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Toddler interaction during play in the Swedish preschool

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This article focuses on how children aged 17–24 months initiate play and interact with their peers during self-initiated play in preschools. Play is looked upon as a rich arena for observing toddler interaction. The ethnographic study was carried out in a toddler unit with 15 children. Six one-year-old girls and boys were observed during five weeks at the end of a longer research period. The study follows a phenomenological tradition with participatory observations and video recordings. The overall findings support a theoretical perspective where very young children are seen as social actors, with social competences. Play invitation strategies, as well as play enactment and play-closing moves, were mostly found to be based on nonverbal communication such as locomotion, gestures, physical actions and facial expressions. This study also shows that the competence of taking others’ perspectives was found recurrently in play among younger children. Furthermore, the young children used negotiating skills during their play.

Keywords: toddlers; preschool; interaction; play; communication; phenomenology

Introduction

One of the ambitions with the Scandinavian welfare model is that children should have the right to play, learn and develop in a child-centred environment, while their parents work or study. During the last 15 years, however, the role of child care has changed (Howes & Sanders, 2006; Tobin, Yeh, & Karasawa, 2006). The number of children in preschools in Sweden has also increased during the last 30 years. In 1975, 2% of children under the age of three years spent their days in preschool (Woodhead, 1979) compared to 2009, where 47% of the one-year-olds and 86.5% of two-year-olds were in preschool (National Agency for Education, 2010). The situation with a high numbers of toddlers in preschools gives young children access to additional play arenas and multiple play mates.

Studies of infant development have shown that a child can be socially active from the first minutes of its life and that learning can take place in interaction with others in meaningful contexts (Stern, 1985, 1990, 2004). Already newborns can imitate expressions of the caregiver (Meltzoff & Moore, 1999). These results indicate that infants can be aware of the intentions of other persons. Previous research shows that children can benefit from high-quality childcare. It can be an arena where they make friends and establish close relationship with emotional quality (Dunn, 2004).

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So far, we do not know much about how toddlers play in preschools. Most previous studies involve three–six-year-old children where researchers explore how they play and interact with teachers and peers (Dunn, 2004; Fleer, 2009; Lillemyr, 2009). In order to further understand how young toddlers make sense when playing with peers, this ethnographic study explores self-initiated toddler play. The study takes place in a toddler group in a municipal preschool. The studied children were 17–24 months old during the data-collecting procedure.

**Aim**

The overall aim of the study is to further understand how these young children interact during self-initiated play sequences. More specifically, this study is focused on how toddlers communicate with each other during play sequences. Interaction with teachers was not studied.

**The importance of play within early childhood education**

Play is seen as an integrated part of early childhood education, but what play actually means can be argued. Play has been described as an opportunity for children to go beyond their daily behaviour, for example that children in play raise above themselves to a position where they are a head taller than they are (Vygotsky, 1978). Play can imply a means for learning (Lillemyr, 2009) since it involves complex forms of learning processes, particularly in the cognitive and social domains, but also moral and intellectual aspects (Sutterby & Frost, 2006; Wood, 2009). Play can serve as an opportunity for children to learn how to understand their surrounding world and to practise theory of mind, and it can enhance learning about themselves and others (Saracho & Spodek, 2003). The essence of play can also be understood as an opportunity to deal with reality on a child’s own terms (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2004) or as an activity where young children’s inner world can develop, for example, through the child’s use of imagination and fantasy (Fleer, 2009). Play is also understood as a social phenomenon where the ‘make-believe’ aspect in pretend play can be seen as a way for others to look into the communicative world of the infant (Sawyer, 1997).

Certain skills have been identified as necessary for being able to play; mutuality, reciprocity and turn taking (Garvey, 1977). Play was found to involve the use of intrinsic motivation, abilities to make free choices and to use both verbal and nonverbal communication (Johnson et al., 2004; Sutton Smith & Kelly-Byrne, 1984). Embodied actions, at times, through rough and tumble play, were recurrent activities (Løkken, 2000; Pellegrini, 2006).

The quality of interaction during play was found to be on the local culture (Aronsson, 2011; Sawyer, 1997). According to Sawyer, improvisation might be collective, which means that no single child decides what will happen next. Because improvisational play, drama and reality were seen to be interrelated in children’s play, researchers could use play as a window through which they get access to the intersubjective worlds of children and their peer relations. This indicates that play could be a rich arena for understanding children’s interaction with peers.

