the students did not take the initiative away from the children.

The critical aspect of this situation is that the two boys are trying to learn something important to them. Such spontaneous learning and teaching situations emerge from play activities, which are crucial for developing children's independent learning and autonomy. Davydov (1988) noted that high-level play creates children's aspirations and needs for 'real' learning. The initiative to learn comes from the child, who is motivated to achieve his goal. All he needs is a little help, which the teacher can always provide. It is essential to support the child's initiative and to help only as much as necessary. Suvorov (2003) calls this graduated shared activity and advocates moderate adult help for the child. According to him, adults should not miss the moment the child takes the initiative in the shared activity and should continue encouraging the child to act independently. Otherwise, they may disrupt the child's personal growth and end up with an obedient, controlled doer.

At the same time, while two boys were repairing the boat, the five younger children retreated to play independently. After the rescue of Mama Rabbit, they developed topics that were more familiar to them. One three-year-old girl took up cooking, two other girls started treating animals, and two more girls played family. After a while, their play merged into a joint baby doll healing theme played by four four-year-old girls.

The micro-analysis of individual play episodes shows that once the children have withdrawn from the shared narrative adventure and started to develop their personal theme, they interweave their personal experiences with the events or characters of the adventure they have just experienced. For example, three-year-old Vesta (who was baking a birthday cake at home with her mother a few days ago) played in the kitchen. She started baking a cake for the Rabbit family, saying they could celebrate when they all reunited. The two girls, playing doctors, said the rescued rabbits must be cured after they are rescued.

The children's consistent development of their play theme in free play and with the same theme in collaborative play seems particularly important for play

autonomy. The video material's analysis and the children's observations confirm that all these children consistently return to the same theme in free play daily, individually or with several other children. We see this as a sign of developing play autonomy.

The three youngest children have also returned to exploring and playing with what they are more familiar with. Each played individually but in pairs with an adult (mother and student). There is no evidence to suggest that their free play was related to the theme of collaborative play. However, the fact that they kept coming over to see how the ship was being repaired suggests that they were watching what the other children were playing and possibly waiting for a chance to join in. Importantly, children as young as two or three also join the collaborative adventure of narrative play.

The described two-day Narrative Playworld adventure reveals how collaborative play is constructed. It starts with an adult-initiated critical incident, followed by the children's reactions and the adults' responses, which help to develop the children's proposed ideas. The adult's task is to construct a coherent narrative by weaving together the children's ideas, involving each child, and considering their experiences, needs, and possibilities. Give space to each child's personal theme. As Narrative Playworld takes place over several months, this works well as each child gradually reveals their needs and interests.

Collaborative play activity is co-constructed in a constant dialogue between the participants. Children's voices are more important than adults' if we seek to develop a community of players. The adult role is of mediator and a model demonstrating flexible play behavior. The primary task for adults in developing collaborative play is maintaining the play's overall structure while upholding its central and essential themes. This can be achieved by initiating play events through dialogic interactions and ensuring children's ideas are included. This keeps children interested and engaged. Children's interest and engagement are sustained through dialogical interactions and intriguing, 'dramatic' events that maintain the rhythm of the play—a kind of emotional wavering. Recent research reveals (Feldman Barrett, 2017; Sujetaitė-Volungevičienė, 2022) that emotions are contagious, particularly important for young children who do not fully understand the language. Children are first and foremost caught up and drawn into the emotional field of play.

Observations of children over several months revealed that individual children can create their play activities and are likelier to play with each other in larger groups, e.g., not just two but three or even four. Children of different ages, boys and girls, have started to play together. Although these play episodes are short, they are increasingly linked to the Rabbit Family Adventures. The children found it easier to choose their playmates; they could play with different children, not only with the same child.

This research complements and extends the work of scholars in the cultural-historical theory of play, particularly in Playworld research, as it investigates the dynamics of collaborative play between adults and children. The research on Playworlds is multifaceted and focuses on various aspects, including teacher development (Ferholt & Lecusay, 2009); issues of adult participation (Bredikyte &

Hakkarainen, 2011; Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2019) online contexts (Talamo et al., 2010); and examines how Playworlds support and enhance children's agency and control over their play and learning activities (Rainio, 2008). It also explores the development of communication abilities (Baumer et al., 2005), narrativity (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2014), fostering creativity and exploratory learning (Ferholt et al., 2015), as well as how imagination in play and learning is developed and intertwined (Fleer, 2018; Utami et al., 2023).

The novelty of this study lies in the choice of the unit of observation. I have examined collaborative play in depth, not as separate, one-time events but as longer-term observations. Play in the PlayLab lasted an extended period and was not interrupted by the usual preschool routine, allowing the children to engage with the students for two to three hours. All activities were recorded. The children had attended the PlayLab for several years, enabling the observation of qualitative changes in their play. In this study, only two days of play episodes are analyzed, through which I seek to reveal the complex, multi-layered structure and fluctuating dynamics of collaborative play. The step-by-step analysis shows that the beginning of collaborative play is a dramatic event that generates interest and mobilizes the players. In this case, it is initiated by adults; however, children can also instigate such an event. This mobilization of the players and the 'pure' collaborative play lasts only for a short time—7 to 15 minutes—with only the core, most experienced players and those interested in the theme of the play remaining. The rest of the players drift off into their free-play themes or form smaller groups. However, even as they develop their play, they connect it to collaborative play events or characters. They also hear and see what is happening around them, and as soon as a new dramatic event occurs, they immediately join in. Thus, collaborative play is an evolving activity that combines episodes of free play with self-spontaneous learning and teaching, allowing children with various play abilities to participate. Observing and analyzing children's play in the PlayLab, I suggest that successful and sustained collaborative play requires different skills and varying ages of children. However, this hypothesis must be tested with more robust data and extensive research.

Adults in Collaborative Play

Just like children, adults must learn to play to participate successfully in collaborative play with children. Not all teachers are good players. The play activity is always co-constructed and created on the spot as an improvisational dialogue between the participants. Each play session presents a new challenge for participants, no matter how experienced they are. This is quite unusual for adults who are used to and feel safer constantly guiding and directing children's activities.

By playing with children, teachers learn to play themselves. Therefore, it is important to stress that all players improve and perfect their playing skills. Teachers grow professionally by developing play skills and can better understand and support children's play. What features define a 'master player,' whether a child or an adult?

Generally, a good player is sensitive, responsive, creative, improviser, and constantly learning.

Becoming a 'master player' means professional growth for teachers. By experiencing play 'from the inside,' one can grasp the logic of children's play and thinking. As a result, one can better support their development and learning by understanding the children's motives and personal sense. For a teacher, playing with children means learning to enter children's play without disrupting or destroying it or transforming it into a didactic or other activity.

The cultural-historical theory of child development claims that the autonomy of children's play is one of the educational objectives. In that case, any adult intervention should aim to continue the children's play after the adult has left. Alternatively, at best, play activity undergoes qualitative changes, becoming more motivating and challenging and requiring a higher level of skills from the children than before.

For the children, play autonomy is an indicator of personality development. The construction of one's play activity is a creation and revelation of one's image of the world; it occurs at the physical (visible) space level and simultaneously in one's mind. This helps children become aware of their knowledge and make sense of it. Similarly, for adults, writing down their thoughts helps them become aware of, reflect on, and clarify them. Developing play activities independently cultivate independent thinking. It is not as if the child already has a 'picture of the world' in mind. While playing, they weave it together from bits of individual experiences and knowledge. Each child's image is different and unique. Only independent players can create a sustainable play culture in the classroom. The qualitative changes in play, which are signs of growth and development, occur gradually and eventually transfer into everyday behaviors.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I analyze the episodes of the narrative Playworld adventure to investigate how the orientations highlighted by Edwards (2021) emerge in collaborative children's play. I describe Narrative Play practices as an example of collaborative play to illustrate how elements of different play orientations/play strategies are merged. However, this can also be the case in other types of collaborative play.

The Narrative Play is rooted in the theoretical idea that a child's *development and learning are collective* because the source of development is social interactions. Moreover, the development itself has a creative character. Narrative Play seeks to fulfill these developmental requirements. Play adventures proceed in the mood of ongoing dialogic improvisation; learning occurs spontaneously and purposefully. Everyone learns from each other and is led by personal motivation. The process is self-directed and requires coordination and self-regulation. Players' learning is holistic, developing the whole range of skills as it emerges from a cultural (play) context that they create and find meaningful. Constant play practice is the path to children's play autonomy.

The study revealed that children's play autonomy is cultivated when all forms of play are recognized and given appropriate attention, as they all support and maintain a sustainable play culture in the classroom. The professional teacher must create conditions for all play, considering the individual children's and the group's needs. This pedagogical task demands a high degree of professionalism from the teachers. The ability to play is one of these requirements for their professionalism.

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Chapter 8

Agentic Imagination in Joint Play in a Home Setting



Liang Li

Abstract There is a growing body of study advocating young children's agency in play and care. Yet little attention has been directed towards addressing how to extend children's agency to develop a meaningful learning experience for them in a family setting. We used a cultural-historical theoretical framework to investigate six infant-toddlers' engagement in play and learning at home and early learning centres over a 7-month period. We applied the wholeness approach (Hedegaard, *Studying children: A cultural-historical approach*, Open University Press, 2008) to interpret the infant-toddlers' play and their engagement with peers and adults. This approach considers the children's perspectives, including their body language, gestures, choices, initiatives and movements, and the adults' pedagogical choices, positioning and demands in play. Visual narrative analysis (Ridgway et al., *Video J Educ Pedagogy* 1:1–18, 2016) enabled us to capture and map the toddlers' interactive patterns, non-verbal language and embodied movements and intentions in the play activity settings. Drawing on visual narrative methodology, cultural-historical concepts of imagination and agency were applied to explore El's, a 21-month-old boy, joint truck play with his parents before dinner time in a home activity setting. The toddler's agency and how he developed agentic imagination within the joint play under the support of his parents is discussed here. The study argues that adults need to acknowledge toddlers' agency and motives in play while meeting parents' demands. The focus child, El, used gesture and simple words to express his intention in continuing joint truck play, although his father explained to El that it was time for dinner and his father was getting tired of continually pushing the truck. In such a conflict, what can adults do to support the child's intentions and meet adults' demands? This problem gives rise to a pedagogical intention to think about how to sustain and afford children's agency in play, thus addressing the conflict when the adults' demands do not align with the child's initiative in play. We argue agentic imagination can be a solution to sustain children's play and meet adults' agenda.

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Introduction

Agency has recently emerged as a focus topic in social science and educational research. There is a clear emphasis on empowering children to become active, creative, critical citizens who can contribute to a democratic society (Rainio, 2007). Therefore, the development of early childhood pedagogies centres on children's agency and highlights children's ownership of their play and learning, and seeing young children as agents with a voice, capable of thinking, exploring and acting in play (Sairanen et al., 2022). The existing research has shown agency promotes children's personally meaningful learning and sense of belonging (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Sairanen & Kumpulainen, 2014) and explained the importance of acknowledging children's initiative and how this is responded to as part of a child-centred pedagogy (Quiñones et al., 2021; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Pramling et al., 2019).

Research has applied child-centred pedagogy in early childhood education for more than a century; however, this has mostly focused on children's agency and initiative in early learning educational settings, and there is a lack of attention to exploring children's agency and initiative through the interaction between parents and children and how parents respond to the child in the home setting. In this study, we addressed this research gap by exploring young children's agency in imaginative play and parents' responses to their agency as a way of understanding how family creates the conditions to promote young children's sense of agency in play.

Parent-child play interactions during the early years of life contribute to positive cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes for children (Amodia-Bidakowska et al., 2020; Milteer et al., 2012). Further, emerging evidence suggests father-child interactions, particularly in play, may have a unique and strong connection to later cognitive, social and behavioural outcomes (Barker et al., 2017; Dumont & Paquette, 2013). This highlights the importance of including father-child play in child development research (Gregory et al., 2019). Many existing studies focus on fathers' involvement with children across a broad span of childhood, such as the preschool years (Chou et al., 2023) or specifically on certain types of father-child play, such as rough and tumble play (Fletcher et al., 2013; Majdandžić, 2017; Popp & Thomsen, 2017). However, there is a lack of research focusing on father-child play during the critical early developmental period (0–3 years), particularly regarding imaginative play interactions.

Thus, our study aimed to understand the quality of father-toddler play interactions and how toddlers' sense of agency is promoted through imaginative play in the home context. Specifically, we addressed the following research question:

How do parents, particularly fathers, promote toddlers' sense of agency through imaginative play in the home context?

Theoretical Foundations

We refer to play as ‘imaginative play’ by drawing on Vygotsky’s (1966) cultural-historical concept of play and imagination, where children and adults create an imaginary situation by changing the meaning of actions and objects to provide a new sense of these. The creation of the imaginary situation is the key characteristic of children’s play. In this reading of children’s play, children develop through active exploration with adults in the imaginary play situation by extending the play narrative (Hakkarainen et al., 2013; Vygotsky, 1966). Imagination in cultural-historical theory is not biologically determined; rather, it is a psychological function developed through social interaction within a child’s environment (Fleer, 2013). Elkonin (2005) also argues children’s play abilities are ‘learned’ through the interaction with the social environment. While children engage in imaginative play with adults or peers, their collective imagination within the shared situation drives their play development. Children’s play becomes much more complex and mature through adults’ co-participation (Hakkarainen et al., 2013). Much of the cultural-historical literature focusing on adult–toddler interaction in imaginative play shows the importance of adults’ role in play. Other studies have investigated educators’ response to toddlers’ active expression through being play partner (Li et al., 2016); preservice teachers’ play guidance and intervention in children’s play through a narrative playworld (Hakkarainen et al., 2013); adults’ emotional and playful support in developing toddling style (Quinones & Pursi, 2020); and adults’ active co-participation in play (Pursi & Lipponen, 2018). These adult–child play interactions have been explored in the early learning settings. However, this study focuses on the investigation of parent–child play in the home context by drawing on cultural-historical concept of play, examining how parents promote the toddler’s sense of agency through play interaction, thus enhancing family pedagogy.

Double Subjectivity in Play

By extending Vygotsky’s (1966, 2004) concept of play, the key criterion for play is the child’s creation of an imaginary situation, which bridges the space between the optical (real) and sense (imaginary) fields. Kravtsov and Kravtsova (2010, p. 29) argue that to create this space, “a player must be simultaneously inside and outside of the play.” This notion highlights the player’s double subjectivity, where one must simultaneously create the imaginary situation as a participant player while stepping outside it to connect with reality, deciding what to play and how to play.

The unique creation of the imaginary situation in play enables players to maintain two forms of subjectivity: being “in the situation,” immersed in and enjoying the play, and being “above the situation,” controlling and directing their play. When parents join their toddlers’ play through imagination, by being “in the situation,” they enjoy the play alongside their children, gaining insight into their toddlers’

needs and agency. Simultaneously, by being “above the situation,” parents can use their rich life experience to respond to their toddlers’ needs and extend the play.

This chapter employs the concept of double subjectivity to explore how parents create conditions for their toddlers’ play and learning and promoting the toddlers’ agency within the home context.

Agency and Agentic Imagination

In this study, ‘children’s agentic imagination’ refers to the idea of children as active agents who bring their feelings, motives and intentions to the collective imaginary situations. Children contribute to play by considering and sustaining the agency of their play partners as they collectively engage in the shared imaginary scenario. The cultural-historical view of ‘agency’ understands it as relational and situational (Edwards & D’arcy, 2004), a dialectical process shaped by social interactions, learning and development (Rajala et al., 2016). It emphasises children as social agents who develop their sense of self through interactions with those around them: ‘The individual becomes what they are in themselves by what they show to others’ (Vygotsky & Rieber, 1997, p. 105). Within the collective play situation, children’s agency can be promoted through interaction with others within the shared collective imaginary situation. In exploring a group of toddlers and their teacher during bus play, Li (2024) argued that ‘in collective play, a child is not only a responsible individual but also shares his or her agentic imagination with others and affects the collective aspects of agency’ (p. 3). This chapter focuses on one toddler’s sense of agency during joint truck play, examining how the toddler’s parents promote his sense of agency in dealing with the tension that arises over the imagined truck play.

