

I rather would prefer not be real, I would prefer to live in my dollhouse and with my toy beasts. Hustvedt Siri,

Play in daily life – from the perspectives of children.

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June, 15th, 2017

I want to share with you some thoughts on play. To play is a very common activity, we all know what it is, but on the other hand, it's very hard to define it. There are many things in our lives we know, without being able to tell quite clearly what it is. We all know what love is, and think, and humour and fun and so many other things in our life. We know it, we can experience it, we can talk about it, but we can't describe it exactly. To play is very known activity: children as well as adults know what it is to play. Children say: I'm going to play and they know what they mean by saying that. Also adults know what it means: to play. We all know what it is, and very famous people as Huizinga, Vigotsky, Sutton-Smith wrote definitions of play that are very helpful to understand play, but there is no definition we all agree. There are all different ways to understand. We know it, and we can handle it but can't describe it exactly. We know what humour is, and love, and sorrow, and feelings and to think and so many other things... these all are aspects of human being. In this presentation, I don't want to try to define 'play' but I want to turn around it, I want to present a few aspects, moments, sides on play that I learned from children while observing and interviewing them. I want to explore some aspects of play, some things that are related to children's play to children's experiences related to play. Thanks to interviews and observations I learned some of their perspectives that might help to understand what it is to play. Does this get a bit confused, maybe, but it is so fascinating to get a broader understanding of what plays mean.

In short: I'm going to tell you something about playing in the childhood context, about to play in the context of being a child, about play related to other aspects of children's life.

Let's talk about these aspects:

- Children negotiate play
- to do or to play or ...
- Boredom
- Schoolyard
- Giving meaning
- Bullying, teasing, playing

1. Children negotiate play

I tell you a story you all might know. It's a very specific situation.

Listen to this dialogue:

- Mum, can I play?
- + where do you want to play?
- On the street?
- + and what are you going to do on the street?'
- Just to play
- + Yes what are you going to play?
- I don't know
- + Is Jonas there?
- I will ask it.
- + Yes but be careful, don't cross the street, you shouldn't go further than the corner etc. etc. (other good advices)

We can focus on the discussion between mum and the child. And that's interesting from several perspectives and on the development of the relation. But in this case I want to focus on the child.

In these situations, the child (mostly) can't describe the concrete action he or she wants to start. Mostly they really don't know what they want to do; it depends on many circumstantial influences as if there are other children on the street, if one of them has a good idea, if they see something interesting: a ball, a bike, ..., if something interesting is happening in the street: a new car, a truck that delivers building materials etc. So children have an open agenda. Of course sometimes the child can mislead the parents for example when he or she has a secret plan, when he wants to meet Gina or to admire a new toy of Jonas etc.

In fact children are asking for a blank cheque, for confidence, they have a word that helps them to receive this cheque, they call it: to play. Asking for permission to play is asking for freedom. Parents often will limit the freedom

(on time, location, partners etc.), but instead to describe their plans, ideas or to avoid to explain that you don't know what you want to do, you can use that word: 'to play'. So children avoid to discuss detailed plans or even to discuss that they have no plan at all. What do you want to do: I want to play.

Children use the word 'play' as a term that covers a wide load, a container concept, but this term makes it possible to get a wide action domain, it's a useful term. Children want freedom, permission, time, space, tolerance.

Play is a useful container-concept.

Father comes home after his business day and his ask his daughter Lena:

-Lena, and how have you passed your afternoon?

+I was playing.

-And what did you play?

+Different things

- Did you play with David?

+Yes, sometimes

Why you want to know it?

Children use the word 'to play' for a lot of activities. Sometimes they do not remember what they did. In other cases, they do not find the precise word, and sometimes they do not want to make an effort to tell what they have done.

Playing is then a word beyond which they can hide.