**Understanding play through the perspective of the child**

This study is based on a theoretical orientation influenced by humanistic, cultural–dialogical and interpretative traditions (Sommer, Pramling-Samuelsson, & Hundeide,
which is designed to let children’s subjective world come through. Such a child paradigm has grown during the last 30 years emanating from research within childhood sociology, theory of mind and contextual–relational developmental psychology, politically supported by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). This child-oriented paradigm strives to gain knowledge of children’s perceptions, experiences, emotions and actions. The child is seen as a subject in her or his experienced life-world (Farrell, 2005; Sommer et al., 2010).

Children’s own perspectives cannot be fully perceived by others. However, some sort of understanding can be achieved by getting close to children’s experiential world and by taking notes of their expressions. Within this tradition, child researchers could strive to listen to and have dialogues with children and to analyse what children express in terms of perspectives or creation of meaning. Researchers could learn from and with children (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2001; Souto-Manning, 2009).

When using this research approach, children should be understood as agents in a continuous interplay with the surrounding environment (James, 2004; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Sommer et al., 2010). Kavanaugh (2006) argued, for example, that children as well as adults are acting subjects and that they do not behave mindlessly. Drawing on the theory of mind, he underlined that people act in particular ways because of the thoughts we entertain, the beliefs we hold or the outcomes we desire.

Play, development and learning should be understood as situated in contexts. Play and how to enter play draw on cultural and linguistic routines, and children’s socialisation into play activities could be understood as a process of appropriation, reinvention and reproduction (Corsaro, 2003; Göncü, 1999). It is an interpretative cultural activity, where children express, manipulate and try to understand their surrounding community. Even young toddlers’ play seems to be dependent on local cultural routines and traditions (Aronsson, 2011). Few studies have explored the power of peer culture, in which children shape and reconstruct each other (but see Clark, Kjörholt, & Moss, 2005; Danby & Baker, 1998).

Previous research about toddlers’ communication and interaction with peers

One recent comparative study in seven countries (Australia; Chile; Hong Kong, China; Japan; New Zealand; Sweden and Wisconsin, USA) followed five to seven toddlers in each country and in different early childhood settings. The aim of the study was to gain a more international perspective on how play and learning are framed, sanctioned, theorised and built into the discourse of the different countries. The toddlers, one to three years old, were video recorded during one full day. Interviews were carried out with teachers and parents (Pramling-Samuelsson & Fleer, 2009). There were differences between the countries primarily on the relation between play and learning linked to toddlers. However, in all countries, both parents and teachers were amazed at the children’s competencies, shown in the video recordings. The competencies were ability to play skilfully, to concentrate, to create social relationships and to show empathic behaviour. The overall finding was that play is a positive element in toddlers’ lives, strongly linked to what is good for children.

Earlier studies of friendship among toddlers in early childhood education and care show that toddlers orient themselves in different ways to their peers in the preschool group. Musatti and Panni (1981) studied peer group play among six children (aged 11–18 months) and concluded that all children paid more or less constant attention to their peers by following them with short or longer gazes. Howes (1983) defined
friends as children who enjoy and prefer playing together. Later studies confirmed that it seems to be common among two- and three-year-old children to have friends (Greve, 2009; Johansson, 2004). However, little is known about the characteristics of early friendship and if toddler friendships differ in any ways from friendships among children older than three years (Howes, 1983).

Løkken (2000) studied play and especially greetings in a Norwegian group of 13 toddlers (aged 12–38 months). The observations of greeting routines and play routines showed that part of the toddler style is doing things together, mostly non-verbally and to make spontaneous use of the things at hand. Their actions were recurrent and developed into routines, forming a local toddler culture. Greve (2009) suggests that as a result of child-initiated activities, a multitude of child cultures are being developed within one preschool group.

According to Løkken (2000), play was open for many players, and it was seen to be a true arena for building relationships. The commonly created WE in a toddler group were understood as to support the view of toddlers as very social human beings. Toddlers’ ways of getting to know their surrounding world were primarily embodied. They also showed a characteristic embodied toddler style, specific motor actions and a physical embodied closeness to the environment. Toddlers lived and inhabited their world, which was used as a prolongation of their own bodies. Toddlers were at the same time spectators, participants and actors in the life-world (Johansson, 2004; Løkken, 2000). Their ways of being together were recognised by mutuality, embodiment, freedom, spontaneity and joy (see Løkken, 2000; Michelsen, 2004).

Although the design and findings of most toddler studies were focused on dyads and triads (Greve 2009; Howes, 1983; Katz, 2004), the Scandinavian studies reported that interplay is open for many players. Since negotiations on relations, relationships and the content of the play were found to be central in toddlers’ communication with two–three-year-old peers, play may be seen as an important arena where young children develop social behaviour through interaction (Alvestad, 2010).