Study Design

Cultural-historical theory drives research methodology that is dialectical and interactive. Hedegaard’s (2008) dialectical-interactive approach to research creates conditions for researchers to investigate toddlers’ play with adults in their family context. It allows for a holistic view of capturing children’s developmental process as they engage in activity settings within family institutional practice; in this case, the activity setting was where truck play with father took place. In the present study, the researcher’s gaze was on the toddler: his movement, gesture and voice when interacting with his parents, and his parents’ responses to the toddler’s agency in the activity setting.

Participants

The case discussed was part of a larger project involving the study of six infant-toddlers and their learning and development at home and in early learning centres. The infant-toddlers joined the study for 9 months, allowing the researchers to investigate the infant-toddlers' cultural world and transitions. In this chapter, we draw on data gathered from one family: El (21 months old) and his parents. El's parents were originally from China and immigrated to Melbourne, Australia nearly 11 years prior to the data collection. El was born in Melbourne and had attended a childcare centre for 4 days a week since the age of 1 year old. El's parents valued play with El, viewing it as a very important family activity that could provide El with quality interaction to support his learning at home.

Procedure and Data Collection Method

The project included video observations of the infant-toddlers' interactions at early learning centres and in home settings and interviews with the infant-toddlers' educators and parents. We gathered 5–8 hours of video observations for each child through researchers' visits to early learning centres and home settings. These visits were conducted without any instructions or interventions regarding the practices at the centres or homes. In total, 60.5 hours of video footage was recorded. After the video observations, a reflective interview was organised with each participating family and educators. The interviews used selected video clips of the children's play as prompts to capture the families' and educators' perspectives. Each reflective interview lasted 30–45 minutes and was recorded and later transcribed. Full informed consent was obtained from families and early learning centres, including permission to use the recorded images in research journals and books. The data collected was utilised exclusively in the fields of education and research. To protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms were used. During each visit, the researcher also sought oral consent from the child by explaining the purpose of the video recordings. Only after the child gave their consent did the researchers proceed with video recording. This chapter discusses extracts from one 15 minutes' video of El's (a 21-month-old boy) truck play with his parents at home, as this provides understanding of both parents' interactions with their son in the same activity setting where truck play was taking place.

Wholeness Approach to Data Analysis

Conducting research from the perspective of a child's lived experience is the main part of the visual narrative analysis (Ridgway et al., 2016). To understand children's lived experience, as researchers, we need to capture the child's perceptions, experience, gestures, embodiments and movements in the activity setting, and to understand the process of lived experience and how the child interprets and emotionally relates to the activity setting (Clerc-Georgy & Martin, 2021). Therefore, this study drew on Hedegaard's (2008) model of three levels of data analysis including common-sense, situated practice, and thematic interpretations, and Li's (2014) synthetic interpretation, and the spirals of analysis were undertaken of the video data (Li, 2014, p. 42) explaining "the process of analysis is not linear, but is dialectical in essence, conceptualised as a continuing upward spiral of progress."

The first spiral of data interpretation focused on understanding different perspectives, including those of the children, parents, educators and researchers within the activity setting. The activity setting for the data presented in this chapter was truck play. Through common-sense interpretation, we captured El's, his father's and his mother's perspectives in the truck play. The second spiral of visual data analysis examined the interactive patterns of motivated actions within the activity setting, that were situated within the children's lived experience. We analysed the interactive play patterns between El and his father, including the tension, conflicts and negotiation. The third spiral of interpretation, thematic analysis, related to the theoretical concepts guiding the research, including imagination, play, agency, motives and demands. This spiral of analysis aims to address the research question by conceptualising the findings. For instance, the family pedagogical strategies promoting El's sense of agency in the truck play were identified through the theoretical analysis. The final spiral of analysis led to the synthetic interpretation of the activities across activity settings situated within the institutional practices. El's truck play experience across family and early learning centre practices was analysed to understand all aspects of his interpretation of truck play.

Further, narrative was introduced through showing how El interacted with his father during the truck play. Their interactions exemplify the concepts of imagination and agency, which was introduced by the narrative presentation of their truck play.

Findings: A Case Example of El's Joint Truck Play

During the data collection, El was observed to be very interested in the truck play at home and at the early learning centre. He played with the trucks with his peers at the early learning centre, driving the trucks on an adventure and pushing the trucks along the path following his peers, Caz and Alf—Caz was leading the truck play (See Li et al., 2021).

Vignette 1: El's Truck Play with his Peers at Early Learning Centres (Li et al., 2021)

El and Alf were pushing their trucks along the path, following Caz who was leading their three-truck play around the play yard. Alf called out to El, saying, "Come, come, come," while gesturing with his hands, prompting El to run over to him. Alf then approached the bridge from the side, moved his truck onto the bridge by slipping it through the railing, and then carefully climbed up onto the bridge. Meanwhile, El, sitting about a meter away from the bridge in the riverbed area, observed Alf as he climbed. Once Alf was on the bridge and has positioned his truck there, he waved to El and called out, "Come... come." Caz, already waiting for them, looked back toward them as he was about to leave the bridge, eager for them to join the driving team.

Vignette 1 highlights El's interest in truck play with his peers, showing that he preferred to follow their lead. His peers, in turn, were patient with him, encouraging him to join by saying, "come... come." Their shared, imaginative play reflects a strong sense of social companionship and friendship among them (Li et al., 2021). This chapter specifically examines El's joint truck play with his parents in the home context. According to El's parents, the truck play became his favourite play experience at home during the data collection period.

Vignette 2: Child-initiated Play

El was playing with his truck at home when his father arrived after work. El invited his father to join the truck play. His father agreed, and El grabbed a toy truck for his father. They started driving the trucks from the corridor to the living room. His father lightly tapped El's truck and said, 'El first, El first.' El drove his truck forward, and his father followed behind, saying, 'Go, go, go!'

As they played, El kept looking back at his father's truck. At one point, El stopped and held his truck in his left hand, using his right hand to hold his father's truck so that it couldn't move forward. His father paused, making a sound—'Ah ... Ah ...' El laughed, sat down on the floor and babbled, 'Ayah, ayah, ayah.' His father stood up to take a rest, but El pushed his father's truck forward, babbling, 'Tri, tri, tri ...'

His father bent down, picked up the truck again and tapped El's truck, saying, 'El first, El first!' El frowned and loudly replied, 'No!' His father tapped El's truck again and said, 'El first, please.' El responded even louder, saying, 'No! No!' His father tapped again, insisting, 'El first. Okay?' El held the truck, jumped slightly and slowly began driving it forward while saying, 'Go!' His father tapped El's truck again, saying, 'Be quick!' El continued driving slowly but smiled widely at his mother and loudly said, 'Walking, walking, walking, walking.'

His father followed behind, driving his truck. El's mother, who was in the kitchen area preparing for dinner, asked El, 'Walking? Are you walking now? No longer running?' El drove his truck towards his mother and stopped. Then his father changed direction and headed towards the study room, saying to El, 'Dad goes first!' El's father quickly drove his truck, making a 'woo' sound. El raced to catch up, laughing as he went.

Interpretation of Vignette 2 reveals El initiated truck play and invited his father to join the truck play. They collectively created an imagined truck driving experience. El clearly conveyed his intention that he would like his father to drive first and that he likes chasing his father driving around by saying ‘No! No!’ when his father requested ‘El first, please!’ Through the negotiation, his father finally realised El preferred him to go first, then his father dramatically drove the truck. This process of play explains El’s initiation in truck play and his rule that he would chase his father in the play. His agency concerning what and how to play was illustrated clearly although he was only 21 months old. El clearly expressed his disagreement with his father’s suggestion. After rejecting his father’s proposed play rules several times, El’s agency was promoted when his father acknowledged El’s preference in play and accepted El’s play rules, thus their play could be continued. This process explains the importance of acknowledging and understanding the situations that needs consider the children’s initiatives, thus promoting children’s agency (Sairanen et al., 2022).

Vignette 3: The Conflict

The truck play continued as they stopped at the edge of a kitchen cabinet. This time, El’s father turned the truck and asked El, ‘Ready? Ready? Ready?’ El mimicked his father’s actions and turned his truck. His mother encouraged them: ‘Come on, Dad’s chasing El, Dad’s chasing El!’ El squatted down, saying, ‘Go!’ While driving his truck, El’s father said, ‘Dad’s chasing El, Dad’s chasing El. El goes first, and Dad chases you.’ El glanced at his father, then quickly drove his truck forward. As he drove slowly, he kept looking back at his father’s truck. His father moved his truck back and forth, saying, ‘I’m chasing, I’m chasing. Run quickly, run quickly!’ (see Fig. 8.1).

El looked back at his father’s truck, then drove his own truck back to make it parallel. He pointed at his father’s truck, saying, ‘Run. Run.’ His father held his truck and said, ‘El goes first, El goes first, and Dad chases you.’ El moved his father’s truck a little, saying, ‘Don’t! Don’t!’ His father looked at him, and asked, ‘Ah?’ Then, understanding El’s intention, his father quickly got ready to drive his truck, saying, ‘Okay, Dad goes first! Ready?’ El picked up his truck and put it down, seemingly ready for a new adventure.

El’s father drove his truck from the study room to the living room, then the corridor, making a ‘woo’ sound. El followed, laughing, and waved ‘bye!’ to his mother as he sped off to catch up. When El caught up, his father said, ‘You caught me! You caught me!’ El changed the direction of his truck and said, ‘Go!’ His father, feeling tired, stood up and asked for a rest. El kept saying, ‘Go! Go!’, and his father asked again for a break. El kept pushing the two trucks together slowly, frowning and saying ‘Go, Go, Go!’ El’s father told his mother he was tired from squatting. El’s mother agreed, saying, ‘Let’s have a rest. Dinner time now!’ Unsatisfied, El kept demanding, ‘Go, Go, Go!’, meaning he wanted to continue driving the truck.

In this vignette, the truck play continued, with El’s father proposing the same rule as before: El would go first, and his father would chase him from behind. However, El insisted that his father should drive first, and he would follow and chase



Fig. 8.1 Dad encouraged El to keep pushing the truck

him instead. El's father agreed to El's suggestion and drove the truck ahead of him. El was thrilled to start the journey, as seen in his enthusiastic wave saying 'goodbye' to his mother, who was in the kitchen. After a while, his father stated that he was tired from pushing the truck while squatting, suggested they take a break. This is when the conflict arose. From his father's perspective, pushing the truck around the house in a squatting position was physically tiring. However, El was deeply invested in the truck play, which was a joyful bonding moment with his father. Meanwhile, El's mother, as an outsider to this imaginative play, reminded them of the family's routine—dinner time approaching. The conflict emerged from these different perspectives—El's father's need for rest, El's desire to continue playing and El's mother's concern for the family schedule, each of which influenced the play situation and how the play continued.

Vignette 3 captures the tension between El's agency in wanting to continue the imagined truck play and his parents' practical demands. El's motives in continuing truck play and how to play represent a form of agency, an expression of his intuition within the context of imagined truck play. For El, play is not merely an activity; it is about creating a shared experience with his father. This challenges the traditional view of toddlers' play as parallel play (Parten, 1932). Instead, El's focus was on the interaction with his father and the shared imaginative space they created together. This illustrates that children's play is a complex and situational process, deeply connected to social interaction, as Quiñones et al. (2021) argue. Furthermore, it explains El's agency is constantly in dialogue with adults' demands. The conflict might not

be a clash of needs but a dynamic space from which new play scenarios and learning opportunities can emerge.

Vignette 4: The Agreement

El's father was too tired to continue pushing the truck forward, but El kept insisting they keep playing. El's mother suggested they 'top up the petrol', since the truck had run out of fuel. El's father walked over to El, who was sitting on the floor playing with the trucks, and said, 'Let's go and top up the petrol.' El looked up at his father and replied, 'Okay!'

His father held one truck and asked, 'Let's go and top up petrol, okay?' El held his truck in his left hand, pointed at his father's truck with his right and said, 'Petrol, petrol, petrol.'

His mother joined in: 'We need petrol! Go and top up the petrol!' El got ready, holding his truck, and said, 'Let's go!' He drove his truck forward, and his father followed, saying, 'Go! Woo ...'

El stopped and looked back at his father's truck. His father caught up and said, 'Let's go!' El continued driving, glancing back at his father's truck. El's father drove his truck to the study room, passing El's truck. El laughed and followed. When El stopped in the study room, he sat on the floor, looked at his mother with a big smile, and babbled, 'Ah, ji, ah, ji, ah, ji.'

El's father placed his truck on the carpet and said, 'Let me park the truck.' El's mother said to El, 'Let's top up the petrol in the truck. Park the truck and top up the petrol. Be quick. Top up the petrol, baby.'

His father said, 'Let's top up the petrol in the truck.' His mother pointed to a wooden block box, pretending it was the petrol tank: 'The petrol tank is over there.'

El's father walked over to El, who stood up and pointed forward, babbling, 'Eh ...'

His father helped El move the truck to the carpet: 'Dad helps you push your truck over here to top up the petrol.' El's mother pointed out that the trucks were in the wrong place. 'The petrol tank is here,' she said.

El's father looked surprised. 'Oh, it's there,' he said. 'I parked in the wrong place.' While El's mother pointed out El's father's mistake, El walked to the trucks, moved them and parked them in the correct spot next to the 'petrol tank' (the wooden block).

El's mother said, 'Here it is, El! Top up the petrol here.' His father added, 'Top up the petrol, top up the petrol, here.' El looked at the petrol tank and the trucks for a few seconds before moving his father's truck to the other side of the petrol tank. His mother encouraged him: 'Good thinking! You're great, El! You know how to park trucks!' El then parked his truck next to his father's.

El's mother smiled and said, 'Queue up and top up the petrol.' She showed El the rope (which was part of the wooden block box) connected to the petrol tank and said, 'Use this to top up the petrol.' El's father demonstrated how to top up the petrol: 'We need the pipeline to top up the petrol. Plug the pipeline in like this.'

El imitated his father's actions, topping up the petrol in his father's truck. El's mother made the sound of petrol being added: 'Ci ... Ci ... (see Fig. 8.2).



Fig. 8.2 El topping up the petrol

When his truck was full, his father moved El's truck to the petrol tank. 'It's time to top up the petrol in El's truck,' his father said. As El topped up the petrol in his truck, El's mother and father both made the 'Ci ... Ci ...' sound.

His father said, 'Okay, it's done.' His mother added, 'Okay, let's park the trucks and have a rest. Dinner is ready.' El agreed and parked the truck in the nearby parking lot and walked to the dinner table with his parents.

Analysis of Vignette 4 shows three different perspectives over these conflicting moments. The conflict was solved by extending El's imagined truck play. Agentic imagination was the driver through the negotiation process between El and his parents. El's parents promoted his agency in play and guided his motive orientation in the truck play through agentic imagination; thus, they engaged with the truck play in ways that met both El's demands and their agenda. The conflict was reflected through El's motives in the truck play and the demands of the family practice of moving to the dinner time. Through agentic imagination among the players, the conflict became potentially productive for El, as both parents supported his agency and development of motive orientation in the truck play. Thus, El generated the new motives of topping up the petrol and parking the truck. This echoes Hedegaard and Edward's (2023) argument that 'conflict can occur when children meet new demands in a new institution ... these crises may lead to a reorganisation of a child's whole relation to the activities and people' (p. 5).

Discussion

Drawing on a cultural-historical view of play, imagination and agency, this chapter examines how adults such as parents make responses to children's agency in play in a home activity setting and how they promote agency through play responses, thus supporting children's play development and learning. In capturing a toddler's play interaction with his parents through visual narrative methodology, insights are gained into the toddler's agency and the family responses to the child's agency in a shared imaginary situation.

This study supports Vygotsky's (1966) conceptualisation of the origin of play as social and cultural rather than chronologically determined. The case example, El's truck play with his father, shows that at a very young age, El could change the meaning of the truck from toy to real and initiate the imagined situation of driving the truck. El took a real interest in pushing his truck and wanted to play truck with his father, driving through the house as part of their adventure. El's initiated imaginative play with his father drew on El's interpretation of his social world, such as driving a truck on the road, and created possibilities for him to express his agency and practice the social role of truck driver for future reference.

