

Play is a natural and significant aspect of children's learning and development. Adults can be important to children's play, as they act as "play agents." Their involvement significantly influences the quality of the play activities in which children engage. The author briefly reviews the theoretical assumptions about adults' role in children's play to provide context for a study conducted in a preschool setting in Sweden. Observations from the study of adults' interaction with children during their playtime shed light on the potential negative effects of adult actions that may interrupt children's play. The study provides recommendations about ways to carry out daily preschool routines that do not impede the ongoing learning and development processes that may be occurring during play.

Cautionary Tales on Interrupting Children's Play

A Study From Sweden

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Today, many education professionals acknowledge play as a medium for children's learning and multifaceted development. Several researchers, including Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (2006), Sutton-Smith (1997), and Lindberg (2003), have noted the positive social, cognitive, and emotional development that play promotes for children. It is also important to discuss adults' role and involvement in children's play.

The prominent play theorist Sutton-Smith (1997) explained that adults are important players or play agents. However, if adults are not skilled in how to interact appropriately with children as they play, their involvement could be an interruption and a threat to gaining the full benefit of children's play.

The potentially inappropriate interference by adults in children's play in preschool settings seems to be an overlooked aspect in the research literature. This article focuses on adults' involvement in children's play, briefly reviewing theoretical assumptions about adults' involvement in children's play and discussing practical data obtained from an observation and unstructured interview at a preschool setting in Sweden. The central questions concerned how the observed preschool teachers took part in the children's play and how they reacted to children's actions during play.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adult Involvement in Children's Play

In play, children exercise control over their activity and thus exercise power (Sutton-Smith, 1997). In this sense, children being playful are active agents creating and breaking rules, making choices, and learning self-control or self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1978). During play, children are social agents who are competent interpreters of the world around them and are understood as having influence on and in their life. Although children are believed to have the competence to control their play, it is not uncommon to see adults unknowingly/unintentionally interrupting

children's play with arguably inappropriate pedagogical acts. The purpose of this article is to show how such action by adults can have detrimental effects on children's play.

Adults are an important part of children's play process, helping the children to engage in play and possibly achieve gains in play-related areas of development. Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the zone of proximal development suggests that adults could help young children engage in advanced forms of play that they would not manage on their own. Frost and Sunderlin (1985) and Christie (1983) note that adults' involvement in play may be imperative, such as during higher forms of play, when play gets very repetitive and brings loss of interest among children, and when there is a natural need for encouragement and support. However, this does not mean that adults should attempt to shape children's play so that it conforms to the teachers' preconceptions of play.

Aside from such need for adults' involvement, Wolfgang, Mackender, and Wolfgang (1981) indicate that children have their own world where adults do not belong. Unintended interference in children's play may hamper the creative process that takes place in a child's mind. Brown and Briggs (1990) describe adults as play *facilitators*, not play *participants*, who show children how to play. They stress that ownership of ideas has to be avoided and be left for the major actors—the children. Johansson (2002) also points out that adults are responsible for building children's morale and safeguarding them from danger, but they should be conscious and extra careful not to teach or over persuade them during play.

Types of Adults' Roles in Children's Play

Scholars have identified certain types of roles that adults can adopt when involved in children's play situations. According to Johnson, Christie, and Wardle (2005), the two broad categories are the facilitative roles and the precarious roles. The facilitative roles are those of onlooker, stage manager, co-player, and play leader. The precarious roles are the uninvolved, the director, and the redirector.

According to this group of writers, adults

as onlookers serve as an appreciative audience for children's play activities. In this role, adults stay around the play area and give signals of approval without any direct involvement. In the stage manager role, adults are there to help and respond to children's requests during the play process. While acting as a co-player, adults join the children's play in minor and passive roles, letting the children lead the play. When adults exercise the role of leader, they deliberately exert effort to influence and enrich children's play.

Of the three precarious adult roles, the first one, the uninvolved, occurs when adults are ignorant of the playful interaction among children. Such a role has been highly condemned for its failure to realize the assistance that children may require when experiencing difficulty during play. The second role, the director, is manifested when the adult takes control of children's play. When teachers take on the role of the director, they remain on the sidelines and tell children what to do while playing. The last precarious role is the redirector, which is exhibited when the adult uses play inappropriately as a medium for academic teaching. In this role, teachers remain outside the play and ask questions aimed at suspending make-believe and interjecting reality into the play episode.