So if the father is insisting to know more about the activities of the afternoon, children will answer: we played on the street, I played with my friends, I played in the garden. For them it seems not relevant to repeat what they did exactly

2. To do or to play

In an investigation telling them about their free time, children made a difference between judo playing or judo doing.

I don't know if it's also common in English and in other languages, but in Dutch there is a difference between to play judo of to do judo, to play football or to do football. Children make that kind of differences.

Play judo	do judo
Play in the water	to swim
Play football	do football

The difference is subtle. When you do judo, you have to respect all the rules, as there are:

Intentionally injuring an opponent is not permitted.

Punching, kicking, and other strikes are not allowed.
Touching the opponent's face is not allowed.
Attacking joints other than the elbow is not allowed.^[1]
Head dives are not permitted.^[2]

But when you play judo you just pretend to do judo. The word 'play' gives you more freedom, more space for create your own game, the rules aren't important. It looks like judo, it's more or less an imitation of judo. But it's play judo. Sometimes the word 'play' is no more suitable, and then the child says, "no, I don't go to the club to play judo, I'm a real member of a judo-club", or on the contrary: "I don't prefer to go the judo club, but sometimes I play judo with my friends". When you play, you can do what you want to do.

Another illustration: young people in Brussels are used at making an appointment at the metro-station to go together to a park to play football. They prefer this kind of football before play football in a club: in the club are too many rules, you may not be absent from training, you must be present on time and the coach and the referees are very strict. Other reasons not to go to the club are financial arguments. However these youngsters prefer the free choice on the other players, on the rules of the football, on the timing etc. As in the judo and in the football, the word 'play' offers more freedom.

There are children who refuse to appoint certain activities as play, their seriousness is more important than the informal character. A few examples. Children who are helping their grandmother to work in the garden: they plant bulbs, they pour young plants, they sow salad. Because they are very serious, they will indignantly claim that they were working and not playing.

They also love it to help in the kitchen: baking a cake or cookies. Children don't call these activities 'play'. Even when children are building a camp, they say: we are working. Similar some children don't say: I like to go to the playground, but not to play; I'm going to work. The difference between play and other activities is not always clear, but using the word 'play' it's a more open approach, a creative dimension.

3. Boredom

A totally different theme: children who are bored. There are a few types of boredom and it's not my intention to mention them all; I want to focus on the most common boredom: when children end a certain activity and want to start another one, they often are bored.

For example:

-Two parents made an appointment that their children will come to play together on Wednesday afternoon. Tommy was playing with Andy, and they passed a nice afternoon. At 5 p.m. his mother picked Andy up. As always children are playing well, they were surprised, they were not happy, they wanted to play on, they protested. But both parents were solidarity: the gathering was over. Andy leaves Tommy. Tommy says goodbye, 'see you tomorrow in school', and then he was bored.

-Similar situations are where a child was reading a book, watching television etc. And at the end of the activity the child says: "and then I was bored".

The children are confronted with the question: what am I going to do now? how to start a new activity? Mostly this is an annoying feeling, their agenda is empty, children don't like it. This is one of the themes that children often focus on the Children's Helpline. How do they make the transition to play? How to make the transition from emptiness to play? How to fill the emptiness?

Adults and children also, often have a negative picture of boredom: they are sure that boredom has to be avoided. That's why their agenda is filled with a lot of organised activities, and if there not enough activities, there is still the television. But there is more in children's life: children also learn to deal with boredom themselves.

Children explained me how they deal with their boredom. In essence, children experience emptiness in their time budget, and they want to fill them up. To this end, they develop their own strategies. Listen to 4 illustrations they told me:

-When I'm bored, I go to the garden, to the swing and I start to rock. And when I am on the rock, ideas come in my head.

-When I'm bored, I go to the case of my toys and sometimes I find something I want to play with

-If I'm bored, I draw the ninja turtles

-If I'm bored, I'll be on my mind, and then the ideas come true.

Children are able to fill the emptiness in a period of transition. They are relaxing, they create situations of relaxation, of concentration and rest, and then they decide what to do. After the period of relaxation, they are creative and able to decide about their next activity.