This study reveals young children's transition to different educational settings is influenced by their previous play experiences, which also inform their play in the new setting. El's truck play was also observed in his early learning centre experience (see Li et al., 2021 and Vignette 1). El was noted to follow his peers, Caz and Alf, as they drove their trucks on an adventure. When observing El's truck play at home, the play rules from the early learning centre appeared to have been adapted to the home setting. This may explain why El was trying to negotiate the rules, expressing a preference to follow his father's lead and requesting his father guide the truck play around the house. This enhances Vygotsky's (2004) argument that creative imagination is closely linked to the variety of a person's past experiences, as these experiences provide the raw material from which imaginative creations are formed. Notably, El's past play experience with his peers informed his play with his father at home, and the play rules learned at the early learning centre influenced El's play with his father. Peer interactions during play were highly valued by El, and his imagination, especially in truck play, enriched his overall play experience. In turn, this shaped his play practices at home. Additionally, El's previous experiences with peers in imaginative truck play affected his emotional responses and understanding of play rules. The play rules, created by the three young toddlers, represented genuine feelings and experiences for El, and this helps explain why his approach to playing with trucks alongside his father followed a specific pattern. Therefore, we argue young children's play may evolve across different contexts, and there is continuity in the themes and behaviours they bring to the new settings. El's adaption of play rules and roles across different environments highlights the continuities of play as a developmental tool in supporting El's learning and development. In the case example, El's play interaction in two different activity settings with different institutional practices shows play is a dynamic process that informs children's learning with

prior experience. This informs educators and researchers that there is a great need to develop a holistic approach that considers different activity settings young children experience to support their learning and development.

This chapter highlights agentic imagination creates the possibility for adults to promote children's agency in play when conflict arises between children's motives and the demands made to children in play. As children transit between different institutional practices each day, their previous experience informs their play and interactions. When adults make demands different to what children have experienced in other educational settings, conflict might arise. To address the conflict and turn it into a positive experience, adults are required to value children's agency when they express their feelings, voices and intentions in the activity setting. In the case example discussed, El's father did not know what El experienced at the early learning centre and intended to chase El, which could be much pleasant experience for El. However, in the truck play, El's insistence in chasing his father and following him differs from his father's demands in the play. This conflict illustrates the same play can mean something different to children and adults. That is, children's motive orientation might be different to the demands made by the environment. As noted earlier, El explained a few times by saying 'No, no!' in Vignette 2 and 'Don't, don't!' in Vignette 3, and used gestures to show his father should go first. In Vignette 4, El's father was too tired to keep pushing the small truck toy in the house after the whole day of work and preferred to have a rest. However, El was really enjoying his play with his father and did not want to stop playing. Meanwhile, El's mother suggested having dinner because the dinner was ready. This dynamic process in the case example illustrated three different perspectives in the joint play; El's, his father's and his mother's.

The negotiation arose because of the tension between continuing the truck play and moving to dinner (demands from family routine and El's father for rest). As a solution, El's parents' promotion of their son's agentic imagination reframes the play, sending it in a new direction. They valued El's motive orientation in continuing the truck play, then extended the play to the petrol station, then moved to the restaurant for dinner, which drew on El's everyday practice. In this process, El's father, as a play partner, agreed with El's mother's suggestion to top up the trucks' petrol. Using his player role inside the play, El's father guided him in how to do this. El also agreed with the suggestion to move his truck to the pretend petrol station, saying, 'Petrol, petrol'. The extension of a new play direction combines *as if* (truck play to top up petrol) with *as is* (dinner time and rest) by topping up the petrol leading to a transition to dinner time. In responding with 'No', El's parents did not directly reject his choice; instead, they understood his agency and promoted his agentic imagination, thus promoting opportunities for El to learn a new everyday concept (topping up petrol) and help him make sense of his social world. This extends other research conducted with toddlers and older children in the early learning centres by responding to young children's talk and embodied actions, such as advancing a group of toddlers' agentic imagination in play (Li, 2024), teachers' positioning in supporting children's deep learning (Disney & Li, 2022; Fleer, 2015)

and attending the children's perspective and creating joint play situations that sustained the flow of the play (Cekaite & Simonsson, 2025, Chap. 6, in this volume).

In the home setting, parents can promote young children's agency by extending their children's agentic imagination. Kravtsov and Kravtsova (2010) have extended Vygotsky's (1966) concept of play, arguing the presence of double subjectivity in play helps players control their behaviours from an objective position while taking the subjective position inside the play situation and enables them to transform aspects of their real-life characteristics. In El's truck play situation, El's father intentionally made responses to El's agency while being a play partner through 'role me' (i.e. truck driver)—by accepting El's invitation of driving a truck with him, simultaneously with 'real me' (i.e. father), who needed a rest after squatting during play with El, and helped El's mother transition to dinner time as part of family routine. Therefore, we argue the double subjectivity of parents in toddler's play also prompts parents to acknowledge and value the children's agency and promote their agentic imagination.

Conclusion

The focus of this chapter is one toddler's agency and how he developed agentic imagination in joint play under the support of his parents. By investigating joint play at home, this study indicates adults need to acknowledge toddlers' agency and motives in play while meeting adults' demands. The findings suggest that the tension that arose during the joint play in the case discussed gives rise to a pedagogical intention to think about how to sustain and afford children's agency in play, thus addressing the conflict when the adults' demands do not align with the child's initiative in play.

Studying the role of agentic imagination in adult-child joint play enriches the literature and adds to the existing research knowledge of children's imagination, agency and adult intervention. We argue agentic imagination can be a solution to sustain children's play and meet adults' agenda when the adults can value toddlers' experience, intentions and agency in play. By focusing on an activity setting within family institutional practice and exploring parents' perspectives and intentions as well as those of the child, we could identify some of the conflicting moments affording children's sense of agency.

Acknowledgement The study reported in this paper was supported by research team members, A/Prof. Gloria Quinones and Dr. Avis Ridgway. The data transcription by Dr. Junqian Ma is acknowledged. Special thanks go to the participating teachers, children and parents for giving permission to undertake this research and for their participation in the project.

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Chapter 9

Imaginary Play in Adult–Child Interaction: Encounters with Life, Death, and Grief



Annukka Pursi, Saila Poulter, and Lasse Lipponen

Introduction

For children, imaginary play and death go together, for example, in a battle between good and evil, or between life and death (Hedegaard, 2016; Kalliala, 2005). But what is the place of imaginary play in situations where death is a real experience in a child's life? Can the relationship to the deceased loved one take the form of play? If so, where, when, how and with whom do such playful encounters emerge, what do they mean, and what value do they bring to the players themselves? Previous research has shown that peer group activities and camps for children who have lost a loved one provide opportunities for children to “play out their grief” (Smith, 1991). Play allows children to express emotions and make sense of things they might find difficult to put into words. Through imaginary play, children can create a safe space to explore different significant life situations. Especially in the situations of loss, death, and grief, the role of an understanding adult is crucial in recognizing and facilitating such playful encounters (Smith, 1991).

Prior play research has shown that through joint imaginary play with adults, children can explore personal reflections of the emotionally touching real-life experiences and make sense of situations such as witnessing natural disasters (Bateman et al., 2013), starting daycare and losing the full-time presence of a parent (Pursi, 2022), and encountering losses during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ferholt et al., *in press*). For adults, engaging with children in the wonders of play and imagination offers opportunities to reflect on how those children are facing events such as death-related loss and grief (Smith, 1991), life in war or as a refugee (Hyder, 2005) or other extreme cases of adversity (Fearn & Howard, 2012), but also more mundane experiences in children's lives.

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In this chapter, we explore how imaginary play between adults and children can expand children's experiences of life, death, and grief after the loss of a parent. In doing so, our research provides new insights into how children's loss and grief can be confronted and dealt with through imaginary play with adults. We begin this chapter by outlining our theoretical stance, namely, a cultural-historical approach to imaginary play. We then offer an overview of the research literature that recognizes and explores the connections between play, death, and grief during early childhood in different institutional, family, and community settings. After that, we describe the context, data, and method of our study and provide detailed analysis of one example of children's and adults' cumulative encounters with life, death, and grief in real life and in an imaginary play world. Finally, we reflect on the importance of play in the interaction between adults and children for providing a creative, aesthetic, and collective space to encounter existential questions of life, death, and grief.

A Cultural-Historical Approach to Imaginary Play in Adult–Child Interaction

A cultural-historical approach to children's play views it as a dynamic social activity, which is culturally and historically formulated (also see Chap. 7). This approach involves the use of cultural tools, such as language, symbols, and artifacts, which shape and are shaped by children's thoughts, impressions, and actions (Solovieva & Garvis, 2018). Most importantly, play is a realm of imagination where children can explore and create new realities, drawing on their cultural experiences (Vygotsky, 2004). Imaginary play like art can be understood as “the antithesis of everyday life” (Lindqvist, 1995, p. 44), as it reveals aspects of life that we would not otherwise recognize and experience. Play reflects reality on a deeper level, and it should not be confused with realistic representations of everyday actions (Lindqvist, 1996).

We define imaginary play as a form of creative activity that involves transformation of real-life objects, actions, experiences, persons, and situations into characters in a fictional world (Vygotsky, 2004). Imaginary play is not just a reproduction of reality in its current form, but rather a productive and creative process—“a culture in the making” and “imagination in action” (Lindqvist, 1995, p.15; Vygotsky, 2004). As pointed out by Vygotsky (2004, pp. 11–12):

[E]lements of his [a child's] previous experience are never merely reproduced in play in exactly the way they occurred in reality. A child's play is not simply a reproduction of what he has experienced, but a creative reworking of the impressions he has acquired. He combines them and uses them to construct a new reality, one that conforms to his own needs and desires.

The more life experiences a child has, the more sources for imagination and play they have. Imaginary play is also a powerful tool to express and explore emotions such as grief. In imaginary play, emotions and feelings may be seen in new ways,

and as pointed out by Hakkarainen (2020), it allows children to seek to understand their own lived experiences, not just those of adults.

From a cultural-historical perspective, emotions (like grief) are deeply entangled and situated within socio-material practices, constituted by people, artifacts, and other matters that make up cultures. They are not just mechanical reactions, but verbal and bodily ways in which humans try to understand significant life events (Brinkmann, 2019; Lipponen & Pursi, 2022). Moreover, how we interpret and perform emotions is heavily dependent on the local moral order of our communities (Vallgård et al., 2015). People do not passively encounter grief, but write diaries, create memorials and rituals, make art, and, like children, engage in imaginary play.

Connections Between Play, Death, and Grief During Early Childhood

Play, death, and grief are intertwined in many ways during early childhood in various institutional, family, and community settings. For example, play therapies and play-based activities have been found to be supportive interventions for grieving children (Chen & Panebianco, 2018; Salinas, 2021). Through imagination and play, children can actively maintain their relationships with deceased loved ones and create empowering biographical transitions and personal stories in their lives after the loss of a parent when they have opportunities for adult support and involvement (Donovan et al., 1995; Turner, 2020; Salinas, 2021; Smith, 1991).

According to Smith (1991) “all children—as young as preschoolers, toddlers, and even infants—grieve the loss of a loved one” (p. 170) although “[t]here may be a reticence in adults to acknowledge a young child’s grief” (p. 171). Smith points out that even in early childhood, children can be agents in and play out their grief. In her startling example (Smith, 1991, p. 169) three-year-old Joanne had lost her sister in a mountain accident. After the loss she was withdrawn (e.g., thumb sucking and withdrawal from social play) at bereaved children’s weekly peer group meetings. Over time, imaginary play with the instructor and peers that took the form of mountain accident events brought vitality, safety, and shared joy to her being. In her play Joanne grabbed the instructor’s arm and started pulling, yelling “Help!” She grabbed the arm and let go repeatedly. Joanne’s face was tinged with distress, anger, and fear. According to the instructor’s interpretation, Joanne was playing out her versions of her sister’s death and events and emotions surrounding it. After a while, other children joined in the play. They pulled on the instructor’s arm, crying for help, and letting go, falling together in a puddle, laughing. Smith (1991) argues that children’s play is full of healing metaphors and elements that help them deal with and make sense of their loss and grief, even if adults do not necessarily understand what is happening in the play and what kind of meanings it involves from the child’s point of view.

Children bring their lives, losses, and grief to educational institutions. Hogstad and Jansen (2023) point out that early childhood educators typically encounter children's grieving and parental death as a social, relational, and emotional phenomenon. They also try to involve peers of bereaved children in the encounters with life, death, and grief to build a community of compassion. Teachers use artistic and playful methods, such as dramatized table theater performances, to communicate to bereaved children and the whole peer group about the death and the knowledge, emotions and events surrounding it. At times teachers also engage in imaginary play with bereaved children to provide "a narrative-dramatic form of therapeutic dialogue" (Hogstad & Jansen, 2023, p. 174).

Some children draw on family members and friends for emotional and playful support after a loss. In family context, play and the interpersonal closeness it brings may ease the emotional and sometimes isolative pain of grief. As demonstrated by Pursi et al. (2024, p. 8), playing a cuddle game with a little brother helped ease the grief a little when a child was facing the destructive power of grief alone at night:

I was left alone with my grief. At night, I felt it in my chest and the tears welled up in my throat. I asked my little brother for a hug every few minutes, as the touch seemed to ease the grief a little. My little brother thought this game was funny. I laughed along, but as we hugged, I closed my eyes and wondered if this feeling would destroy me (narrative 52).

In sum, different cultural communities and institutions have long responded to grieving children facing death and loss in multiple play-based ways. Although the link is clear in the research-based examples cited above, our knowledge of the interconnections between play, death, and grief is still very fragmented. The aim of this study is to deepen our understanding of the connections between these phenomena from a cultural-historical perspective.

Ethnographic Context of Young Children's Peer Group Activity at Bereavement Camp

The research data was gathered in September 2024 in a peer support-based bereavement camp for families with children who have lost a parent. In this three-day weekend camp children who did not know each other before had the opportunity to encounter other children who shared similar experiences of loss. Such activity with peers enables children to communicate around the loss in a safe and supported environment and the aim is to normalize the grief experience (Salinas, 2021). The camp counselors (inc. family therapists, child and youth workers, and ministers in the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church, palliative care services, healthcare, and social services) were experienced grief professionals. The researchers took part in the meetings to plan the camp and reflected on their role as non-participant observers, yet adults that belonged to the camp team.

During the weekend children were divided into three age-based groups. Each peer group meeting focused on a specific objective and activity, such as getting to

know each other (sharing personal stories about oneself, one’s life and the deceased parent), emotions (identifying and expressing emotions around life, death, and grief), and memories (having conversations about memories, memory objects, and grief rituals). The activities were based on pedagogical discussions as well as artistic, playful, and functional methods. The goal was to create a safe space for children to remember, share, and express emotions and personal stories about life, death, and grief, as well as to give and get peer support. During the peer group meetings, adults and children engaged in imaginary play both as a pre-planned activity (see the first example) and as a spontaneous improvisation in which adults responded to children’s play initiatives (see the second example).

The video observation data for this study was gathered in the youngest age group (three-to four-year-olds). Outside the peer group meetings, camp counselors organized guided activities for all families. During the camp, families also had the opportunity to rest, sit by the campfire, take a sauna, and participate in Sunday mass.

The Data and Method

To collect the data, we used focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005; Stahlke Wall, 2014), a method suitable for studying predefined research topics in real-life situations through relatively short field visits. Our data collection was guided by our cultural-historical approach to children’s encounters with life, death, and grief. Our research question was: how can imaginary play between adults and children help navigate life, death, and grief after the loss of a parent? We used video observation to capture instances of this phenomenon in detail.

The data for this chapter draws from five hours and 15 minutes of video in which three children (Leo 3y, Teo 4y, Veä 4y) participate in a peer group activity led by two camp counselors (RIIA & NINA). The video data include documentation of three peer group meetings (one meeting lasted two hours) filmed over the course of two camp days. With one handheld camera, the first author video recorded interaction, carrying out video observation as a non-participant observer, intending to disrupt the peer group activity as little as possible. The role of the second author was based on more traditional ways of observation, writing notes and audio recording.

The unit of analysis for this study is children’s and adults’ joint encounters with life, death, and grief. By these encounters we mean face-to-face interaction in which the participants are oriented toward one another and share the focus of attention on the children’s deceased parents. We use the combination “life, death, and grief” because according to our observations these encounters were very diverse in nature, including lively narrations about a shared life with the deceased parent, fragmented thoughts about death, and grief-filled descriptions of not remembering something about the deceased parent. We identified 43 such encounters of which seven were playful in nature and involved imaginary play between adults and children. The encounters presented in the present analysis are representative of the larger sample.

