



**Playfulness and social life of young children in  
child centers  
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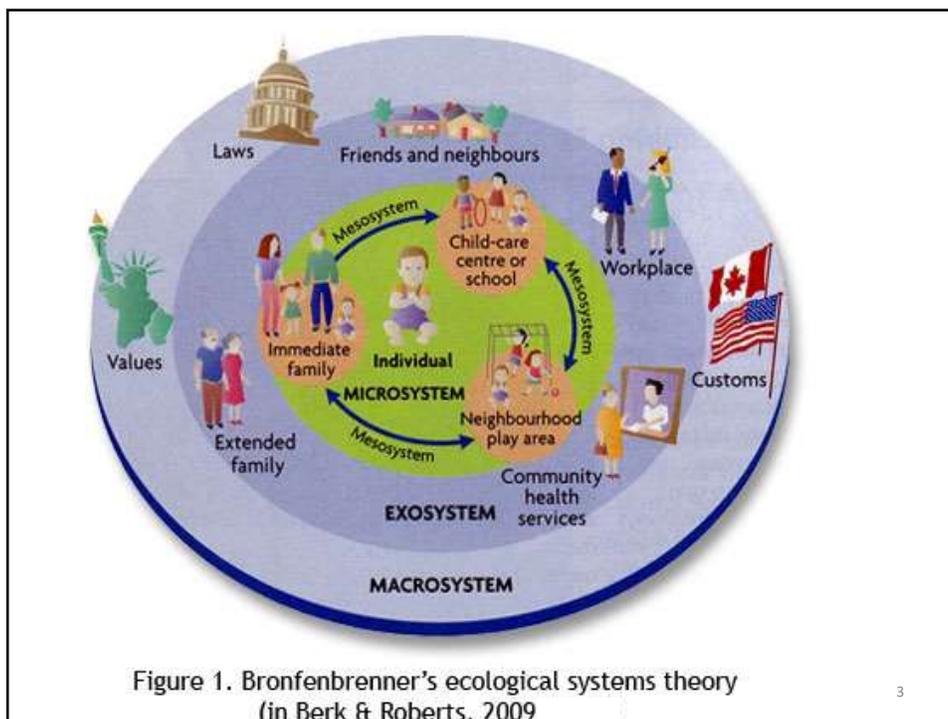
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**Urie Bronfenbrenner  
1917 - 2005**

Pioneer in studying the  
behaviour of children in their  
natural life space of family,  
school, peer group, and  
community

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## Rethinking social lives and play in child centers from an ecological perspective

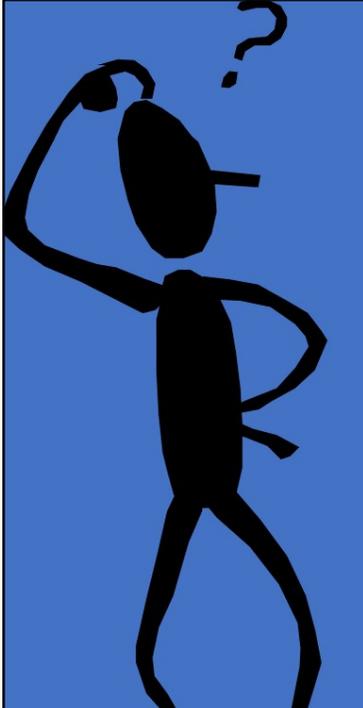
Since 1970s: Home -> Child Centers



## Designing play curricula for group settings

- 19th and 20th century: Pestalozzi, Fröbel, Montessori, Piaget, Vygotsky, Malaguzzi
- 21th century: most curricula for young children aged 0-5 years are 'play curricula' (Bertram and Pascal, 2002)
- Play and active learning are core pedagogical principles

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## Criticism of play pedagogy in practice

- **Teachers are often:**
  - Too directive and spoiling children's play
  - Too much focused on teaching
  - Giving too little support
  - Too little challenges
- **Children get:**
  - Too much free play
  - Too little learning experiences
  - Too much protection and shortage of risky play

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## Rethinking play in child centres from an ecological perspective

1. Lack of emotional security?
  - Home setting -> dyadic relations
  - Group setting -> multiple relations
2. Value of peer relationships of young children?
3. Segregation of adult's world and children's world:
  - Filling up an empty social space
4. Free play and or learning goals of professionals?