These children know how to organise their activities, you can say: they know about: time management.

With such strategies, children don't have the feeling 'not to know what to do' but it's more correct to say that boredom is 'not yet to do what they want to do'. Instead of the negative colour of boredom, we should emphasize that such

periods of emptiness are important, and even more that children are entitled to such periods: children have the right to be bored, they have the right to figure out what they want to do, to choose how to spend their free time, how to decide what to play.

4. SCHOOLYARD

Over the last years, much more attention has been paid to the quality of the schoolyards. So they invite to more game interchange, more suitable for all ages, more attractive, more green, etc. Children's play is more appreciated, it's more than recovering after sitting in the classroom and shake off the stress after the lessons. There is more space for self-determination, for deciding what they want to do and with who. They like it. But in addition to a good layout of the school playground, children need enough time to play.

Teachers who do not close the lessons in time are faced with nervous and even protesting children. The time between the lessons is their time. That time is not in the hands of the teachers, that time is claimed by the children; on this point children have strengthen their position. They know pretty well that they have a right to play, but this right is not always realised.

So there is still a difference between two kind of playtimes:

the short playtime: the breaks between the lessons during about 15 minutes

the long playtimes: the time in the morning before classes start, after the lunch (when they eat at school), the time after class activities when they are waiting for their parents.

During the short playtimes: children are running, crying, doing nothing, eat something, go to the bathroom, hanging around. There is a lot of noise in the schoolyard (for some children too noisy) and there is a lot of movements, discussions, etc. Children call it 'play', but these short breaks don't permit creative play. These breaks are more compensation, re-recreation, it's work off stress and play in function of a better concentration during the class-activities. The longer playtimes allow, stimulate different types of play. These allow the children to organise activities, competitions, discussions about the next game, make plans, explorations, to invent new games. In these playtimes children are more creative. Children develop these play activities in function of their own needs. Children prefer to come earlier to school: to meet the friends and to develop more play activities. There is more play in the activities.

The wheel can only turn if there is some play.
On the short playtimes, the wheel can't turn, in the longer playtimes, it turns very well. A wheel can only spin if there is play; if there is no play, it can not turn, it is blocked. The child's activities must also include play, space and time and tolerance

5. GIVING MEANING to play

Young children at play are very active in giving meaning.

Giving something meaning, means:

Give it a position in your life project

You're establishing a relation with it

You're developing yourself and the world.

Giving meaning is a very attractive characteristic of children's play.

Play with toothbrush. In order to know how you can manipulate the toothbrush, you have to try it out. It's exciting to know what you can do with it. You can use it on different ways, you will realise different effects. With the toothbrush you can splash the water against the mirror, in the face of your sister, you can paint with it, you can feel it on your arm or leg etc.

Play with water is very curious. Children are trying to catch the water, but it escapes until the water will be collected by a cup, in a cup. It's a wonderful event to master the water: this fluid stuff can be handled by humans. Children are learning about liquid and not liquid. Similar is the discovery that while using sand you can build castles, canals, mountains, cakes especially when you add enough water to it. Children give meaning on water, on sand etc. They are mastering the water and the sand. At the same time they are mastering their hand, the fingers...

In practice children are giving meaning the whole day: while biking, while painting, while exploring your personal capacities when you jump further than your friend, when you climb higher, etc. etc. Children are giving meaning almost the whole day, when they are eating, watching television etc.. Most of these activities are called 'play'.

Those were some illustrations of giving meaning for children. But it's interesting to focus also on young people.