All the participants in the examples have been anonymized using pseudonyms and by editing frame grabs to line drawings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were of paramount importance in our research. The project was granted ethical approval by the University's Research Ethics Committee in the Humanities and Social and Behavioural Sciences, and the appropriate ethical and research governance approvals were obtained for each of the institutions and services involved in organizing the bereavement camp (i.e., Lutheran parish union and a palliative care service).

Families were informed about the research via an information letter and a short introductory video even before registration for the camp had started. In the pre-interview, camp counselors asked families for their views: "How do you feel about the presence of researchers in the camp and the possibility to participate in the research?"

The possibility that participation would involve videography was made clear to both children and their parents or guardians via a short introductory video, and the issue was returned to again at the outset of the research. The intention was not only to avoid surprising or alarming the children by the sudden appearance of the video camera, but also to provide each attendee with ample time to consider whether they wanted to participate in this stage of the research. Prior informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians before the peer group activity or any of the research activities began. If families decided to opt out of the research, it was accepted unquestioningly without any negative consequences. All the families who attended the camp approved participation in the research and videography. Children's assent was evaluated by observing their orientation to the practice of video observation.

Analysis

The detailed interaction analysis (Jordan & Henderson, 1995) unfolded as follows. First, by viewing the raw visual data in several data sessions among researchers, we generated collaborative observations and understandings of encounters with life, death, and grief. Second, we transcribed the data using conventions of conversation analysis developed by Jefferson (2004, see Appendix). Then, by exploring all the examples and their transcripts, we tried to capture how children and adults participate in and orient to encounters with life, death, and grief during the peer group activity (RQ 1). Finally, we compared all the encounters against those that included imaginary play and tried to understand how imaginary play expands children's experiences of life, death, and grief in relation to their deceased parents (RQ 2).

Findings: Imaginary Play as a Way of Expanding Encounters with Life, Death, and Grief

Creating an Aesthetic Experience of Reunion with the Deceased Parents through Play

In our first example, we describe how the process of engaging with photos and memories of the deceased parents unfolded during the peer group meetings between children (Leo 3y, Teo 4y, Veä 4y) and adults, that is, their camp counselors (henceforth RIIA & NINA). First, we give an overview of the whole process in the form of narrative description and data extracts (1–7). With this overview we provide some background information on the children and their various encounters with life, death, and grief during the peer group activity. Then, we analyze how the children and adults participated in and oriented to encounters with life, death, and grief and how imaginary play in the form of a treasure hunt game expanded children’s experiences and created an aesthetic experience of reunion with the deceased parent on the last day of the camp.

Families had been instructed to bring a photo of the deceased parent to the camp. The children were asked to take the photo to the first peer group meeting. All children in this peer group had a deceased father. Children came into the peer group room with their fathers’ photos in their hands, eagerly showing them to the adults and telling them vividly and enthusiastically about their families.

(1) Showing photos of the deceased father

Leo:	<i>((eagerly shows two photos to RIIA))</i>
RIIA:	<i>onko tässä teidän perhe ((couches down to the level of Leo))</i> <i>is this your family</i>
Leo:	<i>joo tässä on Leo vauvana ja tässä on minun äiti ja tässä on minun (.) °isi°</i> <i>yeah here’s Leo as a baby and here’s my mom and here’s my (.) °daddy°</i>
Leo:	<i>((stamps his foot two times and shifts his gaze away from RIIA))</i>
RIIA:	<i>ne on tärkeitä kuvia</i> <i>they are important photos</i>
Leo:	<i>joo</i> <i>yes</i>
RIIA:	<i>mm</i> <i>((...))</i>
Leo:	<i>arvaa mikä on minun isi ((eagerly shows two photos to NINA))</i> <i>guess who my daddy is</i>
Leo:	<i>nämä on minun isi ((points to his father in both photos))</i> <i>these are my daddy</i>
NINA:	<i>siinä on sun isän kuva</i> <i>there’s your father’s photo</i> <i>((NINA guides the children to place the photos on the wall next to the meeting circle))</i>

NINA:	<i>pannaanko tähän arvokkaat kuvat talteen</i> <i>shall we put the precious photos here</i>
NINA:	<i>siinä ne odottaa (.) kohta me katsotaan niitä yhdessä läpi (.) teidän aarteita</i> <i>there they are waiting (.) your treasures (.) soon we'll look through them together</i>

After a couple of icebreakers the peer group activity continued with the adults telling the children why they were attending the camp and this particular peer group. The adults' open and honest introduction to death and loss produced direct references to deceased fathers and their deaths from all the children. During the encounter, the children observed each other attentively.

(2) Sharing the experience of loss

RIIA:	<i>me ollaan täällä sen takia ku jokaiselta lapselta joka täällä on</i> <i>we are here because for every child that is here</i>
RIIA:	<i>ni on kuollu joko isä tai äiti</i> <i>either the father or the mother has died</i>
Teo:	<i>mult on kuollu isä</i> <i>my father has died</i>
RIIA:	<i>Teolta on kuollu isä</i> <i>Teo's father has died</i>
Vea:	<i>minulla on kuollu myös isä</i> <i>my father has also died</i>
RIIA:	<i>Vealtaki on kuollu isä</i> <i>Vea's father has died too</i>
Vea:	<i>joo-o</i> <i>yes</i>
RIIA:	<i>no mites Leo</i> <i>well how about Leo</i>
Leo:	<i>minulla on kuollu isi</i> <i>my <u>daddy</u> has died</i>
RIIA:	<i>teil on kaikilta kuollu isi</i> <i>all of your daddies have died</i>
Vea:	<i>nii:n</i> <i>ye:s</i>

Then the children and adults explored photos of their deceased parents together. The adults asked each child the name of the deceased parent and whether the child knows where the parent died. The adults and children carefully explored photo by photo how the parent in the photo was holding the child. They searched for similarities between the deceased parent and the child, such as eye and hair color, smile, gaze etc. The adults also asked what the children remember about the deceased parent and what they liked to do with them when the parent was still alive.

(3) Sharing affective memories

NINA:	mitäs sä tykkäsit isin kanssa tehdä (.) mitä te teitte what did you liked to do with daddy (.) what did you do together
Vea:	me maalattiin we painted
NINA:	tykkäskö isäki maalaamisesta did your father like to paint
Vea:	joo yes
NINA:	aa mitä te maalasitte (.) minkälaisia juttuja aa what did you paint (.) what kind of things
Vea:	€kukkiä€ €flowers€
NINA:	o:i teittekö te millä väreillä o:h what colors did you use
Vea:	mm (.) sinisillä ja punasilla mm (.) blue and red
NINA:	sinisiä ja punasia kukkia blue and red flowers

After exploring the photos and sharing their memories, the children painted and decorated photo frames for their photos. While painting, the adults and children continued to discuss the deceased parents and other people whom the children hold dear in their lives. These conversations opened spaces for encountering life, death, and grief.

(4) Talking about people you love

RIIA:	kuka on Teolle rakkain tai rakas who is dearest or beloved to Teo
Teo:	se mun kissa my cat
RIIA:	mikä sen kissan nimi on what's the cat's name
Teo:	Muru Sweetie ((...))
RIIA:	onko muita ku Muru are there any others than Sweetie
Teo:	mun äiti my mom
RIIA:	joo yes
Teo:	mul on vaan minä, äiti ja Muru I have only me, mom, and Sweetie
NINA:	mm-m

(5) Making sense of one's family relationships

RIIA:	<i>mä aattelen et kun ne isätkin on ollu arvokkaita</i> I think that since those fathers have also been precious
	<i>vaikka ne ei oo teidän elämässä tällä hetkellä</i> even though they are not in your life at the moment
	<i>ni ne teidän isien kuvat saa näin hienot kehykset</i> those photos of your daddies get such nice frames
Leo:	<i>mutta minun ukki on olemassa</i> but my grandpa exists
RIIA:	<i>nii: ((an insightful tone of voice))</i> ye:s
RIIA:	<i>mikä sun ukin nimi on</i> what is your grandpa's name
Leo:	<i>ei mikään</i> nothing
RIIA:	<i>ei mikään</i> nothing
Leo:	<i>se on vaan ukki</i> he's just grandpa
RIIA:	<i>no niinpä ukit on ukkeja</i> well yes that's what grandpas are

Encounters with life, death, and grief were present throughout the group meetings and continued even after the guitar-accompanied closing song. During the encounter children are playing with NINA's guitar.

(6) Facing the death of one's father

Teo:	<i>mun kotona on kaks kitaraa</i> I have two guitars in my home
NINA:	<i>kukas teillä soittaa kitaraa</i> who plays the guitar in your house
Teo:	<i>mä ja mun äiti</i> me and my mom
NINA:	<i>okei (.) soittiko isä kitaraa</i> okay (.) did your father play the guitar
Teo:	<i>isi on °kuollu°</i> daddy is °dead°
NINA:	<i>nii soittiko isi sillon ku se eli ni soittiko</i> yes did daddy play the guitar when he was alive did he
Teo:	<i>en mä muista ((frowns and looks down))</i> I don't remember
NINA:	<i>joo mut äiti soittaa (.) joo</i> yes but mom plays (.) yes

At the last peer group meeting, the adults drew a treasure map for the children and organized a treasure hunt outdoors. At the end of the treasure hunt, the children found the photos of their deceased parents in the painted and decorated frames.

(7) A treasure hunt game

RIIA:	<i>aletaaks me olee aika lähellä</i> are we getting closer
Teo:	<i>joo</i> yes
NINA:	<i>nyt se aarre voi kuulkaa jo alkaa polttelemaan</i> now the treasure's near, it looks like we're getting hot <i>mutta mistähän me tietään et mikä se niinku on</i> but how do we know what it is
Leo:	<i>hei tulkaa katsomaan sitä aarretta</i> hey come and see the treasure
NINA:	<i>löysit sä sen jo</i> did you find it already
Leo:	<i>joo tulkaa</i> yes follow me
Teo:	<i>mikähän se mahtaa olla</i> I wonder what it is
NINA:	<i>no en tiä ihan jännittää</i> well I don't know I'm so excited
RIIA:	<i>ihan ku tuolla kimaltais joku</i> like there's something sparkling out there

The children approached the table outside the sauna building on which the framed photos were placed and stopped to stare at the treasures in silence first from a distance of a few meters (Fig. 9.1). The adults gasped in amazement. Children glanced at the adults, smiled and took a few steps closer, but stopped again to stare at the treasures in silence.

Leo:	<i>häh</i> what
Leo:	<i>hei ketkä tuossa</i> hey who's there
RIIA:	<i>näyttääks jotenkin tutuilta</i> does it look familiar in some way
Teo:	<i>joo</i> yes
NINA:	<i>onko näin että me ollaan löydetty se aarre vai</i> is it so that we have found the treasure
Teo:	<i>joo</i> yes
NINA:	<i>no siltä kyllä vaikuttaa</i>

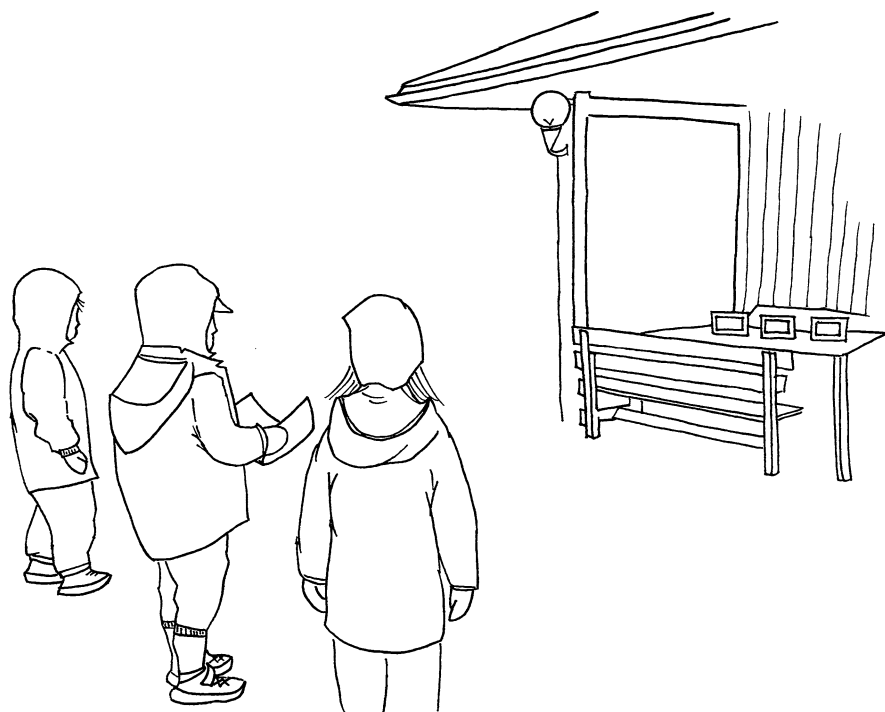


Fig. 9.1 Finding the treasure

	<i>it certainly looks like it</i>
<i>RIIA:</i>	<i>ihan aarteitten aarre</i>
	<i>a treasure of treasures</i>
<i>NINA:</i>	<i>siis nää ihan loisti tonne</i>
	<i>these really shone over there</i>

Children gathered around their framed pictures in silence, looking at their treasures intensely and lifting them gently in their hands (Fig. 9.2).

During the peer group activity reality here and now (extracts 1, 2, 4), remembering (extract 3) and not remembering (extract 6), creative imagination (extract 5), and imaginary play (extract 7) were in the dialectic relationship shaping and expanding each other in the cumulative flow of encounters with life, death, and grief. The children used elements of their own experiences while sharing and creating memories and observations of their life with and without the deceased parent. They also used fictional and other participants' experiences to expand their own sense of life, death, and grief. What is significant here is that these young children were able to bring both the absent and present fathers into their encounters and make smooth transitions between parental absence and presence. As Turner (2020, p. 1179), expressed it, these children “displayed a capacity to move imaginatively between

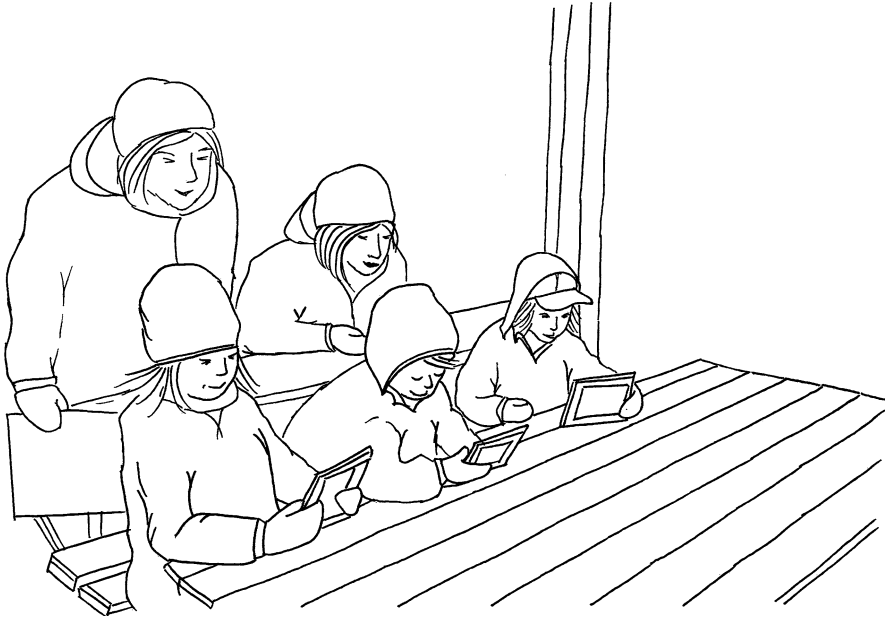


Fig. 9.2 An aesthetic experience of reunion with the deceased parent

states of parental absence and presence, blurring the boundaries such that they are less absolute categories and more relative positions, which are not mutually exclusive.”

