

What influence does play with siblings and peers have on children's development?

by Patricia Karsten

The question invites us to explore the developmental effects of children's play with siblings and peers as opposed to play with other persons or playing alone, and to find out which aspects of children's development might be concerned, when we think about their physical, emotional, intellectual and social development. We will consider the special nature of children's relation to siblings and peers and present two typical forms of children's play in order to point out the developmental effects of play. We will conclude by briefly considering to what extent developmental theories are able to explain the findings of recent research in this field.

Children's relations to parents and other caregivers are characterized by complementary processes aiming at protection and acquisition of knowledge for the child, but with an advantage for the adult partner regarding authority. In contrast to this, children's relation to their siblings and peers is characterized by reciprocal processes based on similarity in knowledge and power (Schaffer 2003). This provides children with the opportunity to acquire and practice skills they need to co-operate and resolve conflict 'among equals'. The relation to siblings usually incorporates a certain difference in knowledge and skills, from which younger children take advantage when the older sibling acts as tutor and role model in their play (Schaffer 1996).

A typical type of play children engage in is play fight, or rough-and-tumble play. It consists in playful wrestling, pushing and chasing, but without hurting each other. Indicators that it is play and not real aggression are that children laugh during their play, and constantly change between dominant and subordinated position (Smith et al. 1999). The physical interaction helps to develop physical, but also social skills, because on the one hand, children have to use their strength when they try to win, on the other hand they must restrict their strength so as to not hurt the other. Research observations of young boys in Mexico shows how quickly playfight can turn into real aggression, if children hurt each other, and how their change of mood is accompanied by the participants stopping to laugh (Maccoby 1999). These patterns seem to be culturally independent, as they have been observed in Mexico and seem equally familiar in western context. Thus playfight develops not only physical strength, but also the skill to limit its use, the ability to take turns and to use laughter as a social signal.

While play fight uses predominantly non-verbal communication such as laughter to regulate interaction, language plays a more important role in pretend play, where children engage in acting out roles in a shared imaginary scenario. The two main forms of pretend play are thematic fantasy play and socio-dramatic play. In thematic fantasy play, children create adventurous situations and act out imaginary personalities, whereas in socio-dramatic play, they act in typical real-life situations, like 'bringing baby to bed' or 'visiting friends for tea'. (Smilanski 1968). Functional explanations of the developmental effects of pretend play have been gained from discourse analysis, examining children's verbal communication during their play (Corsaro 1986). The results suggest that thematic fantasy play helps children to cope with their fears and anxieties by sharing them with others and by finding play solutions, and also fosters creativity, since situations are invented and dialogs change from one occasion to the next. sContrasting to this, socio-dramatic play functions as 'anticipatory socialization

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device' (Stone 1981) in that children imitate real-life behaviour which prepares them for social situations they will encounter later in adult life.

The wish to take on a preferred role is a possible source of conflict in pretend play, which can be resolved by turn-taking. The thematic fantasy play sequence 'Dracula and the monster vanishing hero' (Fein 1984) illustrates the social process involved. The sequence is a transcript of the interaction between two three and a half year old boys, Peter and Michael. One boy is Dracula, and the other is the hero with the power to kill Dracula, then they change roles. A moment of conflict arises in their play when Michael does not want to take the role of Dracula, thus blocking turn-taking. But when Peter gets angry, Michael resigns, accepts the role change and their play continues. Michael resolved the conflict by accepting the inferior role when he felt that Peter became angry. The sequence illustrates that children are able to interpret the other's change of mood as a signal to co-operate, and continue playing by successfully practicing turn-taking. The sequence also shows that the children switch between communication and metacommunication (Göncü 1998, Bateson 1955): They communicate in their imaginary role ("Grrrow!" – "Pow! Pow! Pow!"), but they also use the metacommunication level in order to negotiate about the role change ("Now you be Dracula" – "No, I.."). The ability to react to other's emotional situation and switch between communication levels is important for regulating social interaction, and these skills are practiced in their play.

Having to share a toy is another possible source of conflict. Sheldon (1992) and Maccoby (1999) compared the discourse of two four year old pairs of boys and girls in a play situation where each pair had to share a toy. The girls were engaged in a pretend play situation, using a doctor's kit. The boys were playing with a telephone, but their interaction lacked a pretend situation. The analysis of the children's interaction showed that the girls used 'double-voiced discourse' which included negotiation and attempts at persuasion, and that they were able to take the other's point of view under consideration: "May I?" – "No, I'm gonna need the shot" – "But ... I need this though" – "Ok, just use it once"; and later: "Well, let's pretend ... we have to look in her ears together". Contrasting to this, the boys' discourse was 'single-voiced' and did not contain negotiating: "No, that's my phone" – "No, it's on my couch". The girls continued to play together, whereas the boys ended up one watching the other play without participating in any way. The research shows that there are gender-specific differences in play behaviour. Both boys and girls find themselves in potentially conflicting situations, but girls seem to be better at making use of language as a social tool to resolve conflict and play together co-operatively. From the above examples we conclude that children need and make use of quite sophisticated social skills when they play, leading to the question how these skills are initially acquired.