Studies among two- and three-year-olds suggest that imitation could be looked upon as active and intentional processes (Dunn, 2004; Greve, 2009; Howes, 1983; Johansson, 2004). Imitation might, actually, be a special ‘toddler language’, as described by Whaley and Rubenstein (1994) who saw toddlers who ritualised their imitations of each other to create their own unique ways of being together. Rayna (2002) and Meltzoff and Moore (1999) also confirm a more active and exploring definition of imitation, where very young children in their actions express belonging.

Most early childhood education studies are placed indoors. Children, especially in the Nordic countries, play outside for considerable time every day. They like challenging places, where they can explore the surroundings (Davis, 2010; Lindstrand, 2004; Sutterby & Frost, 2006). Drawing on the knowledge about toddler’s special style, social play and early friendship, this study explores how young toddlers (aged 17–24 months) communicate during play sequences indoors and outdoors in order to further understand their competencies.

**Method**

**Context and participants**
The data for this study were collected in a municipal preschool in a multicultural Stockholm suburb. The preschool is located in a park, a short walk from the underground station, in an area with apartment houses. There are four units in the preschool,
two for toddlers (one–three-year-olds) and two for older preschoolers (three–six-year-olds). The data collection took place within one toddler unit with, in total, 15 children. Both teachers and parents gave written consent to the study. The six youngest children’s activities were in focus for this study. These three girls and three boys were between 17 and 24 months during the data collection procedure. Two full-time teachers and two part-time child care attendants worked together in this unit, covering the hours between 7 am and 6 pm.

**Phenomenology**

This ethnographic study is placed within a phenomenological framework. The goal is to strive for a better understanding of the nature and quality of the phenomena linked to the toddlers’ interplay (Bryman, 2008; Willig, 2008). A phenomenological approach aims at accomplishing close descriptions of the studied phenomena, elucidating both what appears and the manner in which it appears. This approach helps to suspend presuppositions and biases (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

From this perspective, everyday life in preschool can be looked upon as a life-world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The life-world represents something more than the mere sum of physical facts. This means that one-year-olds perceive their surroundings through their bodies and by using all senses. The lived body, a basic concept in phenomenology, underlines the unity of and interplay between body and soul in what is perceived. The lived body is aware of other people as lived bodies, different from objects (Løkken, 2000; Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Following a phenomenological ethnographic approach, the researcher shall strive to share the child’s life-world and to pay close attention to his or her own presuppositions (Corsaro, 2003; Dunn, 2004). By sharing the children’s everyday life during several months, I became a part of their life-world. Still, the asymmetry between the researcher and the children as well as the difference in power must be taken into account as possible influences during the studied play sessions (Corsaro, 2003; Farrell, 2005). My ambition was to have the position of an additional adult. I tried to give priority to the children and did not carry out ordinary teacher tasks.

One-year-olds tend to have quite restricted vocabularies. The studied one-year-olds talked very little, and it was not possible to make use of informal conversations or interviews. The method chosen for enabling me to get close to the children was thus participatory observations, especially video recordings (Tobin et al., 2006). The participatory observations should be as open and exact as possible, striving for unveiling also what was not obvious (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Willig, 2008). Video recordings amass rich as well as detailed documentation of toddlers’ play and interaction during their everyday environment (Gillen et al., 2007).

**Data collection**

The data collection was based on video recordings, two mornings a week during five weeks in October and November 2006, as the final part in a longer study. When the recordings started, the children, teachers, parents and I already knew each other. My role as a researcher was to follow the children during their play, help out when asked by the children, and playing along when invited. During the first week of video recordings, the children were invited to get to know the camera. Some children wanted to follow the recordings and looked several times at the result; others did not pay
attention to the camera after the first introduction. There was always a teacher present when I was videotaping, enabling me to concentrate on the recording. I chose to carry the camera to be able to move along easily with the children.

The observations were carried out in the mornings during periods of self-initiated play, where I considered the children had good opportunities to influence their play. Indoors, the teachers arranged for the youngest children to spend time together while the two-year-olds were outside or in other rooms. Within the group, I chose one of the six one-year-olds to be in focus for my recordings. The focus child thus directed my observations through her/his actions, and I followed her/his initiatives, locomotion and play interactions in the different rooms in the unit. The other children became parts of the observations when they were playing with, interacting or communicating with the focus child. Outdoors, I followed the child in focus and her/his communication with other children. By this methodological choice, the observations were always linked to how the events and phenomena appeared to a child, that is, to the child’s meaning making and experienced phenomena. The method thus helped me to keep a child’s perspective. I videotaped around 45 minutes each morning.