The children and adults participated in and oriented to encounters with life, death, and grief in various ways. Together, they jointly produced orientation to the presence and absence of the deceased fathers, as we can see from the following analysis of the data extracts:

- (1). **The absence and presence of the deceased fathers was built through photographs, children’s narrations, and adults’ genuine interest in the children.** Children displayed lively enthusiasm for showing the photos of their families and explaining who was in them. In extract 1, Leo’s first spontaneous showing of a photo unfolded with a touch of absence as he named his deceased father last after a micropause, in a quieter voice with gaze aversion. However, the next time Leo showed the photo, his deceased father was more of a central figure. He was introduced first with “Guess who” newsworthiness and in this way Leo highlighted and reinforced his presence. In these encounters the adults crouched down to the level of children, showed interest and listened intently. They actively recognized the great value of the photos for the children by naming them as “important,” “precious,” and “treasures” (RIIA & NINA).
- (2). **The absence of the deceased fathers was built through children’s direct mentions that their fathers were dead.** Children encountered each other with

a shared loss by directly mentioning that their fathers were dead and observing each other intently during these moments. In extract 2, Veä quickly responded to Teo's spontaneous statement ("my father has died") and linked her own experience to Teo's by using the word "also" ("my father has also died"). Leo, on the other hand, emphasized the personal nature of his experience by talking about "daddy" and not about "father." Through the adults' lead and open, honest, and concrete introduction (i.e., answer to the question: "why are we here?") the children's experiences were brought together and their attention was focused on the fact that they were not the only ones whose fathers had died. During these encounters the absence of the deceased fathers was jointly created and confirmed, children got experiences of feeling less different from others, and their experiences were recognized collectively.

- (3). **The presence of the deceased fathers was built through affective memories.** Children created and shared affective memories of their fathers by describing joint activities and events with their fathers. In extract 3, the emotional intensity of Veä's memories and the lively presence of the deceased father were evident in Veä's describing this with a smiley and confident voice. Adults were involved in creating these affective memories and the deceased fathers' presence through their questions and emotional attunement (NINA).
- (4). **The absence of the deceased fathers was built through children making sense of their families as somehow incomplete or deficient.** In extract 4, when an adult (RIIA) asked Teo who he loved, Teo named his pet cat in a confident voice. When the adult continued the questioning, Teo named the most beloved ones in his life with a touch of absence by using the adverb "only" ("I have only me, mom, and Sweetie"). In this way Teo made sense of his family as somehow incomplete or deficient, which highlighted the absence of his father. The adult (RIIA) facilitated the encounters with loss and grief with her questions but did not continue the conversation by drawing attention to and reinforcing the absence of the father and the fact that, in the child's view, there was something missing from the family.
- (5). **The absence of the deceased fathers and presence of other father figures was built through children's creative imagination.** In extract 5, when the adult (RIIA) brought up the absence of the deceased fathers Leo used his imagination to compensate for the loss of his father by recognizing other loved ones and important father figures in his life ("but my grandpa exists"). The adult (RIIA) recognized Leo's insightful viewpoint, followed Leo's line of thought, and reinforced the presence of the father figure.
- (6). **The absence of the deceased fathers was built through not remembering.** In extract 6, Teo faced and verbalized the death of his father with a touch of absence, pain, and grief at not remembering how life was when the parent was still alive. The adult (NINA) oriented in this situation to what Teo himself remembered and reinforced the presence of other loved ones in Teo's life.
- (7). **The presence of the deceased fathers was built through joint imaginary play.** In extract 7, children participated in joint imaginary play with adults and experienced an exciting treasure hunt and an aesthetic experience of reunion

with the deceased parent—a real treasure. The adults created the framework for the imaginary play, built excitement along the way, and gave space for children’s nonverbal and embodied ways of encountering the “treasure of treasures” (NINA & RIIA). During these encounters the lively presence of the deceased fathers was jointly created and reinforced.

When we examine the collection of cumulative encounters that working with photographs created (1–7), we can ask what added value imaginary play brought to these encounters—how imaginary play between adults and children expanded children’s experiences of life, death, and grief in relation to their deceased parents. According to our interpretation, the treasure hunt as an “adventure game” (Lindqvist, 1995, p. 214)—in which play is centered around an adventurous journey, accurate exploration of the correspondence between the map and the environment, and slowly growing excitement—facilitated the children’s creative imagination and enabled an aesthetic experience of the new kind of presence of and reunion with their deceased fathers. For the children, imaginary play was an embodied, physical, and emotional practice of continuing to relate to, appreciate and care for, their deceased fathers in new ways.

The children’s coordinated silence, stopping at a distance from the treasure site (Fig. 9.1), exclamations of amazement such as “what” and “hey who’s there,” and intensive gaze toward and gentle touch of the treasures in silence (Fig. 9.2) provided evidence that the reunion was on the edge of something new—an embodied experience of collective exaltation. This reunion can be seen as an “antithesis of everyday life” (Lindqvist, 1995, p. 44), as it revealed aspects of life in relation to the deceased fathers that children would not have otherwise experienced, which the children had no words to directly describe. The encounter would have been very different and more mundane if the children had framed the photos with the adults or found the framed photos in their everyday life world when entering the group meeting space on the last day of the camp.

In addition to discovering and experiencing something new, imaginary play provided a very intensive shared experience and produced collective emotional involvement. Most of the other encounters with life, death, and grief were more focused on a dialogue between an adult and a child, with the other participants engaging as bystanders (extracts 1, 3–6). In the frame of imaginary play everyone had more equal access to the situation and events, as well as opportunities to participate and share the experience. Only the encounter in which children were facing each other with a shared loss (extract 2) was as intensive as at the encounter at the treasure site from the collective perspective of sharing an experience and creating and confirming the deceased fathers’ absence/presence.

Overall, our analysis of the cumulative flow of the encounters with life, death, and grief during peer group activity at the bereavement camp shows how joint imaginary play in the form of a treasure hunt expanded children’s experiences of life, death, and grief in relation to their deceased fathers. Through imaginary play, children and adults created an aesthetic experience of reunion with their deceased fathers and reinforced the lively presence of the fathers in the children’s lives.

Creating a Safe Space for Remembering and Imagining the Deceased Parents through Play

In our second example, we describe how the process of engaging with keepsakes and memories of the deceased fathers unfolded during the peer group meetings. We focus on encounters involving imaginary play (extracts 8–9) to demonstrate how play consistently expanded children’s experiences of life, death, and grief.

Families had been instructed to bring a keepsake of the deceased parent to the camp. The children were asked to take this precious object to the last peer group meeting. At the beginning of the meeting, the keepsakes were put in a bag. When the adult took out the bag and started to introduce the activity of exploring children’s memory objects, the children spontaneously framed the activity as joint imaginary play.

(8) Playing grandparents and grandchildren

Riia:	<i>meidän tän aamun aihe on muistot ja muistelu</i> <i>our topic for this morning is memories and remembering</i>
Teo:	<i>olet mummo</i> <i>you are a grandma</i>
Riia:	<i>ai minä</i> <i>oh me</i>
Teo:	<i>joo</i> <i>yes</i>
Riia:	<i>tiedät sä (.) mä en oo mummo</i> <i>you know (.) I'm not a grandma</i>
Leo:	<i>oletko sinä mummo</i> <i>are you a grandma</i>
Riia:	<i>en oo mummo</i> <i>I'm not a grandma</i>
Teo:	<i>olet mummo</i> <i>you are a grandma</i>
Riia:	<i>no haluuttekste et mä oon mummo</i> <i>well do you want me to be a grandma</i>
Teo:	<i>joo ((smiles))</i> <i>yes</i>
Riia:	<i>no kenen mummo mä oon</i> <i>well whose grandma am I</i>
Leo:	<i>sinä olet meidän yhteinen mummo</i> <i>you are our grandma</i>
Leo:	<i>sinä olet papan kaa mummolassa ja me ollaan teillä kyläilyllä</i> <i>you're with grandpa at grandma's house and we're visiting you</i>
Riia:	<i>no (.) kyllä se minulle sopii</i> <i>well (.) that's fine by me</i>
Teo:	<i>sä olet sitten se mummo ((smiles and gazes intently at Riia))</i>

	you're the grandma then
Leo:	<i>ja sinä olet se pappa ((points at NINA))</i>
	and you are the grandpa
NINA:	<i>no sitte (.) mitä se mummo sieltä kertoo</i>
	well then (.) what will the grandma tell us
RIIA:	<i>[mummo ottaa täältä kassista Vealle ((takes Vea's keepsake from the bag))</i>
	[grandma takes from this bag for Vea
Teo:	<i>[mummo ((leans on RIIA's arms shifting to a nested position))</i>
	[grandma
Leo:	<i>[mu::mmo ((presses his cheek against RIIA's leg, touches it gently, Fig. 9.3))</i>
	[gra::ndma

After each child's keepsake had been examined together, the children spontaneously initiated a rough-and-tumble play by running around the room and chasing each other with their memory objects. The adults did not prevent the chasing play but framed it as imaginary play, thus reinforcing the presence of the deceased fathers.

(9) Playing boisterous fathers

<i>((Vea and Leo chase each other with their memory objects in their hands))</i>	
RIIA:	<i>haluutteks te leikkii niillä</i>
	do you want to play with them
Leo:	<i>[joo ((wraps his father's football team scarf tighter around his neck))</i>
	[yes
Vea:	<i>[joo ((puts her father's workplace access key card around her neck))</i>
	[yes
<i>((Vea and Leo start running around the room laughing and making different sound effects))</i>	
RIIA:	<i>miten musta näyttää siltä että ihan niin ku Leon ja Vean isit ois kyllä nytte</i>
	how it seems to me that it's just like Leo's and Vea's dads are now
	<i>ne on vähän riehakkaita ne isit</i>
	they're a bit boisterous those dads
NINA:	<i>on aikamoinen vauhti iseillä (.) toinen varmaan pelaa jalkapalloa</i>
	the dads are going at quite a pace (.) one is probably playing football
	<i>ja oisko toisella kiire töihin</i>
	and the other is in a hurry to go to work

Participation in joint imaginary play with adults expanded children's encounters with life, death, and grief and oriented them to the presence of deceased fathers and other close family members in new ways, as the following analysis of data extracts shows:



Fig. 9.3 A safe and caring space for remembering the deceased parents together

- (8). **A safe and caring space and the presence of close family members was created by taking and giving roles in an imaginary play:** Extract 8 highlights how imaginary play has the potential to build and strengthen warm and caring relationships between children and adults and create a safe space and atmosphere for remembering the deceased loved ones together. In this play situation acts of safety and care were displayed through the dialogue and bodily closeness. Children created the framework for the imaginary play. They created intimacy with adults through gentle touching and cuddling (Fig. 9.3), and by taking and giving roles in imaginary play. The adults eventually followed the children's spontaneous play initiatives and, in this way, reinforced the caring presence of close family members in the form of imaginary characters.
- (9). **The presence of the deceased fathers was built through joint imaginary play:** In extract 9, the children initiated spontaneous play with their memory objects. The adults followed the children's play initiatives and expanded the play by creating a framework for imaginative play, thus reinforcing the presence of the deceased fathers and their lived experiences in a new, creative way.

We interpret the play of grandparents and grandchildren as a "relation game" (Lindqvist, 1995, p. 214) in which play is centered around the characters. In this play children and adults were bringing to life the personalities of the characters (grandparents and grandchildren) and the caring relations and actions they perform. The play reflected children's experiences of intergenerational relationships, with affection and closeness generated through touch and visits. For the children, imaginary play was an embodied, physical, and emotional practice of continuing to relate to, appreciate, and care for their close family members. The adults could have easily ignored children's play initiatives as inappropriate to the planned topic and activity.

Importantly, however, the adults’ openness to the children’s play ideas helped both children and adults to create a safe and caring space for encountering life, death, and grief (i.e., remembering the deceased fathers and talking about the precious memory objects).

Also, playing *boisterous fathers* was a relation game as it involved the deceased fathers as fictional characters. The boisterous father figures were born from the synergy of the children’s emotional displays and movement in space with their precious memory objects. As in the treasure hunt game (extract 7), a new kind of presence of and reunion with the deceased fathers was created through joint imaginary play between adults and children.

Discussion

In this chapter we have explored how children and adults participate in and orient to encounters with life, death, and grief during bereavement camp for families with children who have lost one of their parents. We have analyzed the encounters to show how imaginary play can expand children’s experiences of life, death, and grief in relation to their deceased parents. The empirical evidence in this chapter confirms that imaginary play between adults and children is an important form of play for children facing emotional real-life situations (see Bateman et al., 2013; Ferholt et al., *in press*; Pursi, 2022; Smith, 1991). Next, we will discuss how our findings about children’s experiences with life, death, and grief can inform educators and practitioners in mainstream early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions, both theoretically and pedagogically. Being human involves encountering many types of losses, and even young children share this enduring human experience (Pursi et al., 2024). Thus it is vital to reflect on how to make sense of a loss with all children in general ECEC settings. Here, play-based pedagogical initiatives and valuing children’s imaginative thinking and knowing around grief are particularly valuable.

Our study highlights the importance of adult involvement in playful encounters with bereaved children (also see Hogstad & Jansen, 2023). During the peer group activity in this study, the adults played a key role in creating and maintaining real-life and playful encounters with the children by creating open, honest, reciprocal, and concrete communication about life, death, and grief. The adults listened intently and took a genuine interest in children’s perspectives. They focused on leading, following, listening to, and playing with the children. Through play and by paying attention to children’s impressions and how they make sense of the world, the adults could better understand the children’s perceptions and needs as they learned to live with their bereavement. In relation to adult participation, our research suggests the following: For adults who work with bereaved children, it may be wise to avoid making too normative and morally fixed assumptions about children’s grief and grieving. Instead, it would be prudent to create an open and safe space in which young children can create their own ideas of life, death, and grief in relation to their

deceased loved ones. Alongside joint discussion, remembering, and artistic work, imaginary play offers a medium to create such an open space in adult–child interaction.

Expanding these observations to the broader contexts of ECEC, we emphasize the responsibility of adults in creating an emotionally safe, yet intellectually challenging space to deal with sensitive topics (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019). Within weekly pedagogical activities in ECEC it is possible to explore grief with children over a longer period, where losses can be approached as part of life. Educators need to create opportunities for children to share experiences of grief (e.g., over a deceased grandmother or pet), both verbally and in embodied and emotional ways. Educators also need to demonstrate that playful approaches to death are children’s legitimate response to grief, which is culturally very normative and controlled. Facing death and loss in multiple play-based ways like performing a funeral for the dead mouse found in the playground with children, recognizing that even young children grieve in the midst of ecological turmoil, and thus seeking silence and healing in nature, taking children to “play out their grief” (Smith, 1991) are all signals for children that grief can be shared with others and displayed in public settings in various ways (Varutti, 2024): this can be done in the forest or by exploring sacred places and art museums that give space for children’s imagination, ritualistic behavior, big questions and wonder. By making children’s grief visible, whether by helping them to verbalize and perform their emotional worlds together through drama, imaginary play, or storytelling, educators can support children to reach to the material and emotional dimensions of loss, and to perceive grieving as socially accepted.

The playful practice of experiencing the deceased parent as present in new and creative ways can be seen as a resource and a cultural tool for children to sustain, shape, and expand a connection to the parent through childhood and into adulthood. As Køster (2020, p. 390) argues, the classic continuing bonds paradigm (Klass, 2006) is not about an individual’s skill or maturity to maintain an ongoing inner relationship with the deceased person but “rather part of a complex nexus of both individual, social and cultural practices that all contribute to nurturing a continuing bond.” In a similar way, imaginary play should be seen “as part of the social fabric of a community and as a dynamic exchange between the child and their world” (Hyder, 2005, p. 4, also see Chap. 7). Thus, collective grieving and peer support activities are important spaces where questions of life, death, and grief are explored with other children and adults. Regrettably, grieving children often feel left alone (Pursi et al., 2024). In light of our findings, we borrow the metaphor of a community of grief (Brinkmann, 2019) and ask whether adults and children together could create sustained collective practices around grief by applying imaginary play in different family and professional settings. Further investigation into how creative imagination in play and in real life expands children’s experiences of life, death, and grief in various social contexts and life situations is crucial. In this line of research, the participation of adults should be further explored and expanded.