This study will examine some empirical data observed at a preschool setting in Sweden in order to understand the teachers' thinking about their role in relation to their actions while interfering in children's play. The observation focused on how adults interact with and involve themselves in children's play during their everyday routines.

METHODS AND CONTEXT

The study was conducted in an international preschool in Sweden. The preschool serves 80 children of various nationalities and the 12 teachers also come from various parts of the world. Through my prior connection with the school's afterschool program, I understood the school routines and knew most of the staff and some of the children. The observed teachers and the administration were fully aware of my study and its purpose. I participated as an observer, spending three

hours of observation on three different days. From the observed multiple play episodes during the three days, I chose six different play episodes to illustrate adult-child interactions.

For the purpose of collecting data, I used unstructured observation as a tool and made repeated observations of various play episodes. As I was interested in teachers' natural and spontaneous interactions with children, I chose to observe the "free play" sessions. Unlike the teacher-tailored and -organized activities, such free sessions would more likely provide opportunities for children to choose to participate in whatever activity they like with a lesser degree or absence of teacher intervention.

Only indoor free play activities were observed. The observed teachers' interactions during play were video recorded and analyzed in light of current beliefs about adults' involvement in children's play. To strengthen the data from the observation, an unstructured interview was also used to help determine the teachers' thinking behind their actions. Most of the oral questions in the interview were initiated by observed adult involvement and reaction to the children's play. During the data collection process, an agreement was reached with the preschool principal that the children, the teachers, and the setting would remain anonymous.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following six specific play episodes reveal the interruptive effect of adult's involvement and reaction to children's play.

Episode One

Children arrive at the preschool at different times, from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. While waiting for all the children to arrive, free play occurs in some of the common rooms in the school. On this particular day, the children were playing in the common room known as the "Pretend Room." This is a home-like room where children have access to a collection of various materials and toys for different imaginative or pretend play. It is an ideal place for the 5- to 6-year-olds to act out various social roles.

At the time of observation, three teachers and 18 children were present in the room. Some of the children were playing in groups

and others were playing alone. Jenifer, a 5-year-old, picked up a pink princess dress and put it on. She seemed to be curious about how it looked on her, going over to the mirror at the other corner. When Jenifer picked up a comb and started to comb her hair with it, a teacher noticed that she was not standing right in front of the mirror and thus could not watch her complete body. The teacher approached Jenifer and slowly positioned her closer to the mirror, saying, *"Jenifer, why don't you stand here at the front so that you can see yourself well?"* Jenifer looked at the teacher, but didn't respond. The teacher repeated, *"Yes, get closer to the mirror so that you can see your whole body."* Jenifer stopped combing her hair and moved away from the mirror and began playing with another toy.

I questioned why Jenifer moved away from the mirror. Was that the end of her play with the mirror? What else would she have done in front of the mirror? What else could the teacher have done so that the child's play would not have been interrupted? I understood the teacher's intention was to help Jenifer enjoy the play more, but the result was an interruption of her play. Without knowing and meaning it, the teacher had created what Brown and Briggs (1990) describe as a barrier to the development of children's thought process. What if the teacher had reacted in a different way? She might have stood in front of the mirror herself and demonstrated to Jenifer how she could see herself well. Perhaps the play might not be interrupted if the teacher acted in the role of a co-player involved in Jenifer's play. Jenifer might like to see the teacher joining her in the actual play instead of trying to correct her play, and so may have then extended her own thought processes to understand a more effective use of the mirror.

While Jenifer was in her own imaginative world, the teacher should not have taken power away from her. Children are competent interpreters of their situations, and we should set them free to make choices and decisions, self-regulate, and make and break the rules as they learn from their own hands-on experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). The mismatch between the child's and the adult's perspective brought an interruption of the play.

Episode Two

On the other side of the "Pretend Room," 5-year-old Jacob was playing with the cash register and pretending to be a shop keeper. He asked other children to come over and buy some items from his shop. Fake money was available for this purpose, and the other children were "buying" some items from Jacob. It was very interesting to watch the children putting price tags on different objects, paying the money, and taking the items away. After a while, a teacher commented on the noise from the cash register and asked Jacob to stop. Jacob resisted the teacher's reaction and continued playing with the cash register, although he was trying to press the keys gently to reduce the noise. More kids kept coming to Jacob's shop, however, and the noise level increased again. Despite Jacob's obvious desire to continue the shopping game, the teacher told him to find something else to play with, and Jacob put the cash register aside and moved away.