The video observations (eight hours in total) were transformed into DVDs and then first roughly transcribed to offer an overview of what was going on during the session. Later, a detailed transcription was made of play sequences with intense communication and interaction; sequences that were considered of special interest for the study. The transcription conventions used were inspired by Ochs (1979). The format used in this study shows movements, sounds and words simultaneously, as all the three expressions can be seen as integrated in toddler communication (see Table 1). As is described by Sawyer (1997) and Eriksen-Ødegaaard (2010), the observations have been looked upon as polyvocal text during the analysis. The first column indicates lines, each line capturing one action, and the second column show names of the actors. In the third column, there is a possibility to add arrows, which can indicate actions of special interest and the fourth column describes the actions, sounds, expressions and words.

In order to get an understanding of the studied phenomena, all recordings, as well as all the transcriptions, were read multiple times. The repeated readings about the children’s play sequences and interplay created a holistic perception of and a familiarity with all data. Such a procedure gives meaning to the phenomena looked for (Bryman, 2008; Løkken, 2000; Willig, 2008).

The analysis of my different observations identified units that carried specific meanings, for example, each expression of initiative, involvement, mutual understanding or direction. I looked for events, where the children verbally or nonverbally approached or oriented towards each other. In the analysis, I looked for sequences showing nonverbal communications such as locomotion, gestures, voice quality, facial expressions as well as smiles and laughter. The episodes were sorted into

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Activity, sounds, words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Theo</td>
<td>Walks towards N and smiles at her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nova</td>
<td>Smiles at T, while at the same time swinging and starts to slow down</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Example of the format used for video observations.
categories, which have been presented as results. The nine excerpts have been chosen as representative examples of recurrent phenomena during the toddler play sequences.

When analysing the video recordings, I found some examples of quick glances from the observed children towards me, standing behind the camera. These glances indicated that the toddlers seem to be aware of the person behind the video recorder. In spite of my passive presence, I may, therefore, have influenced their interaction during play.

Findings

The findings show that the toddlers (17–24 months) use various forms of communication when playing with peers. Their agency involves variations of turn-taking through various nonverbal actions. The result will be presented following the play process; play initiations, play enactment and play-closing procedures. Arrows have been put at some lines, indicating actions of specific interest. In examples 1–3, the arrows indicate play initiatives, in examples 4–7 turn taking, position taking and negotiations and in examples 8–9 the arrows indicate closing procedures.

Turn taking in play invitation procedures

The toddlers use multiple strategies to attract the interest of their peers. Different types of toys are used for attracting the interest of other children. The following examples illustrate how the toddlers try to be attractive play mates when inviting peers to play.

Verbal and nonverbal play invitation strategies

The toddlers make frequent use of embodied, non-verbal entrance strategies. Sometimes they also combine nonverbal invitations with verbal utterances, embellishing or emphasising their invitations.

The following example is videotaped in a large play room where there are six large horses made of a soft plastic material filled with air. There are three red and two yellow horses standing on line by the window. The horses are quite large for the toddlers. In this sequence, Leo (21 months) is seated on a horse and invites Nova (17 months), verbally and nonverbally, to take a horse and play with him.

Video excerpt 1 (November 16)

1  Leo  →  Bends over and pats the back of the red horse,
2  →  looks into N’s eyes, saying: ‘här’ [here],
3  →  looks into N’s face and points at the red horse next to him

4  Nova  looks at L

5  Leo  →  says: ‘HÄR, här’ [HERE, here], moves over to sit straight up and starts jumping

6  Nova  looks at L while scratching her hair

7  Nova  looks at N, pulls a yellow horse closer and

8  Leo  →  pats its back saying: ‘här, här’ [here, here]
Leo is already active, jumping on his horse, when Nova approaches him. Leo invites her to play with the horse closest to him. He pats the back of the horse and he points at the horse (lines 1, 3 and 9), thus making several invitations to play. Leo and Nova look at each other, and Leo further clarifies his invitation through three distinctive verbal invitations ‘here, here!’ (lines 2, 5 and 9). The combination of body language and words is expressive, and they catch Nova’s attention.

Sharing emotions

To initiate play, the children express joy, through smiles and also through loud laughter. The sound of laughter attracts the interest of other children and seems to serve as a signal to start playing together. The children also seek eye contact; they look in each others’ eyes and smile.