In their lived realities (both real and imagined), children bear experiential knowledge of life, death, and loss (Mercer, 2024). The death of a loved one can be seen as a disruptive event or a rupture in a child’s life. As pointed out by Zittoun and Cerchia

(2013; see also Hilppö et al., 2016), this rupture in life can be a powerful trigger and motor toward imagination. It breaks a child’s previous ways of relating to reality and others, expands their experiences, and encourages them to imagine new possible worlds. The fact that children might lack language or factual knowledge about death and separation should not mean that the knowledge that children carry in their bodies, minds, and souls is dismissed. Our approach to children’s and adults’ joint imaginary play increases understanding of imagination’s transformative potential. Through imagination, death is not just an end but the beginning of a new and creative understanding of existential questions and encounters around life, death, and grief.

Mercer (2024) proposes ‘the recovery of imagination as a privileged epistemology’ in understanding children’s grief. By valuing children’s imaginative knowing, curiosity, and wonder—not treating children as immature and unable to distinguish the rational facts of death—we can come to value children’s ability to approach life and death through animistic and imaginary realms that “reflects a speculative way of seeing the world which can create room for responsiveness, attentiveness and caring-with relations in the world” (Merewether, 2023, p. 22). This can be considered as a valuable epistemic resource to face loss (Mercer, 2024). When blurring the boundaries between living and dead through imagination and play, creating space for playful and speculative ‘enchanted animism’ (Merewether, 2023), children can explore new ways of thinking, being, and relating to a loss.

Guidelines for supporting children after parental death typically recommend that adults provide clear, factual, and concrete explanations about death and events surrounding it, using the words “death” and “dying” and avoiding euphemisms (Willis, 2002). Many adults still hold a strong underlying assumption, grounded in Jean Piaget’s developmental logics, that children “will grow out of it” as their ability to understand death is undeveloped, but that children who understand the concept of death rationally and as a permanent absence are better prepared to deal with the loss of a loved one (see e.g., Donovan et al., 1995). At the same time we know that children’s understanding of parental death involves more than just cognitive, factual knowledge through the dichotomy of presence and absence. Our research leads us to question these assumptions embedded in our cultural knowledge—if only cognitive and rational explanations make death more comprehensible to children, does this exclusion of the affective, emotional, and existential risk narrowing the dimensions of being human?

We argue that it is vital to cherish the power of imaginary play in dealing with losses in ECEC. In the child’s world, the animate and inanimate, visible and invisible, material and spiritual can be true at the same time. Children’s ability to imagine the borderline between life and death as fluid can comfort them and help them to sustain the bond with their loved ones. A soft toy animal that speaks, a dead mouse continuing its life in mouse heaven, or the waves of the nearby lake that keep bringing the loving memories of the deceased grandfather are all part of the very holistic world of children, which can be safely explored through imagination and play. Enabling *all* children—not only who have lost a loved one—to participate and

share their experiences of emotional real-life situations through play can support children's imagination, which is their valuable epistemic resource in living with loss.

Conclusion

This research highlights how imaginary play in the interaction between adults and children provides an important creative, aesthetic, safe, and collective space to expand exploration of life and being a human. Children's everyday encounters with life, death, and grief create new meanings about and relations to their deceased parents, building both the parent's presence and their absence in the children's reality and imagination. The diverse forms and functions of creative imagination and play in the lives of young children after parental loss are worth further investigation. Overall, this research guides adults to recognize joint imaginary play with children as a powerful cultural tool to meet and make sense of emotional events and challenges in life and build shared understanding of the existential questions they face. We hope that this chapter will encourage adults in both family and professional relationships to explore life, death, and grief and the presence and absence of the deceased loved ones with children through curiosity, imagination, and play.

Acknowledgments We wish to thank all the children, families and professionals who participated in the study. This work was supported by the Research Council of Finland under Grant 341153.

Appendix: Transcription Conventions (Jefferson, 2004)

(.)	Micropause
:	Sound before colon is stretched
<u>word</u>	Underlying indicates stress/emphasis
WORD	Loud voice
°word°	Quiet voice
€word€	Smiley voice
((word))	Words in a double brackets are descriptions of nonverbal actions
[Overlapping talk

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Chapter 10

I Wish for My Own Treehouse: Educational Relational Practices Promoting Children’s Play in a Refugee Context



Trond Løge Hagen and Marit Heldal

Fawad, a four-year-old boy from Afghanistan, lives with his mother and father in a refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos. Fawad is shy and has several traumatic experiences from fleeing the war in his homeland and from living in different refugee camps, both in Turkey and Greece. He struggles with relations to both children and adults, and he does not take any initiative to play. One morning when Kostas, one of the early childhood educators in the camp, starts to carry logs for creating a nature playground, Fawad comes running towards him eager to help. He endures carrying logs, tie the ropes and construct for several hours. The next day Fawad’s father came to the ECEC institution and told us that Fawad came home happy after working together with Kostas. He had also talked about his grandfather whom they left in Afghanistan. Fawad had a very close relation to his grandfather, and he used to help him collect wood for the fireplace. Fawad’s father was sure that working with wood together with Kostas made Fawad “open up” to talk of the past—making it possible to talk about the family’s experiences related to fleeing from their homeland and relatives there.

Introduction

Since 2015, the Greek island of Lesbos has emerged as a hot spot for refugees in Europe. Together with his family Fawad was one of the children who came to Lesbos as a refugee after undertaking a perilous journey from Afghanistan, across the Mediterranean Sea in an overcrowded boat from Turkey to Lesbos. Upon arrival

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© The Author(s) 2025
N. Pramling et al. (eds.), *Adults in Play with Children*, International
Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 44,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-99629-0_10

the family were transported to a refugee camp, now referred to by Greek authorities as a Reception and Identification Centre (RIC).

Over the past decade we have witnessed significant upheavals and challenges related to climate change, migration, pandemics and violent conflicts. These changes have resulted in less predictability, increased socio-economic disparities and increased migration. At the beginning of 2024, there were 117,301,206 displaced individuals globally, with a new child forced to flee every five seconds (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2024). According to International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (IDAC) (2024) many children spend significant parts of their childhood on the move, often residing in multiple refugee camps and frequently experiencing numerous traumatic events, without access to early childhood education and care (ECEC).

With increased migration and regardless of where children grow up, there is a pressing need to address aspects of sustainable education for all children, aligning with UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2. (UN, 2015). Cultivating a nurturing environment in children's formative education is crucial for both child well-being and social sustainability (Schleicher, 2019; Prilleltensky, 2020; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021). This depends on playful relationships between children and early childhood educators, along with positive cognitive and emotional stimulation within sustainable educational practices, as underlined by Davis (2015) and Elliott (2015). Recognizing play as a fundamental activity in children's lives, essential for health, well-being and experiences of belonging, are consistent with findings from several studies (Boldermo & Ødegaard, 2019; Elliott, 2015; Heldal, 2021; Kvalnes & Sandseter, 2023; Øksnes & Sundsdal, 2018). Based on these studies, one can venture the claim that children's play today is influenced to a greater extent by the actions of adults than in the past.

In this chapter, we examine the role of early childhood educators in supporting play for refugee children through three distinct narratives that are from an ECEC institution in a refugee camp on Lesbos. The first narrative, "Working with Wood," introduced in the beginning of this chapter, describes Fawad's engagement in wood-working activities with the early childhood educator, Kostas, which evokes memories of his grandfather. The second narrative, "Building a Treehouse," depicts Fawad and his friend Mehmet collaborating with Kostas to construct a treehouse. The third narrative, "Gathering New Friends," shows Fawad's willingness to engage in play within the treehouse with his peers from the refugee camp and the local community of Lesbos.

The chapter presents several theoretical perspectives, including (Hohr, 2018) emphasizing the importance of adults' awareness and understanding of children's experiences and how these can be transformed into play. Further, Hobfoll et al. (2021) five principles to reduce anxiety and stress, will be presented as useful knowledge working with children who have difficult experiences from fleeing war and from living as refugees. Løvlie Schibbye's (2002) dialectical relation theory and the concept of "triggering" (Wallerstedt et al., 2021) will illuminate the interaction between adults and children in play. Special attention is given to how adults can promote children's self-efficacy through participation in play.

Background

The idea behind creating an ECEC institution inside a refugee camp for both refugee children and local children, arose from a collaboration between local parents from Lesbos, the team leader of a Greek NGO and one of the authors of this chapter. An important value was to open the ECEC institution for the local community by employing local Greek early childhood educators on a permanent basis and welcoming Greek children from the island to increase stability, improve continuity and thereby create a more resilient environment for all children. Starting an ECEC institution inside a refugee camp is also a response to the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from 2016 to 2030, which include a focus on high-quality education according to goal 4: "Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning" (UN, 2015, p.19). An indicator for this goal (Goal 4.2) particularly focuses on ECE, "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education" (UN, 2015, p. 19). Most of the time 16 children and three educators were affiliated to the ECEC institution, with approximately eight children from the camp and eight children from the local community of Lesbos.

The location of the ECEC institution was a nature playground situated in a pine forest, in proximity to the refugee children's temporary residences. The sole indoor facility was a yurt, a traditional Mongolian tent, used during cold weather. The children were predominantly engaged in outdoor play and activities. The natural environment was organized to inspire to different kinds of play, such as areas designated for aesthetic activities like painting and construction, spaces for climbing and physical activities, and quiet zones for relaxation, storytelling, or reading. The goal of creating an ECEC where play was central, and where educators highly valued children's voices and acted as facilitators and co-players, was to establish an environment and culture where everyone felt heard and had a sense of belonging.

Transforming Experiences through Play

Hohr (2018, p.117) describes experiences as a biological, cultural and subjective category. By being present in a physical world, we are both part of, and at the same time, separating ourselves from and being subject to action. For example, Hohr uses what happens at birth to illustrate how experiences are interconnected. When the umbilical cord is cut, this initiates the child's first independent action, the breath. This experience is further linked to the care the child receives from their surroundings. Experiences develop the child to grow into and participate in the community. When the early childhood educator makes it possible for the child to do new experiences based on the child's own activities and play, the child gets opportunities to

participate in everyday life, make new experiences related to equality, commitment and sense of belonging to the society (Hohr, 2018).

Hohr (2018) argues that adults should facilitate and be open to discuss the experiences children make and highlights the concept of experiences as an educational advantage. Through everyday life, children get to know the world, acquires emotions towards the reality they are a part of, and creates an agency, feelings and repertoire to create new experiences (Hohr, 2013, 2018). Both play and the opportunities to make experiences through play are important for children's formation (Hohr, 2018).

Working with children, like Fawad, who lives in a refugee camp, means meeting children with experiences from war and flight, often characterized as traumatic experiences. However, the concept of trauma is, according to Bath (2017), controversial because it is impossible to classify people's experiences and encounters. All experiences are unique, also the ones related to the field of traumas, therefore it is more appropriate to talk about severely negative events or experiences, according to Bath. He also problematizes how, in everyday language, we tend to talk about traumas as isolated events and fail to discuss the damage resulting from what "does not happen," so-called neglect. For example, a child who has experienced isolated acts of war may be less affected than a child who experiences a lack of care because the mother is mentally ill. When it comes to children living as refugees, it is often the case that the child has multiple difficult individual experiences, in addition to close caregivers struggling with mental health issues (Dangmann et al., 2022). Bath (2017) emphasizes that people working with children with particularly difficult experiences should work in a so-called trauma-informed manner. Trauma-informed work involves helping to reduce the damage from negative experiences and preventing the child from being made a victim. Bath (2015) talks about the 23-1 perspective, which emphasise the importance of the time outside the therapeutic settings. This is the time spent in "normal" settings, like being with friends in play. However, five empirically supported intervention principles are identified as important working with children (and adults) to reduce the anxiety and stress related to traumatic experiences. These are: 1) promote a sense of safety, 2) promote calming, 3) promote a sense of self—and community efficacy, 4) promote connectedness, and 5) promote hope (Hobfoll et al., 2021). To be able to safeguard these principles it is necessary that children meet early childhood educators who can take others' perspectives and show caution in the approach to the children (Løvlie Schibby & Løvlie, 2017). Further, the early childhood educators need to understand play as an important area of life where children have the possibility to create unfolding opportunities for themselves, make new experiences and develop on their own premises (Hohr, 2018).

A Dialectical Understanding of Relationship Between Children and Adults

Dialectical relationship theory emphasizes the dynamic and interactive nature of relationships, where opposing forces or tensions are managed through communication and interaction (Schibbye, 2002, p 35–38). A dialectical understanding of relationships means that one sees reality while recognizing that the whole consists of different parts (Schibbye, 2002). These parts vary together, presuppose one another, point to each other and must be understood in relation to each other. A dialectical understanding assumes that causal relationships are circular and mutual. This is in line with Broström and Hansen's (2004, p. 30) concept of equal dialogue. Through an equal dialogue, there is a process of reflection between individuals, and this process may drive change and development in people. When reflecting on and considering what is important, there is often a phase where you must think about what the new insight will lead to. There is an obligation in new insights, and formation is to make the insight so deeply present that one feels responsibility and takes responsibility.

In this ECEC institution the concept of “adulthood” was an important backdrop for the educators' pedagogical beliefs. Adulthood is based on an understanding of childhood that assumes restricted capabilities and imposes a lower status on minors (Liebel, 2014). The educators wanted to go beyond the traditional distinction of adults and children, and rather view each other as human beings, striving for a pedagogy in which the power perspective between children and adults was blurred. This can be seen in line with the term binding perspectives (Broström & Hansen, 2004) and a dialectical understanding of relationships (Schibbye, 2002) which relate to the fact that humans are dependent on each other. Further, a dialectical understanding involves mutual recognition and respect regardless of whether the relationship is between peers or between adults and children.

So far, we have emphasized the relationship between children and adults in relation to play. However, it is also important to consider this in relation to the environment in which the children are situated. Elliott (2015, p. 44–45) highlights the alignment between early childhood educators, children's play and nature environment. This involves an understanding of how physical and social environments constitute a framework for children's everyday lives in ECEC. Further, how the actions and perceptions of children in their environment are affected by the interaction between the organisation of the ECEC, the environment surrounding the ECEC and the pedagogical practices of the early childhood educators. Because these factors interact in a dense symbiosis, it is crucial that they support each other.

Using nature as an educational environment, provides opportunities for children and for educators to enrich play, promote variety of spaces, and facilitate dynamic, social and creative play (Storli & Hagen, 2010; Knight & Luff, 2017). Further, interaction between children and educators in nature, may function as a social sustainable environment for children's formation across age, gender and culture (Änggård, 2011; Laaksoharju et al., 2012; Hordyk et al., 2015; Heldal et al., 2021). Recognizing

play in nature as significant for children's formation and the importance of educators' roles in these processes, can be understood as social and cultural learning where new understanding and practices develops.

Early Childhood Educators' Intentional Actions and their Interactions with Children in Play

In the context of early childhood education, the concept of "triggering" refers to the ways in which early childhood educators can initiate or stimulate children's engagement and learning through intentional actions or interactions (Wallerstedt et al., 2021). The concept emphasizes that educators can trigger children's interest and engagement by introducing new and stimulating activities or materials in an open-ended, responsive manner, contrasting with the term scaffolding. While scaffolding involves an educator supporting the child towards a predetermined goal, triggering incorporates elements of play where the goal is not predetermined. Triggering as an educational approach allows children to follow their own interests, creating opportunities for exploration and response, often leading to new directions in their play or learning (Pramling et al., 2019).

While the concept of triggering was originally developed for interaction analyses, focusing on the turn-by-turn interplay between children and adults (Wallerstedt et al., 2021), we use the term in this chapter at a more overarching level. For example, in the initial story of Fawad being introduced to wood by Kostas. Here, triggering encompasses various ways educators can spark children's interests and engagement, such as setting up an inviting play environment, introducing new materials, and presenting challenges that initiate curiosity or evoke memories. This approach encourages reflective thinking, prompting children to consider their actions and experiences by being responsive to children's cues and interests in an open-ended way (Lagerlöf et al., 2022). By observing and listening to children, educators can introduce ideas or questions that extend the play and learning experience. This responsive interaction helps to maintain and deepen children's engagement. Facilitating group activities and collaborative play, allows educators to trigger social interactions crucial for developing communication and social skills (Pramling et al., 2019). This involves creating situations where children need to negotiate, share, and cooperate with others as we later will read about in the narrative *Building a treehouse*. Active participation in play also enables educators to help children develop important skills such as creativity, problem-solving, and social interaction.