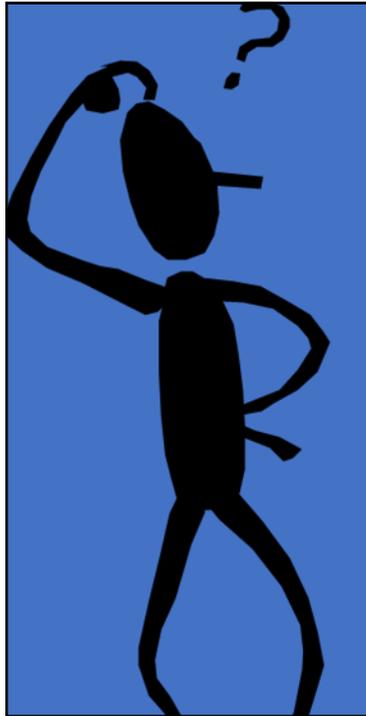
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### Issue 1 Emotional security

Research focus on:

- dyadic interactions between mother and child
- mother's sensitivity in experimental setting





## Ecological validity?

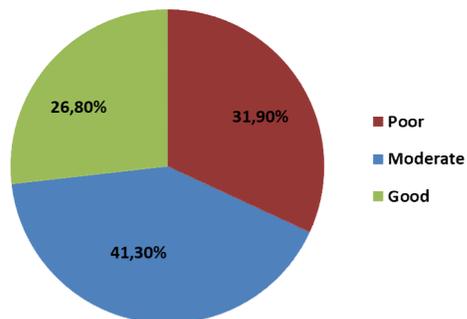
Is it possible to apply the insights based on studies of dyadic interactions in group settings?

**Emotional security in group settings**  
Ahnert,  
Pinquart &  
Lamb in Meta-analysis (2006):

- **Caretaking in home-like situations:**
  - Dyadic sensitivity of caregiver predicts the emotional security of the child in the caregiver-child relationship
- **Care taking in group settings:**
  - Group sensitivity of caregiver predicts the emotional security of the child in the pedagogue-child relationship

## Level of play engagement in Dutch child centers

(assessed with Leavers scale; N=686 intervals; Singer et al. 2013)



**Poor:** frequently distracted.

**Moderate:** brief moments of focused attention <1,5 < 2 minutes.

**Good:** focused attention during more than 2 minutes.

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## Teachers availability for 2- and 3-year olds in group settings

(N=686 intervals of 4 minutes)

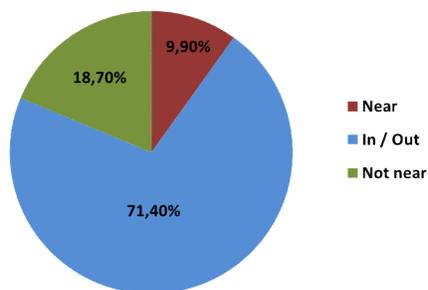
Singer et al. 2013:

Teacher is

- 9,9% teacher nearby child for > 4 minutes
- 18,7% short contact of teacher with child
- 71,4% teacher at distance

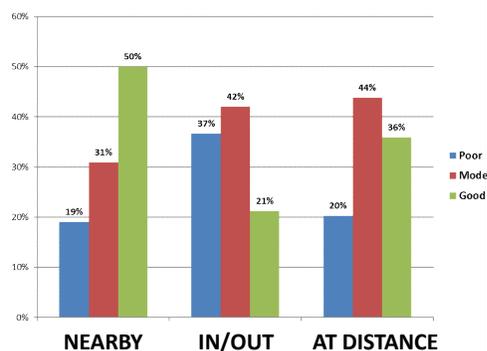
Cain et al. 2007:

- Sustained joined attention is rare in group settings



## Strong relation between availability of the teacher and level of play engagement

- **Teacher moving in and out:** lowest chance of good play engagement
- **Teacher nearby,** the highest chance on reaching good.
- **Teacher at distance,** medium chance of good play engagement.