The following example is a sequence taken from the floor in the play room, where there is a large blue circular carpet, which serves as a place for the morning circle time but also as a common playground for the children. There are also six plastic horses, quite large for the toddlers. Nova (17 months) can barely put her leg across. Leo (21 months) can sit on a horse and jump up and down on the same spot, whereas Robin (21 months) can even move forwards, with a kicking–jumping movement. In this observation, Nova, Leo and Robin have grabbed one horse each and walked on to the blue carpet.

Video excerpt 2 (November 16)
1 Robin Jump-rides round, round, in circles on the carpet and
2 falls off his horse
3 Leo  →  Looks at Robin with a smile on his face and
4 mounts his horse and follows R slowly
5 Nova Pulls her horse into the centre of the carpet,
6 sits down on it and follows R and L with her eyes
7 Leo  →  Falls on top of R and laughs
8 Robin  →  Looks at L and laughs
9 Nova  →  Looks at the boys and laughs
10 Robin Gets up and starts riding in circles
11 Leo  Gets up and follows R slowly
12 Nova  →  Sits on the horse in the centre and laughs

The horses seem to serve as tools for creating interaction. By grabbing the horses, showing each other happy smiles and laughing together, the involved children invite each other to the joint play. Nova is following the boys with her eyes from a central position (line 6) and laughs (line 12). Leo and Robin look at each other, both laughing (lines 3, 7 and 8), and then they resume their riding. The shared laughter seems to serve as a starting signal for one more session of horse riding. Sitting in the centre of
the carpet, Nova shows her appreciation through her laughter (lines 9 and 12), thus sharing the joy of the horse play.

Denied participation

In their invitations to play, children use eye contact and embodied actions, thus clearly showing their wish to play. However, these actions are not always successful; sometimes the invitation strategies seem to be recognised, but are not met with play acceptance. Then, the joint play will not arise.

In the following situation, Jasmine (24 months) is standing by a table, looking at a nearby play house in the shape of a barn, size 65 × 40 centimetres. Robin (21 months) is sitting on the floor, playing with a barn. One half of the barn roof can be opened, thus showing the interior of the barn and making it possible to place animals, dolls and other things in it. Jasmine is standing close to Robin, watching when he opens the roof and puts some small objects into the barn.

Video excerpt 3 (November 10)

1 Robin Puts a crocodile in the barn, closes the roof, lies down,
2 Peeps into the barn through a window, opens the roof and
3 smiles
4 [quick glance at the teacher]
5 Jasmine Looks at R on the floor and at the barn
6 Robin Picks up the crocodile from the barn, puts it back,
7 Stands up and closes the roof top
8 Jasmine Comes up to R and the barn, looks at the barn,
9 sits down,
10 → grasps the roof and begins to open it
11 Robin Holds one hand on the top of the roof
12 [looks at the teacher]
13 Jasmine Opens the roof and looks down
14 Robin Says: ‘e:h’ [e:h], closes the roof
15 Jasmine Holds on to the roof with one hand,
16 → turns the barn towards herself and grabs the roof
17 Robin Puts his left hand on the roof
18 Jasmine → Takes a firmer grip and tries to open the roof
19 Robin Leans over the roof, saying: ‘e:h’ [e:h]
20 Jasmine Lets go of the roof
21 Robin Says: ‘E:H’ [E:H], opens the roof, puts a toy in the barn,
22 closes the roof and taps at it with both hands
Jasmine seems to be interested in playing with the barn. She looks at Robin and at
the barn. Then she approaches him and sits down, positioning herself close to the
barn. Her next move is to grab the roof, and she starts opening the roof (line 10). At
this point, Robin protests and shows bodily (line 14) that he does not want Jasmine in
his playing. Thereafter, Jasmine repeats her trials to play with the barn using embod-
ied actions (lines 16 and 18) that are met with protests from Robin who sticks to the
barn (lines 19 and 21). Her repeated play invitation strategies, joining in and
handling the barn physically, do not lead to a joint play. On the contrary; Jasmine is
denied participation in Robin’s play activities. He signals that he wants to play on his
own with the barn.

**Turn-taking strategies in play enactment**

During the play sequences, the toddlers use different ways to communicate during
their interaction. The turn taking involves multiple patterns, such as imitation, impro-
visation taking the perspectives of others and taking negotiating positions.

**Imitation and joint play improvisations**

During play, turn taking can be seen as acts of imitation. One of the children makes a
move, acts, and another child notices the action and repeats or imitates it. The action
is observed by child number one, who in turn makes a move, followed by careful
observations and new actions from child number two. The following example is
videotaped in the morning when Theo (17 months) is outdoors exploring a bench
which is attached to a playhouse. Theo is busy, working intensely on climbing up and
down the bench. He also tries to stand up and to sit down on the bench. Max (an older
peer, aged 2.5 years) approaches him.