Methodology

The empirical material presented in this chapter is from a larger research study conducted in one ECEC institution within a refugee camp on the island of Lesbos, Greece, (for more see Heldal et al., 2021).

Through participatory observations the authors observed the children and early childhood educators, writing fieldnotes involving interaction between children and educators in playful relations within a nature environment. The observation method incorporated elements of dynamic observation (Tjora, 2017, p. 68), where the researchers participated alongside the educators and the children in a manner described as the ‘work along’ method (Wadel, 2015). By following the group so close, the researchers could gain greater access to the educators’ and the children’s perceptions, understandings, feelings, and interpretations (Wadel, 2015).

The observations were discussed at the end of every day in the ECEC institution’s reflection circle together with the three early childhood educators. The reflection circle was an open conversational space where the educators shared their experiences from the day, information related to the children and their families and the situation in the refugee camp. This supported the researchers with more information about the children’s backgrounds and this were added to the fieldnotes to create a broader picture of the observations. Based on the observations and the information received from the reflection circle; the empirical material is presented as three narratives: *Working with Wood*, *Building a Treehouse* and *Gathering New Friends*.

The three narratives are connected and occurred in chronological order, where the story of Fawad working with wood happened before Mehmet and Fawad built a treehouse, which eventually became a popular play area presented in the narrative *Gathering New Friends*. The analyses of the narratives were conducted using thematic analysis, with an open coding process that produced descriptive codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Throughout all this study the Norwegian Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities were followed (NESH, 2021). The participants were informed about the study and their right to withdraw from it at any time. For the children who were observed, we received informed consent from their parents. Fieldnotes and handwritten notes were taken right after the participant observations, and all personal information was anonymized in the written material.

Narratives

The three narratives presented deal with themes such as the early childhood educators’ role in play and collaborative-construction activities, children’s time to play in nature and caregiving activities. These themes will be discussed as important for children to initiate play themselves, dealing with difficult experiences from living as

a refugee and the importance of relationships between children and the early childhood educators.

Work with Wood

In the beginning of this chapter, you met Fawad in the narrative *work with wood* where he cooperated with Kostas. Kostas' competence and experience regarding construction work with wood and different tools, opened possibilities for Fawad to join the activity and show his competences and experiences. In this chapter Wallerstedt et al. (2021) concept of triggering is used with a broader meaning, encompassing more indirect actions from the educators that immediately or later initiate a process of engagement or problem-solving, often through play or activities. The possibility of helping Kostas with the logs, may serve as a trigger for Fawad to initiate processes where he could engage with the environment in meaningful ways and reminiscent of his past experiences with his grandfather. As an early childhood educator, Kostas initiating play-like activities with Fawad shows the importance of adults participating in children's play. By participating, Kostas not only provided a safe and supportive environment but also modelled positive behaviour and engagement. The positive engagement together with Kostas, helped Fawad talk about his past, which may be crucial for processing difficult experiences (Hobfoll et al., 2021). The relationship between Fawad and Kostas can be understood as dynamic and interactive in terms of dialectical relationship theory (Schibbye, 2002). Both the activity working with wood and the relation between Fawad and Kostas can be understood as triggering events promoting for Fawad's self-efficacy and further activate positive memories of his grandfather.

With this as a backdrop, we can understand the narrative considering Hobfoll et al. (2021) five principles for reducing anxiety and stress related to traumatic experiences. Fawad gets a sense of safety because he does something he is familiar with, together with Kostas. The familiarity of the activity seems to calm Fawad according to his father. This is an interpretation based on information that Fawad is returning home happy that day. Through working with wood Fawad might be in contact with the boy he was before fleeing his home country. His identity is not only as a refugee, but also as a grandchild. Building a nature playground is unifying for the ones who build it, but also for the ones who use it. Fawad may feel proud doing something beneficial for the rest of the group, enhancing his self-efficacy. He also experienced feeling connected to Kostas as a responsible adult (and a substitute for his grandfather) representing good memories and meaningful activities and led to a revival of his memories and emotions related to his grandfather. When Fawad was given the possibility to make new, meaningful experiences through working with wood, he might have felt a sense of belonging to society (Hohr, 2018) and this may promote hope for the future (Hobfoll et al., 2021).

Building a Treehouse

In this ECEC institution, the early childhood educators were working on finding the balance between the dynamic and flexible on one hand and the focus on routines and stability on the other hand. In a refugee camp the everyday life will be affected by unstable conditions both on an individual level and structural levels. Woven into the strong focus on children's participation and belonging lies the awareness of the dynamic between interaction and the need for one's own time and space.

One morning when Kostas came to the ECEC institution, Fawad and Mehemet came running towards him, Mehemet in his pyjamas. Fawad took Kostas by the arm and led him towards a hut the boys had created by using a blanket and the wooden construction of the nature playground. Kostas was told to enter their hut and to listen to their wish of wanting a real treehouse -not just a hut with a blanket.

Together they decided where to build the treehouse, what kind of materials and which tools were needed. The boys wanted to place the treehouse as far away from the Yurt as possible. They wanted a specific place for themselves—somewhere difficult to enter for the youngest children in the ECEC institution. During the next days the creation of the treehouse went on. Kostas were showing the boys how to use the saw, the hammer and helped to find proper materials for each part of the treehouse. From distance one could both hear and see the boys and Kostas eagerly discuss how to solve problems and find solutions during the process.

A dialectical relational perspective emphasizes the balance and interplay between opposing forces or ideas through communication and interaction (Schibbye, 2002, p. 35–38). Something that emerges in the narrative above through a balance between child-led and adult-guided activities between Fawad, Mehmet and educator Kostas. The children initiate the project by expressing their desire for a real treehouse, while Kostas provides guidance and support. This balance between child-led creativity and adult facilitation reflects a dialectical approach where both autonomy and guidance are valued in line with the principles of an equal dialogue (Broström & Hansen, 2004). The boys' desire to build the treehouse in a specific, somewhat secluded location, highlights the balance between their need for a personal space and the broader group dynamics within the ECEC institution. This interplay between individual needs and group belonging is an important aspect of the dialectical perspective (Schibbye, 2002).

Triggering refers to events or interactions that initiate significant responses or actions (Wallerstedt et al., 2021). Fawad's former experience working with Kostas and the boys' excitement and their request for a real treehouse function as triggers to start the project of building a treehouse. These initial interactions set the stage for the collaborative effort that follows. Throughout the construction process, various challenges and the need for problem-solving trigger learning opportunities. Kostas's demonstrations of tool use and material selection trigger the boys' engagement and skill acquisition and show how important the adult role is as a driving force in this construction play.

Triggering events, such as the boys' request for a treehouse and the problem-solving during its construction, drive the narrative forward and highlight key

learning moments. Further, these triggers may foster a dynamic and responsive play environment, emphasizing self- and community-efficacy (Hobfoll et al., 2021), which will be highlighted in the next narrative about Fawad gathering new friends.

Gathering New Friends

Fawad and Mehmet had to say goodbye to each other because of Mehmet's asylum process. Then Noor came to live in the camp. She was five years old and had been fleeing since she was two years old. She had two older teenage sisters; her father was in prison and her mother worked as a translator spending much of her time outside the camp. When Noor came to the ECEC institution she acted like she didn't want any contact with other children, and she preferred to be close to one of the educators. Giorgos, the oldest Greek boy in the group, liked Noor and invited her to see the treehouse. Fawad went together with them. Noor did not want to climb the ladder to the treehouse but sit under it and pick flowers. The same thing happened the next day. But the third day Noor grabbed one of the educators' arms and went in the direction of the treehouse, with the boys following. She started climbing the ladder still holding on to the educator and signalled that the educator should enter the treehouse as well. This was the beginning of a role play consisting of Giorgos as the father, Noor as the mother, Fawad as the brother and the educator as the Yah-yah, grandmother in Greek.

Noor had spent most of her childhood fleeing. The educators perceived her as a child who had little experience of "being a child", meaning her behavior could be more reminiscent of a teenager, dismissive and arrogant when meeting her peers. According to Bath (2017) every experience is unique and therefore impossible to classify. Further he underlines the importance of being aware of the damage resulting from what "does not happen", so-called neglect. In the case with Noor, she had few experiences related to being a child playing with peers and the educator played a crucial role by providing security and support for her, both in establishing new relations and entering play (Hobfoll et al., 2021). When being close to Noor, the educator herself functions as a trigger making it possible for Noor to grab her arm and climb the ladder. The educators' dialectical understanding and practices (Schibbye, 2002, p. 95) can in this case, be understood as triggers (Wallerstedt et al., 2021). Further, it is possible to understand how the educator both promotes Noor's need for safety and sense of self-efficacy, making it possible for her to connect with the other children in play (Hobfoll et al., 2021).

The role of being a "Yah-yah", an old and wise lady, gives the possibility of being the calm and safe person in the play which not only provides Noor with security but also enriches the play for all the children. The "Yah-yah" may also be the one who gathers the family and make them connect, in line with Hobfoll et al. (2021) principles for reducing anxiety and stress. This is a role with several options for the educator to trigger the children's interest and engagement by introducing new and stimulating activities and materials to the play (Wallerstedt et al., 2021),

and let the children explore social interaction and relationships in a safe setting, important for developing social skills (Pramling et al., 2019). In addition, social interaction can be understood as a dialectical activity (Schibbye, 2002) allowing the children to navigate, integrate and transform different experiences in their roles (Hohr, 2018).

Concluding Discussion

The overall theme in this chapter was to explore the role of early childhood educators in playful activities together with children in an ECEC institution in a refugee camp on Lesbos.

In all the three narratives, the early childhood educators have an important role in facilitating and supporting the children's play. They provide guidance, resources, and emotional support, which helps the children engage in meaningful activities and build relationships. In the first narrative Kostas takes initiative to build a nature playground, which can be understood as an act of self-efficacy (Hobfoll et al., 2021) and as a trigger for Fawad's opportunity to participate in the activity, potentially leading to new experiences related to his relationship with Kostas and, later, in play with Mehmet. Since, the concept of triggering is interpreted in a more overarching manner than described in Wallerstedt et al. (2021), the actions of Kostas can be understood as a triggering factor for the subsequent events described in the narratives *building a treehouse* and *gathering new friends*. Working with wood makes Fawad experience a safe environment that leads him, according to his father, to open up emotionally and talk about his grandfather. Further, it is possible to understand this interactional activity as a trigger for Fawad's further engagement in collaboration with Mehmet.

When Kostas collaborates with Fawad and Mehmet to build a treehouse, he intentionally uses triggers during the construction play. He provides tools, shows the boys how to use them, and guides them without directing them towards a predetermined goal. By engaging in meaningful tasks, exploring possibilities, and cooperating with the children, Kostas also enhances the boys' self-efficacy and community efficacy (Hobfoll et al., 2021). The completion of projects like the treehouse, and the positive experiences shared with the educators and peers, may promote a sense of hope and future possibilities.

Dialectical relationship theory (Schibbye, 2002) emphasizes the dynamic and interactive nature of relationships, where opposing forces or tensions are managed through communication and interaction, which are relevant aspects in all three narratives. The early childhood educators balance the children's need of independence and support. By acknowledging Fawad's and Noor's need to approach situations in their own pace, the educator also acknowledges their autonomy. Further, the educators provide a structured environment (e.g., planned activities) while remaining flexible to the children's needs and interests (e.g., building a treehouse based on the children's ideas).

As an early childhood educator in a changing world, one is part of a global community of professionals working to promote play and learning opportunities for children, regardless of whether one works in an ECEC institution, in a refugee camp or elsewhere. Recognizing that children come with experiences that adults do not necessarily understand and cannot relate to is an important aspect working as an early childhood educator. This can be seen in light of Schibbye's (2002) dialectical understanding, meaning that one sees reality while recognizing that the whole consists of more than different parts, and that these parts vary together presuppose one another, point to each other and must be understood in relation to each other. This perspective emphasizes the importance of equality in the relationship between educators and children, and in this chapter, with special attention to children with a refugee background and play. A child with experiences from living as a refugee may have had to put play on hold. Additionally, negative experiences may occupy such a large part of the child's consciousness that they struggle to engage in play long after their flight is over.

There is a need for greater understanding of the importance of play as a fundamental and vital need for children with refugee experiences. This chapter is a contribution to promote the significance of educators being aware of self-efficacy, both their own and the children's, together with the concept of triggering and how this can enforce children.

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Part IV
Conclusions, Outlooks, and Implications

Chapter 11

Conclusions and Future Directions for Research and Practice in Adult-Child Interactions in Play



Niklas Pramling, Cecilia Wallerstedt, Malin Nilsen, and Ann Farrell

Introduction

This book has its background in a combined research and development project that led to the theorization of Play-Responsive Early Childhood Education and Care (PRECEC) (Pramling et al., 2019). On an overarching level, three main lessons emerged from this research. The first lesson was that there is often initial resistance among personnel in ECEC settings to play with children, a resistance related to different (implicit or explicit) understandings of key processes such as play, teaching, education, agency, and care. The second lesson learned was that, when looking at actual adult-child play, there are ample developmental opportunities and support that can benefit children in play and beyond (learning to play, learning in play, and learning from play). The third lesson was to acknowledge the value of empirical studies of play activities, *in situ*, to complement work based on ideology or views of play, children, and childhood. From these general observations, new questions emerged. These questions concern how other settings (e.g., formal/informal, in other cultural environments, in other adult-child relationships) relate to findings from ECEC context: What are general (recurring) patterns and what are important differences (and how may these be explained, theorized)? These questions propelled to the present book, which aims to provide empirically and theoretically grounded insights into what happens when adults play with children, and what are the

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potentials, consequences, challenges of, or resistances to doing so, with an international outlook. The book, as such, constitutes an important expansion beyond our own research and the state-of-the-art research field (for the latter, see e.g., Bruce et al., 2017; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Smith & Roopnarine, 2019).

The studies reported in the present book contribute: (i) concrete and insightful examples of how adult-child relationships in play can develop, and (ii) evidence of adult-child interaction in play in contexts beyond ECEC (what we have previously studied), and with an international outlook. The latter, importantly, makes clear how playing with (one's) children is valued differently, framed by different circumstances and mediated by beliefs and perspectives on play, children, childhood, education, and parent-child relationships (see particularly, Roopnarine & Wusirige, 2025, Chap. 3, this book). These contributions are important to the research literature on play more generally and to the development of PRECEC more specifically. In this final chapter, we discuss some of the more specific contributions made by the studies included in the volume.

The Contributions Adults Make to Play

When adults *do* participate in play with children, we can see *how* they participate, *what* they contribute, and potentially what this *leads to* or implies. Working from the premise that adults *can* and *do* make contributions to children's play, the book reveals four interrelated themes that have been made visible in the empirical work reported by chapter authors.

The first pertains to adults supporting children to realize, make real and carry out in play what they imagine (Bredikyte, 2025, Chap. 7, this book). Similarly, adults have been shown to support children to get “the play activity off the ground” (Cekaite & Simonsson, 2025, Chap. 6, this book, p. 106), to move play along and to help children identify and clarify “what can be relevant and exciting in the play” (p. 107). In engaging with children in play, adults can model “flexible play behaviour” (Bredikyte, 2025, Chap. 7, this book, p. 132), maintaining the play's overall structure while upholding its central focus. These findings imply that adult participation is important for supporting children to learn to play (in ways that are engaging for others to participate in) and to play themselves (see Hagen & Heldal, 2025, Chap. 10, this book). This highlights the broader role of adults in encouraging children's imaginative engagement by offering the support and structure needed to bring their ideas to life. Rather than taking over, adults can contribute to play by collaborating with children to shape and sustain the flow of play, allowing children to experiment with ideas they might not pursue alone. This collaborative effort reinforces the dynamic and evolving nature of play, where participants build on each other's contributions, ensuring that play remains both meaningful and open-ended. In this way, adults can balance their involvement, helping children develop confidence in navigating and expanding their imaginative worlds.