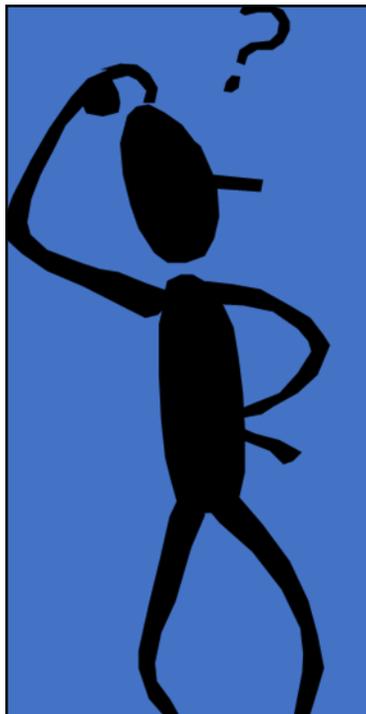
### Coherent patterns: moving in/out disturbs children

- When the teacher is walking in/out; peers are also walking in/out (80 % correlation)
- Teacher is sensitive towards individual children, but disruptive towards peers nearby
- When walking in/out teacher had short one-sided interactions:
  - Did not established shared attention
  - Gave short comments or help
- Children do not understand the teacher
- Teacher is not easy available for social referencing

**Coherent patterns:  
teacher nearby  
is available  
and sensitive  
responding**

- Teacher is calmly observing
- Confirming children's behavior
- She helps without disturbing the other children
- Reciprocal interactions
  
- Children at distance are in power to look for support and play with peers (available for social referencing)

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How to increase the level of play engagement and sustained attention in group settings with <4 year olds?

## We have to understand the complexity of social life in group settings

We easily underestimate:

- How difficult group life can be for young children
- Young children's need of 'a safe heaven' to explore the world.
- Young children's need to share and shared attention with the teacher



## Increase of play engagement

- **Structuring physical environment** and stimulating play opportunities (Musatti, & Mayer, 2011)
- **Structuring social environment**, organizing small groups of playing children and adult play guidance (Hakkarainen et al., 2013)



## Ecological Validity of Pedagogical models

### Dyadic sensitivity model

- Teacher walks around to signal signs of individual children
- Teacher is in control
- Teacher acts sensitively to individual child
- Teacher disturbs surrounding peers
- Teacher is less available for social referencing

### Group sensitivity model

- Teacher sits down and every child knows where the teacher is
- Child is in control to determine the distance
- Teacher supports individual children in group
- Teacher is aware of group dynamics

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## Issue 2 Ecology of the peer group:



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## Research of playing with peer in early childhood

- Until the 1980s Handbooks stated: < 4 year-olds:
  - cannot play together; have conflicts
  - take each other's play objects
- Since 1980s peer relations of < 4 year olds could be studied because of increasing number of child centers:
  - peer interactions among babies
  - toddlers solving conflicts
  - symbolic play of two-year olds

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## Research of joint play of very young children

- Until the 1980s Handbooks stated: < 4 year-olds:
  - cannot play together; have many conflicts
  - take each other's play objects
- Since 1980s peer relations could be studied in child centers with unexpected results:
  - Young children enjoy each others compagny
  - Even babies try to make contact

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### Small research groups in peer relations