Video excerpt 4 (November 30)

1  Theo  Climbs up on the bench on his knees and then stands up
2  Max  Comes up to the playhouse, stops and looks at T,
       walks up to the bench and climbs up on the bench
3  Theo  Looks at M and laughs
4  Max  Looks at T, laughs, climbs down, walks a few steps,
       turns around and looks at T
5  Theo  \(\rightarrow\) Looks at M and stamps his foot on the bench
6  Max  \(\rightarrow\) Stamps his foot on the ground, looking at T
7  Theo  Laughs
8  Max  \(\rightarrow\) Laughs and stamps
9  Theo  \(\rightarrow\) Stamps and laughs
10 Max  \(\rightarrow\) Stamps and laughs
11 Theo  \(\rightarrow\) Stamps and laughs

Max joins Theo on the bench and climbs up. Theo smiles at Max, which can be under-
stood as a welcoming confirmation of Max’s approach. When Max climbs down,
Theo looks at him and stamps his foot on the bench (line 7). Max stamps his foot on the ground, imitating Theo’s action (line 8). Max and Theo both stamp again, and the imitation continues in a form of improvisational play (lines 10 and 11). The interplay is accompanied with laughter.

**Improvisational play and taking the perspective of others**

Most of the play turn takings of the studied young toddlers are manifested in physical action. Turn-taking actions can be more coordinated than in example 4. With the help of eye contact, they seem to focus on each other more closely, they take in the situation and adapt to the peer’s next action. This can be analysed as an emerging competence of taking the perspective of the other. The following observation is made one morning when Leo (21 months) and Robin (21 months) are indoors playing with various things. There is a hammock hanging low from the ceiling in the large play room. Leo and Robin are both being helped into the hammock by a teacher. Leo and Robin are lying down facing each other. Leo has Robin’s legs on each of his sides and Robin has Leo’s feet under his own legs. The hammock is swinging slowly, and the boys are swinging along when the following episode develops.

**Video Excerpt 5 (November 16)**

1. Robin Laughs and kicks his feet towards/into L
2. Leo Kicks his feet towards R
3. Robin → Kicks, then lies still, laughs and starts kicking faster
4. Leo → Kicks and stops
5. Robin Says: ‘ah, sch, sch, sch’ [ah, sh, sh, sh] and kicks
   [quick glance at me]
6. Leo → Kicks and looks at R
7. Robin → Pauses, resumes the kicking and says: ‘sch, sch, sch’ [sh, sh, sh]
8. Leo Looks at R and turns his body so that both R’s feet kick his butt
9. Robin Kicks
10. Leo Smiles and says: ‘ah ha aHA:a’ [ah ha aHA:a], turns and meets R’s left foot with his right foot
11. Robin → Kicks towards L’s feet, stops, laughs and kicks
12. Leo Smiles, uses his hands to block R’s kicking feet, looks into R’s eyes, smiles and kicks
13. Robin Looks into L’s eyes
The boys swinging in the hammock first seem to be with the aim to rest. Then Robin starts kicking. Leo’s response is to kick with his feet towards Robin. The turn-taking kicking goes on in a reciprocal way (lines 1–8). The kicking is accompanied by ‘sh, sh, sh, sh’ sounds from Robin, and with smiles and laughter from both boys. The kicking appears to be ticklish and fun and the boys laugh and look at each other. The kicking seems to be accepted by both boys; however, their kicking is on the verge of becoming violent. There are frequent stops and pauses (lines 3, 5, 9 and 15). During the breaks in the kicking activity, the boys look carefully into each others’ eyes, until one or the other resumes his kicking (lines 8 and 17). During the sensory motoric interaction, the boys communicate through these moments of eye contact, adapting the quite rough body movements to each others reactions. The breaks can be understood as moments for taking the perspective of the other (lines 3, 5, 9 and 15).

Negotiations

Turn taking during play also involves negotiations around their play positions and around toys. This is shown in the following example where two toddlers with interest in the same toy start negotiating the right to the toy through nonverbal communication. This observation is made when Theo (17 months) was quite new in the unit. He has chosen a pram and walks around with it in the unit, humming and singing ‘Ba, bao, ba. Ba, bao, ba’. There is a jug on the floor, and the jug’s lid is lying close by. Jasmine (24 months) is sitting on the floor next to the jug, dressed in a princess skirt and with a crown on her head.