Dunn's study on siblings (Dunn 1988) illustrates the development from simple to more complex forms of playful interaction. This development begins with simple imitative behaviour, with which children begin to join in the action of others, as illustrated by the observation of an 8 month old child imitating the finger wiggling of his older sibling, then "both wiggle their fingers together, with mutual gaze and laughter". Children further develop their understanding of other's intentions and try to join in their activity, as shown by the observation of a 14 month old child: After his older sibling started singing, the child gets two musical instruments from their toy box, offers the other a pipe and makes blow gestures, thus proposing to make music together. Dunn found that from the age of 18 to 24 months, children develop the ability to engage in pretend play by following the instructions given by their older siblings, and begin to understand that they are playing a role. Dunn's findings support the

Karsten, Patricia (2008) What influence does play with siblings and peers have on children's development?

thesis that development of social skills required for playing follows stages of increasing complexity. By giving instructions, also the older siblings develop their social skills as tutors and role models.

Since children with siblings have ample opportunity to develop their social skills 'among equals', they may have a developmental advantage. Role-playing with siblings promotes children's understanding of other's perspectives, providing the cognitive basis for turn-taking and co-operative behaviour. Understanding of other's perspectives can be tested by a simple game, where children are invited to hide a coin in one of their hands and let others guess where the coin is, as proposed in the BBC study 'Child of our Time' (The Open University 2006). Most children at the age of three are not able to play this game on others. Rubin, one of the boys presented in the study, was able to play it, showing his well-developed understanding for other's perspectives, gained from play with his older brothers. But Rubin had great social difficulties at nursery school, indicating a lack of social skills otherwise. On the other hand, the BBC study presented Helena, a girl who was born prematurely and due to health concerns, grew up in complete isolation from other children up to the age of three. At nursery school, Helena developed into a girl who enjoyed playing with other children and had many friends. We must infer that play with older siblings may promote understanding for other's perspectives, but that this is only a necessary, not a sufficient condition to successfully co-operate when playing with other children.

The preceding analysis has shown that seemingly negative aspects of play, such as conflict about roles or access to toys, have positive developmental effects, in that they encourage children to find co-operative solutions and practice their social skills. Blatchford's playground studies (Blatchford et al 1990, Blatchford 1994) found that as children grow older, they continue to enjoy the opportunity to play and socialize with their peers at school playground, but the study also provides evidence that especially girls tend to resign from the playground because they are not comfortable with teasing and bullying among the children. As children begin to develop their own culture, these playground experiences are valuable for the development of the ability to regulate conflict without adult intervention. But if playful behaviour changes its character into bullying and real aggression, adult intervention might be justified, in order to help children to deal with this behaviour and defend their position within their social group. (Blatchford 1999, Littleton and Miell 2005).

As we infer from Oates, Sheehy and Woods' (2005) presentation of child development theories, these do not particularly aim at explaining the acquisition of social skills, nor do they place specific importance on the influence of play. But some of their findings can be applied to the analysis of the acquisition of social skills through play. Social learning theory will explain the development of social skills through imitation, such as the imitative finger wiggling behaviour in infants reported in Dunn's above-cited study (Dunn 1988), but also children's engagement in socio-dramatic play, where they imitate complex sequences from adult behaviour. Constructivism helps us to understand that children build up their social skills through stages of increasing complexity, as described in Dunn's study, but also provides an explanation for the importance of peer contact, which is said to present a 'socio-cognitive challenge' due to the lack of authority in the relation, thus providing incentives to negotiate outcomes in conflicting situations. Finally social constructivism points to social interaction as a way to develop social skills through play, but as it stresses the importance of the difference in knowledge for development, it fails to explain why play with same-aged or younger children also develops social skills. Integrating further research results might help to form a more complete theory on this aspect of child development.

To conclude, the analysis points out that play with siblings and peers develops children's physical, intellectual and most importantly their social skills, in that it offers the opportunity for understanding differing perspectives and wishes of others, as well as the opportunity to resolve conflict through communication. Seemingly negative aspects of play like competition, conflict and aggression have positive effects when they encourage to find co-operative solutions without adult intervention. Play itself can be seen as an 'interactional accomplishment' (Littleton and Miell 2005), because children must master social skills like turn-taking, communication on multiple levels, and have a sensibility for the other person's mood. These skills are developed through play during childhood and youth, thus preparing children for many aspects of adult life.

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