I see the child in this play situation as having lost his authority and freedom of choice. When I asked the teacher why she preferred to stop him, she explained that she thought the noise might be a disturbance to the other children in the room and in the room next door. I wondered why the cash register was present if its noise was not wanted. Also, avoiding noise in preschool does not seem possible. It was wonderful to witness the children's conversation, imagination, and learning during the shopping activity, demonstrating the power of socio-dramatic play to develop children's meaning-making and complex communication skills. If we want to encourage children's imaginations, we should be able to tolerate noise or prepare sound-proof walls.

Episode Three

This episode illustrates the results of too much "policing" from the teacher. A group of five children were pretending to be a family. They all had different roles: mother, father, son, daughter, and cousin. In their play scenario, the son was sick and the mother wanted to take him to the hospital. She picked up the phone and started making a call for an ambulance. The boy who was playing the role of a father grabbed the other

phone and pretended he was answering the mother. The mother explained that her son was sick and she needed an ambulance soon. The boy grabbed one of the prams and ran with it while making an ambulance siren sound. The teacher stopped him, saying, *"You are too loud, and it is dangerous to run like that with the pram. We can't do that at school."* When the teacher walked away, the boy slowly pushed the pram to the child pretending to be sick. They put the sick child on the pram and started pushing him to the hospital. Then, the teacher said, *"OK, I think this is too much! You are done with the pram now; I told you it is dangerous to do that."* She put the pram out of the children's reach and the play ended there.

Was this situation really dangerous? Was the teacher unknowingly threatening the children's right to play on their own terms? In a study by Tullgren (2004), a similar situation illustrated how staff inappropriately interfere and control children's play simply because they do not like the nature of the play or the roles that the children are playing.

In a safe and conducive environment, children are capable and creative enough to engage themselves in a variety of activities, including the risky ones. Teachers should recognize that capability and let the children try out activities they invent. If they attempt risky activities, the adult can monitor the situation to ensure safety.

Episode Four

On my third visit, I observed a free-play session in the school gymnasium. The children were in different parts of the room engaged in various play activities while the adults were moving around following them.

A group of toddlers were trying to build a tower by fitting Legos together. They were sitting next to each other, sharing the materials, and trying to work together. The toddler's teacher came over and told one of the children that she needed to change his diaper. The child wanted to continue playing, but the teacher insisted he must be changed before they went outside, explaining that it would be difficult to bring him inside and change him later since the whole group would be spending the rest of the day outside. Although the child began crying in refusal, the teacher

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carried him off to the diaper room.

In about three minutes, the child's diaper was changed and he was out of the diaper room and no longer crying. However, he never returned to his play. He did not even look at his previous playmates; instead, he went to watch other children playing on the slide in the other corner of the room. I believe this incident illustrates the fragile nature of children's play. If adults interrupt children's play in such a way, aren't they unintentionally preventing play from functioning as a medium for children's cognitive, social, and emotional development?

When asked about diaper change and toilet time, the toddlers' teacher explained that their days are hectic and they must work in teams. The teachers take turns for break times and if a teacher is out sick, as was the case on this particular day, coordinating for changing the children's diapers while monitoring the other children can be difficult.

This situation reveals how teachers can operate according to a certain routine without realizing its impact from the children's perspective. Are we supposed to change the diapers simply because we have to do it or should the children be asked if they need a change? Do we prioritize the school routine or the children? When changing children's diapers without their will, teachers are unintentionally abandoning the children's right to play and right to be heard. Scholars have discussed children's rights and participation from various perspectives and, as pointed out by Bae (2009), one way of manifesting

their right and proper participation in school activity is by listening to them and understanding their verbal and nonverbal cues, as indicated by the child who was refusing the diaper change in favor of continuing his play.

Episode Five

Another routine activity that I observed with the older children was toileting time. The teacher called the children's names one after another and told them to take turns using the toilet before they got ready for outdoor play. The teacher did not seem to consider what the children were doing when their names were called. When one child said, "I don't want to pee," the teacher responded, "OK, but there is no toilet to pee outside." After wondering for a while, the child put his toy down and ran to the toilet.