Video excerpt 6 (November 2)

1. Jasmine Drops down on her knees,
2. picks up the lid and turns towards the jug
3. Theo Walks up to the jug, stretches out his hand and takes it
4. Jasmine → Approaches the jug, drops the lid and turns towards the away-rolling lid and picks it up
5. Theo Holds the jug in his left hand
6. Jasmine Looks at T and the jug, drops the lid, walks on her knees up to T, stands up, grabs the jug with both hands and looks at the jug
8. Jasmine Lets go of the jug and
9. bends down and picks up the lid from the floor
When Theo notices the jug lying on the floor, he seems to become interested in it. Jasmine, on the other hand, seems to be interested in putting the lid on the jug. During the process, Jasmine drops the lid three times (lines 4, 8 and 18) and picks it up again and returns to Theo and the jug. Theo holds on to the jug, showing clearly that he wants the jug (lines 10 and 14). With the help of their eyes and gazes, there seems to be a silent negotiation going on. The turn-taking interplay between Theo and Jasmine can be understood as negotiations, where Jasmine wants to put the lid on the jug, and Theo wants to hold the jug himself. When Theo walks away (line 19), Jasmine follows and gives him the lid (lines 23–25). Theo’s actions during the negotiations are to hold on to the jug, not letting go, walking away, still following Jasmine’s actions with his eyes. When she approaches, he accepts the lid (line 25). Once the jug and lid are with Theo, Jasmine turns to new activities (line 26). The wordless communication seems to be a silent negotiation with the help of intense eye contact, locomotion and gestures, which together lead to a mutually acceptable result.

In the following example, it is shown how toddlers also negotiate during role-play. The storyline is made up by them, and it becomes the background for the negotiations. The young children take positions against each other during the play. The two girls keep up their play positions, while they are negotiating. Molly (23 months) and Jasmine (24 months) are playing in the family corner. Jasmine comes up to the table with a pram, parks it beside the table and sits down on a chair, holding a pink baby bottle in her hand. Molly sits by the table holding a blue baby bottle. On the table, there is a jug with a lid.

**Video excerpt 7 (November 2)**

1. Molly: Picks up J’s bottle and offers it to J,
2. Jasmine: Places her pink baby bottle and a towel on the table
3. releases J’s bottle so that it falls down on the floor, and
The two girls are caught up in a play negotiation process where they position themselves against one another. Jasmine is having a superior position directing the play (lines 7–8), and Molly holds an inferior position, looking at Jasmine before action is taken (lines 10 and 17). The different positions seem to be based on a mutual understanding. However, when Molly repeatedly drops one or the other bottle on the floor, this can be understood as a powerful negotiation strategy, where she shows control of the bottles. When Jasmine just picks up the dropped bottles in a matter-of-fact way and gives them back to Molly, she is in control, from her position in their play (lines 8 and 13–14. Jasmine sometimes underlines her actions and her position, with words, spoken in an instructional tone (lines 14, 19, 24 and 26).

**Play-closing sequences**

When analysing how play activities end, the toddlers were found to use different strategies. One common activity is that one or more of the children just walk away. An interplay sequence can also be finished because of different types of interruptions, sometimes by the daily routines, other times by children and quite often by teachers.
Walking away

One way for a child to end a play sequence, is simply to walk away. In the following example, this is done without gestures or comments. Two children, Nova (17 months) and Leo (21 months) are playing by the window indoors when Nova suddenly sees Alice, her older sister, through the window. By knocking at the window and through emotional nonverbal communication, the three children play and communicate although they are on different sides of the window. All three children laugh while playing.

Excerpt 8 (November 16)

1. Nova looks at Alice through the window
2. Leo knocks on the window and cries out: ‘eh, Alice, hej, hej’ [eh Alice, hello, hello]
3. Nova stands beside Leo, looking at her sister and laughing
4. Leo knocks on the window and laughs together with Alice
5. Nova watches Leo and Alice playing, turns around and → walks away

Leo is the more active child during the interplay, while Nova is watching and laughing. Then, in the middle of the ongoing play, Nova suddenly walks away (line 6). Sometimes, the same play activity reappears during a play session. Greeting-other-children-and-laughing-through-the-window is such an activity. Nova was observed to interact with her sister Alice, who was outdoors, two times during the same morning session. Terminating play through walking away could then be understood as a part of a pattern of multiple short play sequences.