Second, adults have been found to engage in dialogic interaction with children to ensure children's play ideas are retained. Asking questions that progress the play can sustain the rhythm of the play and the emotional engagement in play (Cekaite & Simonsson, 2025, Chap. 6, this book; cf. Bredikyte, 2025, Chap. 7, this book). Also, adults can contribute to the co-narrative elaboration of the play, whereby they extend the storyline of the play in response to the children's suggestion (Kalkusch & Perren, 2025, Chap. 5, this book). In addition to verbal interaction, embodied communication, such as gestures and expressions, can support the flow and continuity of play (Cekaite & Simonsson, 2025, Chap. 6, this book). Adults can also nurture children's agency by attuning to their cues and initiatives, enabling children to take ownership of their play narratives (Li, 2025, Chap. 8, this book). These dialogic interactions are shaped by the cultural and situational practices in which play occurs. The ways adults engage, whether guiding, following, or co-creating with children, emerge through their participation in shared activities and interactions. These practices mediate the balance between child-led and adult-supported play, influencing the dynamics of engagement and the co-construction of meaning (Roopnarine & Wusirige, 2025, Chap. 3, this book). This dialogic and responsive engagement implies that adult involvement in play is not about directing or controlling the activity but rather about co-constructing meaning with children. Such interaction highlights the relational nature of play, where adults and children collaboratively build an evolving storyline, fostering both individual development and mutual understanding.

A third theme relates to adults engaging in "critical incidents" in play episodes and providing technical assistance where necessary. Adult participation can consist of taking initiatives to orchestrate critical incidents, to capture and maintain the interest of children and to move events forward (cf. Bredikyte, 2025, Chap. 7, this book, p. 125). Relational and emotional support during critical incidents in play is particularly important in environments marked by significant challenges where secure and supportive spaces help children engage in play, build trust, and form new relationships (Hagen & Heldal, 2025, Chap. 10, this book; Pursi et al., 2025, Chap. 9, this book). These findings emphasize the importance of adult involvement in orchestrating moments of connection and growth, even in difficult contexts. Play also emerges as a key arena for children's right to express themselves and be heard (cf. Lagerlöf et al., 2023). The importance of encountering critical incidents, for instance a problem, an obstacle or a tension (cf. alterity, Linell, 2009) in initiating and engaging in inquiry has forcefully been argued by Dewey (1910/1997). Making play engaging and interesting may also require some obstacle, particularly for narrative play, since a narrative typically involves an obstacle encountered and taken on.

A fourth and overarching theme is adults promoting children's autonomy in play, which in itself can be understood as a key educational objective and a way of supporting and maintaining a sustainable play culture (Bredikyte, 2025, Chap. 7, this book). That is, adult participation in play with children does not imply decreased agency for children but can actually contribute to supporting children in developing and exercising agency (cf. Lagerlöf et al., 2019; Pramling et al., 2024). Adults can support autonomy by creating safe, supportive spaces where children are

encouraged to take the lead in shaping play narratives and exploring their ideas (Pursi et al., 2025, Chap. 9, this book). In the context of intergenerational play, adults, particularly grandparents, foster autonomy by sharing cultural knowledge and supporting imaginative exploration (Farrell, 2025, Chap. 4, this book). By engaging in play that bridges generations, adults help children develop relational autonomy, strengthening connections across ages and communities. These perspectives underscore that promoting autonomy is not only about individual independence but also about fostering meaningful relationships and collective growth within play. Making play sustainable implies supporting the development of the narrative of the play—weaving more possible episodes together—for instance through adding critical incidents (cf. above) or introducing new roles. Narrative development and role expansion are two things a participant more familiar with the cultural practice of narrating and with a wider understanding of surrounding society can contribute to.

These emerging themes serve to nuance the discussion about the *contents* of play, a matter critical to discussions about play *in education*. Together, they illustrate how adults support children's learning in multifaceted ways; through fostering imagination, engaging in co-narrative elaboration, navigating challenges in critical incidents, and promoting autonomy. The book also highlights how these interactions are culturally and contextually mediated, reflecting diverse perspectives on the adult-child relationship. Importantly, these themes align with children's rights to agency and participation, demonstrating how play serves as a vehicle for both personal and relational growth. The book speaks to what children can learn, or actually are seen to learn, through participating in play with adults. This includes learning in and from play but also children learning to develop play they initiate and participate in, from engaging in small units (e.g., dyads) to multiparty play; increasingly engaging with gender-transgressing play partners; and playing with new partners (Bredikyte, 2025, Chap. 7, this book). Through these 'expansions', children gain a wider relationship net and experience.

Methodological Reflections

One thing that is striking when reading all the chapters of this book is the prevalence of references to Vygotsky (1933/1966, 1934/1987, 1997, 1998). In one sense this reflects as more general trend in educational thinking, where Vygotskian theory largely has taken the place of Piagetian theory. Still, the frequent recurrence of Vygotsky in the research literature on play and on adults in play with children is worth reflecting upon.

A key insight of modern theory of science is the close and necessary ties between the parts of research—the methodology—that is that theory, method of generating, analyzing and reporting empirical data are logically consistent (Säljö, 2009; Pramling, 2023). Another, and inherently related insight is that there is no neutral position to take in research, nor any (theoretical) perspective that is a-perspectival (Hanson, 1958/1981). Ethical considerations about adult involvement in play

include risks of over-involvement such as unintentionally dominating or disrupting children's autonomy, which highlights the importance of reflective practice and ethical sensitivity (Trawick-Smith & Lee, 2025, Chap. 2, this book). These considerations are essential when designing and analyzing studies on adult-child interactions, ensuring that research aligns with the developmental needs and rights of children. Theories, similarly, mediate what and how research is carried out (Schoultz et al., 2001). If, for instance, being interested in learning and studying this through analyzing discourse/interactional data implies a perspective according to which learning is a communicative phenomenon rather than a cognitive one. If instead taking the latter view, that is viewing learning as a cognitive phenomenon, a theoretical elaboration is needed that explains how the communication studied do not constitute or include instances of learning but only indicate learning as something 'behind' or 'underneath' this communication and actually being cognitive is needed. Likewise, if studying communication with an interest in learning, a theoretical point of view clarifying how learning is conceived as communicatively constituted is presumed or, preferably, explicated.

Returning to the frequent referencing to Vygotsky, we may see several reasons why it is evident in the literature (beyond the more general shift in educational thinking, as already mentioned). These reasons include the fact that Vygotskian theory provides an alternative to dichotomous accounts, where the world is divided into mutually exclusive alternatives (e.g., claims about "children's play" versus "non-play (if adults attempt to, or do, participate)"). The unproductivity of dichotomies for analyzing and understanding change (processes, activities: learning, teaching, development etc.) was briefly discussed in our introductory chapter. Further, understanding development as communicative and contingent on participation in mutual activities with more experienced participants (typically adults), it is not surprising that studies of play—learning to play, learning in play, and learning from play—would be explicitly or implicitly mediated by Vygotskian theory.

Important to note, in relation to Vygotskian theory, is that the research reported here goes beyond it. Vygotskian theory is not used deductively to sort observations into predefined slots. The latter would, in fact, be entirely contrary to Vygotskian theory. Rather, having Vygotsky's work as an important foundation but not being restricted by it means using his insights—conceptual resources—as analytical tools (rather than as preset boxes to sort observations into) –, that is, in theory of science terms, abductively. One of several such developments is PRECEC, which, amongst other things, incorporates and contributes analytical resources for grasping processes of differences (alterity) amongst participants in activities, a more dynamic grasp of processes of establishing, falling out of, and reestablishing intersubjectivity (for an early and decisive contribution, see Rommetveit, 1974), as well as a more dynamic way of analyzing processes of play (see theoretical clarification of and, empirically, the shifting amongst participants, between acting as is, as if, and what if, and how adults support different processes: towards a set goal (scaffolding) and towards an open goal (triggering) (Præmling et al., 2019, 2024; Wallerstedt et al., 2021), as well as more specifically related to ECEC, differentiating between instruction and teaching, and how to understand these as part of what constitutes an education.

Further Research

The corpus of work reported in this book points to key areas for further research. These include:

1. Linguistically diverse play settings. Given increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in many contexts, research could focus on adults playing in and with different languages in multilingual settings (Cekaite & Simonsson, 2025, Chap. 6, this book; Abou-Taouk et al., 2024; Kultti, 2022, 2023).
2. How educators (ECEC teachers and teachers in school) respond to the ‘free to’ (van Oers, 2014) of play and alterity (Linell, 2009) (see the introductory chapter of the present book). That is, how educators—potentially with children—negotiate the possibilities of the unforeseeable and novel, on the one hand, and the task they face of introducing children to and supporting them in appropriating particular forms of knowledge, on the other.
3. How educators (ECEC teachers and teachers in school), during their education and professional development, learn to play with children in developmentally rewarding and engaging ways (cf. Loizou & Trawick-Smith, 2022) is an important focus of further investigation.
4. Given the prevalence of digital tools in many children’s lives today (including in ECEC), a timely research focus is digital technology-mediated play between children and adults who are physically present as well as physically absent but psychologically present.
5. Intergenerational play (cf. Farrell, 2025, Chap. 4, this book): How do extended family members play with children and perhaps especially what are the narratives of play that emerge in such interaction between generations?
6. The importance of recognizing and further enriching the quality of adult-child interactions in various environments, such as at home, but also in settings where children and adults meet, for example, within the healthcare sector.

Implications for ECEC and ECEC Teacher Education and beyond

There is much to learn for ECEC and ECEC teacher education from the studies of this book. Perhaps the most important and fundamental lesson is to educate preservice educators on playing with children (cf. Loizou & Trawick-Smith, 2022), and for ECEC personnel to actually do so. In a key passage in her chapter, Bredikyte argues,

By playing with children, teachers learn to play themselves. Therefore, it is important to stress that all players improve and perfect their playing skills. Teachers grow professionally by developing play skills and can better understand and support children’s play. [...] Generally, a good player is sensitive, responsive, creative, improviser, and constantly learning. Becoming a ‘master player’ means professional growth for teachers. By experiencing play ‘from the inside,’ one can grasp the logic of children’s play and thinking. As a result, one can better support their development and learning by understanding the children’s motives and personal sense. (Bredikyte, 2025, Chap. 7, this book, p. 134)

Everyone can learn to play; it is not an inherent characteristic of some people but is mediated by cultural knowledge concerning how to imagine, what roles can be taken, and how the narrative of the play can be developed to make it exciting and inclusive, and much more. All these insights mediate players' engagement in play with each other. And like all cultural mediation, we learn these forms of knowledge in interaction with others; they do not develop naturally. Making playing a part of ECEC teacher education (cf. Loizou & Trawick-Smith, 2022; Pramling, 2022) appears as a key practice of such an education as well as to the professional development of ECEC personnel.

The implications of the studies presented in this book has a wider reach than only to ECEC (and ECEC teacher education). Also, other adults interacting with children, in formal or informal settings and activities can learn from this body of work. In this chapter, we have argued for the importance of adults sensitively participating in play with children. This is particularly important to make play developing and rewarding for all children, that is, for social inclusion (cf. Trawick-Smith & Lee, 2025, Chap. 2, this book). However, what if children themselves were to distinguish between play and non-play based on the absence and presence, respectively, of adults in the activity, one may ask. Such a stance was reported by McInnes et al. (2013). However, and importantly, rather than simply report this finding, the researchers investigated why some children thought so. They did so through analyzing the interactive patterns between children and adults in play activities where children who made this distinction participated and compared these patterns with those of adults and children playing together where the children did not express this idea. What they found was that the interactive patterns differed in an important regard. Children who were used to adults that limited their space for action, and who tended to ask closed questions preferred to play without adults. In contrast, children who were used to adults acting in more allowing and open ways did not distinguish between play and non-play in terms of the absence or presence of adults. Obviously, adults may be poor play partners, but so may children be at times. Hence, what is critical here is whether adult participants are sensitively responsive or not, that is, whether they are able to participate in and contribute to the involvement of play, not that they are adults. Patterns of participation rather than age is the decisive matter. Hence, what is important to clarify—and to which the studies in the present book amply contributes—is *when* and *how* adults participate (and *how* they make such choices), not merely *that* they participate. However, simply *that* they participate constitutes a first step, but to become a valuable play partner also adults need to 'dust off' or develop their playing skills.

Some Concluding Remarks

A focus on adults in play with children requires attending analytically to *relationships* between (cf. the title of this book "...with...") rather than what one play partner (e.g., the adult) does. This is discussed by Kalkusch and Perren, "To evaluate the role of adults in educational settings, e.g. based on their involvement from

passive to active, we simultaneously must consider the role of children. [---] [A]n educator can exhibit either low or high levels of initiative, just as the child can.” (Kalkusch & Perren, 2025, Chap. 5, this book, p. 85f.). This reasoning, further, indicates the importance of understanding play as an interactive or a communicative activity, and hence, as constituted by participants’ response patterns in mutually constituting activity. Hence, the teacher’s participation cannot be understood independent of the children’s participation (Pramling et al., 2019). This reasoning also implies the necessity to base claims about the whereabouts of adults in play with children on empirical research, since it is only this that is responsive to actual response patterns. General claims about adults destroying or ‘hijacking’ children’s play if they participate also disregard the role—participation—of the children. Hence, somewhat ironically, such claims about protecting the play of children (from adults, i.e., the ‘free from’ as criticized by van Oers, 2014) in effect disregard children’s own contributions to play, at least when playing with adults/teachers.

Finally, social pretend play offers children a valuable opportunity to develop their social skills and strengthen their peer relationships, particularly when adults are actively involved. This is especially beneficial for children with limited language comprehension, as they may find it more challenging to engage with peers in structured or verbal activities. The symbolic nature of pretend play allows them to express themselves and interact with others in a more accessible way. Thus, adult’s active involvement in social pretend play is well-suited to support children’s development of social skills and the quality of peer relationships in an age-appropriate way. (Kalkusch & Perren, 2025, Chap. 5, this book, p. 96)

This reasoning, importantly, indicates how adult participation does not imply merely adult-child interaction; rather, through teacher mediation (see Trawick-Smith & Lee, 2025, Chap. 2, this book), also child-child relationships are developed, of importance to all children but particularly to those not mastering the majority language of the setting or community. That is, adult participation makes an important difference in this regard—making activities inclusive—and especially to some groups of children. This again, reminds us to be mindful of the differences in children’s experience and knowledge and not make ourselves rationally blind to these facts through invoking an abstracted child (who has no difficulties initiating, participating in or developing play, who is never marginalized or excluded etc.).

As we introduced in the introductory chapter to this book, looking at the empirical evidence, there is no reason to restrict play to being the exclusive domain of children; children may play with other children as well as with adults—and children do many other things than playing when they are together with other children without adults—which makes it more conceptually sensible we argued, to talk about ‘play’ than ‘children’s play’ (Pramling et al., 2019). The latter term implies that adults are outside this kind of activity. But as seen in empirical research, not least in the studies of the present book, adults do take part in play with children, and like any interaction—which playing together constitutes cases of—participants fall in and out of coordination. In theoretical terms, there is an ongoing interactional negotiation between participants in establishing temporarily sufficient intersubjectivity (Rommetveit, 1974) and differences and novel contributions with the potential to develop the activity in novel ways (alterity) (Linell, 2009), whether children play

with other children only or also with adults. However, whether and if so how adults participate in play with children is mediated (Wells, 2007) by other concerns, not least beliefs about children, childhood, learning and development, play, and adult-child relationships, as thoroughly shown and discussed in Roopnarine and Wusirige's chapter, this book; see also, in terms of ethical implications of different perspectives on these matters, in the illuminative discussion by Trawick-Smith & Lee, 2025, Chap. 2, this book).

In reasoning about adults participating in play with children, from the point of view of a refugee center for children, Hagen and Heldal (2025, Chap. 10, this book) emphasize the need to "being aware of the damage resulting from what 'does not happen', so-called neglect" and how, on some occasions, as with a child who has had "few experiences related to being a child in play with peers", the educator is shown to play a crucial role by providing security and support for the child, both in establishing new relations and entering play" (Hagen & Heldal, 2025, Chap. 10, this book, p. 184; cf. also the example provided by Trawick-Smith & Lee, already mentioned). Supporting children to play together is simultaneously an act of caring, of relationship building, and of playing.

In conclusion, adults are essential participants in play with children. Their roles, whether as facilitators, co-players, or designers of play environments, contribute to children's learning, emotional well-being, and social development. The studies in this book highlight the importance of cultural and contextual sensitivity in understanding and supporting play, offering significant contributions to the field of research on adult-child interactions in play.

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