The teachers believed they needed to give the children an opportunity to use the toilet before they went outside, since they did not have a toilet facility outside and the situation might not allow them to bring every child back inside. However, apart from interrupting their play, is this practice appropriate in terms of the child's rights? Children should not be forced to pee when they are not ready or when they do not want it. It may be easy and manageable for the teachers to do it in such a structured way; however, they need to consider the humanistic aspect and respect the children's right to do things when they need it.

Children have the right to be listened to, the right to make a choice, the right and ability to influence their environment, and the right and capacity to make decisions for themselves. By requiring children to go to the toilet when they don't need it, are we giving precedence to our own convenience? Teachers' pedagogical actions have to be child-centered and should follow children's needs and interests.

Episode Six

Following the completion of the diapering and toileting routine, the next activity before going outside was cleaning up. In a loud voice, one of the teachers announced that it was time to clean up and directed the children to collect all the toys and put them back in the boxes. One of the children who was playing with the train trucks was

disappointed by the teacher's instruction. He dumped out the toys from one of the boxes and started throwing them away with anger. As noted above, children's play is very fragile and teachers should be extra careful during transition times. If teachers do not observe the play situation to determine if the children are ready to move to another activity or not, the transition to the next routine will not be smooth. Sudden interruptions are disappointing for the children, and hamper their thought processes.

If children have to change their play venue or shift to another activity, they should be approached in a way that does not interrupt their play and thought process. Otherwise, teachers may unintentionally distort the children's fantasy and imagination, which in effect will hamper the children's development. In my view, cleaning up should not be mandatory when kids are shifting from one activity to another. Depending on the degree of the mess, it could be possible to leave the toys in place, increasing the likelihood that the children would return to their former play when they see their unfinished work.

If children are supported in saving what they were doing at a specific spot in the classroom so that they will get a chance to continue working on it, transitions to other activities may go more smoothly. Another simple technique to minimize the negative effect of interruptions is to tell the children in advance of an upcoming change so they can adjust their thinking process and the pace of their play. They could purposely pause at a certain "meaningful" point. Teachers tell them the number of minutes left for a particular activity, and count down the time. This helps the children adjust their play and, of course, could help them learn some number concepts. Using a beeper can also be a very good way of communicating time with the children.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

Unavoidable situations certainly will occur that necessitate interrupting children's play. However, interruptions can be handled through various strategies and techniques that minimize any negative impact on children's play.

Teachers need to reflect on their

pedagogical actions and consider that children are capable beings who can understand and interpret their environment and control and regulate their own play. Thus, teachers should refrain from trying to persuade, shape, and rectify the way children are playing.

If it is important to establish and follow certain routines, such as diapering, ways to minimize should be found that help the children return to what they were doing in their play. One possible technique could be preparing a separate place (e.g., a shelf or a corner in the classroom) where children can save their unfinished works. It could also be possible to have a place to change diapers near the children's play area.

Routines should not be so rigid that they create unnecessary interruptions to children's play. Professionals should realize that children's needs and interests should be considered when establishing routines in the preschool. For example, instead of telling children to go to the toilet, teachers can invite (you may go to the toilet if you need to pee), suggest (I think it is a good idea to do it now if you want to go to the toilet before we go outside), or ask (Do you want to go to the toilet before we go outside?).

Likewise, as indicated in episode six, cleaning up should not be destructive to children's play. If children's toys or unfinished works are kept as they were or saved in a separate place, the children will likely be re-attracted to what they were doing. As much as possible, teachers should be able to create a smooth and easy transition from one activity to the other during the day. However, it should be noted that some of the strategies above may not be possible in all early childhood settings.

CONCLUSION

Adults have an inevitable and important role in children's play. Yet, if adults are not carrying out their role in a pedagogically sound manner that positively impacts children's play, they might unintentionally interrupt children's play and thereby decrease its benefits for the children's development.

In light of the fragile nature of children's play, teachers have to be cautious when interfering, giving direction, and involving themselves in children's everyday play.

It is true that certain play scenarios (e.g., when play gets too repetitive and brings about loss of interest) warrant facilitation and reorganization by adults. However, if the children are engaged in meaningful and imaginative play, teachers should be careful not to interrupt the ongoing learning and development.

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