- Italy: Musatti
- France: Stambak, Verba, Sinclair, Rayna
- Sweden: Løkken, Pramling-Samuelsson
- USA: Mueller, Howes, Corsaro, Göncü
- Brazil: Rossetti-Ferreira, Oliveira-Moraes de Ramos
- Finland: Hännikäinen
- Germany: Dittrich, Dorfler, Schneider
- The Netherlands: Singer, De Haan

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## Importance of peers for > 4 years-old

- Observe and imitate each other (Løkken, 2000)
- Play at a higher level:
  - They observe the effects of actions of the child him/herself and actions of peers;
  - Comparison of effects stimulates learning experiences (Musatti & Mueller, 1986)
- Signs of togetherness (Hännikäinen, 1999)
- (Non) verbal co-construction of meaning (Rossetti-Feira et al. 2011)
- Laughter and humor (Singer & De Haan, 2007)
- Symbolic play (Stambak & Sinclair, 1993;
- Friendship among 1 and 2-years old (Howes, 2011; Singer et al., 2013)



## Peers role in learning fine tuned conflicts strategies



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## Effects of conflict strategies

- Will enforcing strategies -> significant higher chance on winning the conflict, but less chance on continuation of peer play
- Bilateral strategies -> significant higher chance on losing the conflict, but higher chance on continuation of peer play
- Good relation with peer seems to be strong incentive to refrain from will enforcing strategies
- (Singer et al., 2012)

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## Role of teacher in learning conflict strategies

- Scaffolding conflict strategies:
  - Modelling, offering tools like 'turn taking'
- Children try out 'tools' in peer conflict
- Teacher often blame the wrong child and do not know the background of peer conflicts
- Important: support positive peer relations, simple rules and 'tools' for reconciliation

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**Pedagogical strategies to foster togetherness:**  
 rituals, rhythms, rules, songs, dance, stories  
 (Maritta Hännikäinen, 2001, 2005)



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**Issue 3**  
**Ecology of segregation of children's world:**  
**a socially empty space:**



- Age groups
- Segregation of adult's work
- Segregation of older children
- Artificial world to bring outside in:
  - Pretend home corner
  - Pretend kitchen
  - Pretend 'doctor' 'fireman'

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## Drawbacks on play

- Lack of models of adults activities
- Little opportunities for participative learning
- Children's interest to grow up is not fully satisfied
  
- Risky outdoor play is restricted



## Acknowledging that children want to grow up: Participative learning in centers



- Montessori: contributing in chores and gardening
- Malaguzzi: active involvement of neighborhood and artists
- Berliner Contextual Approach

## Rethinking free play and adult guided activities: Dutch example of child centers at the farm



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## Firsthand learning in adult/children's world (Rogoff et al., 2003)

- Intent participation in adult's work
- Characteristic for indigenous communities in rural areas
- Informal learning through keen observation and listening to adults
- With moments of playfulness



**Acceptance of the authority of the farmer:  
an attractive role model**



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**Moments of playfulness and 'serious work'**



**Appeal to children's desire to grow up:  
adult guided activities combined with  
playfulness**



**Scaffolding between 'grown-up'  
and children's playfulness**



## Playfulness in participative learning (serious work)



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**Playfulness and  
humour  
during  
routines  
and 'work'**

**Gives a  
sense of  
freedom in  
situation that  
the child has to  
obey**

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## Free play and adult guided activities

- Children learn by freely playing and exploring following their own interest and space
- Children learn during joint play with peers
- Children observe adults and are eager to learn from attractive role models,
- Children learn because they want to grow up and contribute.
- Children need both: free play and adult guided activities

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## In conclusion

To support young children's play in child centers, we have to understand the ecological context:

- Emotional security in group settings
- Value of peer play in early childhood
- Opening up the segregation between children's and adults' world
- Scaffolding between the child's desire to grow-up and his/her playfulness

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## Culture of togetherness



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Thanks!

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