Often adults, teachers are complaining about young people because they don't play anymore, they spend too much time while doing nothing, while hanging around, they are chilling, they are passive. A young Dutch

anthropologist wanted to know more about this behaviour, and she mixed herself with the young people on the schoolyard: real field-research. She was trying to understand what those youngsters really were doing. She concluded that what happened can be characterised as 'giving meaning'. The youngsters were discussing, comparing, exchange information about what is beautiful music, what clothes are nice, why we like this teacher and not another one, they discuss about suicide, driving too fast, alcohol etc. etc. So they really are looking for meaning, they are developing a view, their own opinions... They are playing with thoughts, words, meanings... sometimes very serious, sometimes very funny, sometimes singing etc.

That's how young people pass a lot of time...

Shall we call this 'doing nothing', being bored, exploring meaning, giving meaning, is it 'play'?

6. Bullying, teasing, playing

In children's play, there is a lot of aggression. A joyful play activity can change into a fight with crying children, tears, frustration. It's part of social interaction. To have friends to play with is very important for children and in this interaction there are a lot of learning processes. Children learn to co-operate, the enjoy each other presence, being together, offers a lot of chances, of opportunities to play. But there are also risks.

Such processes are very complicated. In this social interaction, of power, In the social interaction, many factors are active: competition, encouragement, self-image, solidarity, playfulness, etc. Children dare to go far. Especially adults are having trouble assessing such activities.

I want to show you a video that got the title: aggressiveness. The film is in French, and with Dutch captions, but I would like to speak for it.

I tell you a story of a few young girls. It takes 10 minutes.

A group of young girls (4 -7 years old) play on the schoolyard. On the playground is a kind of stage, let us say of 50 cm high. And in front of that stage is a bank. One of the most popular activities is to jump of the stage over on the bench. Both together are a challenge for the girls. If you really want to belong to the group, you have to jump of the podium and over the bench. One of the youngest girls, Nathalie, never did it; although she's strongly motivated to do it. That's the situation: a group jumping girls, but one girl stands on the side, she wants to jump, but she doesn't

dare. There are two girls who stimulate Nathalie. ‘Yes you can, see how I do, just try it ... Adela is the girl that stimulates Nathalie: give me your hand..

(But in the meantime, the other children are jumping. Nathalie interferes with the those interested in parachuting; the other children don’t like that. However, Nathalie takes a run-up, but then she hesitates. The other girls push her aside, they insult on her. Nathalie is angry. “ I am still too young, that I cannot yet.” She stamps her feet, she called her mama, it hurts on her leg: in one word: she’s very frustrated, unhappy. The oldest girl comfort Nathalie up and says: I will teach you. But the pace of jumping girls increases. Nathalie tries to crawl on all fours on the bench. She is going out with her head down. Nathalie said: “Yes I can.” Her mood improves, gets on. But the others are cheeky and say, “that’s not the way you have to do it”. It makes Nathalie really very angry, her snout is hanging on her nose and mouth, she weeps passionately. The oldest girl once again takes the initiative and says: we will do it together. She gives her a hand, they are ready to jump. But at the last moment Nathalie goes alone and at that moment, the school bell is ringing, Nathalie jumps and the whole group was cheering.)

Such situations always happen and everywhere, that's part of the everyday life. The situation is full of conflict, frustration, support, and solidarity Can we call such situation ‘play’?

Some conclusions

To play is a part of the daily life of children. We cannot reduce play to the romantic approach: happy children enjoying their freely chosen activities. That’s only a small part of the play reality. Children’s use of the word ‘play’ learns us that play for them is broad, undefined and related to freedom. Boredom as ‘not yet knowing what you want to do’ is a part of play. There is a big difference between play as recreation and play as creative activity. The giving meaning activities of young people while they are doing nothing can be called play. A lot of play is intertwined with a lot of other activities, and it’s embedded in a concrete setting and social interactions; it’s not always clear if children experience these activities being ‘play’.

So the right to play is a very broad field of action; as mentioned in the general comment of art. 31 of the UN Convention on the right of the child, it is related to all aspects of life. And instead not to reduce play to the romantic part of it we have to realise that the right to play is the right to be a child.

So, let's develop our feeling for 'play'.