Play closings by third parties

Play episodes could also end as a result of third-party interventions. In the preschool context, the third party would generally be a teacher who invoked a rule or daily routine that called for the termination of the children’s playing. Excerpt 9 shows an example of such an interruption, caused by a teacher. The excerpt shows how the turn-taking interplay previously shown in excerpt 5 ends.

Excerpt 9 (November 16)

1. Robin kicks towards L’s feet, stops, laughs and kicks
2. Leo smiles, uses his hands to block R’s kicking feet, looks into R’s eyes and smiles
3. Robin looks into L’s eyes
4. Leo grabs R’s foot and says: ‘eh hehe’ [eh hehe]
5. Teacher → comes up, grabs R and stops the interplay, saying:
   → ‘Jag tror inte att L tycker om när du sparkar så där. Så’
   ‘I don’t think Leo likes it when you kick like that. So.’.
From a position nearby, the teacher is monitoring the play sequence and the turn taking of kicking movements in the hammock. The slightly rough play suddenly comes to an end, as the teacher lifts up Robin (line 6). The boys have not signalled to her or even looked at her for guidance during the play sequence. Her action is accompanied by her expressing how she thinks Leo feels (line 7). There is no attempt to ask about the boys’ perception of the play.

Discussion

Play is an important arena for studying young children’s interaction and communication. Previous research, mostly on preschool children aged two–six years old, suggests that play in preschools can be seen as a cultural arena where children are actors, trying to explore and make meaning of their surrounding world (Alvestad, 2010; Corsaro, 2003; Dunn, 2004; Göncü, 1999; Løkken, 2000).

The objective of this study was to specifically explore how younger toddlers (aged 17–24 months during the study) communicate and involve each other in peer interaction during play. The overall findings support a theoretical perspective where very young children are social actors, with certain competences. Play invitation strategies were mostly found to be based on nonverbal communications such as locomotion, gestures, voice quality and facial expressions (excerpts 1 and 2). Although these young children do not talk as much as older toddlers, they used one-word sentences to underline their invitation moves, see for instance the use of *here* in excerpt 1. The young toddlers were found to use access strategies similar to the ones used by older preschoolers (aged three–six years) described by Corsaro (1979, 2003). Play invitations from a one-year-old child were not always successful, however, since such an attempt can be turned down or ignored by another one-year-old child (excerpt 3).

The competence of taking others’ perspectives has previously been shown in play sequences among older boys in rough and tumble play (Pellegrini, 2006). This study shows that such a capacity was also recurrently manifested in younger children’s playing. With the help of careful observation, Theo (in excerpt 4) involved himself and a peer in nonverbal imitation sequences (excerpt 4). In sequences of rough and tumble play (excerpt 5), two boys took the perspective of each other and adapted their kicking activities in the hammock to each other (excerpt 5).

Emotions shown with smiles and laughter were seen to accompany the turn taking between the young children. Such reactions seemed to reinforce play communicative messages between the peers. Play improvisations draw on fantasy and creativity; no one child dominates the play procedure (Sawyer, 1997). This was, for instance, shown in the stamping and the smiling in excerpt 4 as well as in the kicking and the laughter activities in excerpt 5. Other studies have shown that positive affective signals are the most common emotions in interplay between two-year-old peers (Michelsen, 2004).

The young toddlers in this study used negotiation strategies about how to continue their play interaction, for instance in excerpt 7, where Molly repeatedly throws a bottle on the floor. Furthermore, they negotiated about access to a certain toy (see excerpts 6) and about materials and play procedures (excerpts 6 and 7). Negotiations in interactions among two-year-olds in Norwegian preschools are mainly about relationships, play materials and about what to play (Alvestad, 2010).

A common play-closing action used by the children was simply to walk away from the ongoing play. This was seen, for instance, when Nova, aged 17 months, in the middle of a turn-taking play with greetings and laughter, just turned around and
walked away (excerpt 8). This play-closing behaviour seemed to be accepted by the other children involved, without comments or reactions, and could be seen as an accepted part of toddlers’ play-closing activities. In addition, Nova was observed to return to the same kind of play two more times during the same morning session. This might imply that terminating play through walking away could be understood as a part of a pattern of multiple short play sequences. The same kind of play-closing procedure, as found here, has also been described by Corsaro among older preschoolers (1979, 2003). The result from this study indicates that both older and younger children can stop their playing by just walking away.

Based on this and previous studies with preschoolers, there is a need to stress the importance of play in early childhood education. The preschool setting can be understood as a rich environment, physically, socially and emotionally for children (Sawyer, 1997). It is an arena where children can show intentions and interact with the affordances in the environment (Johansson, 2004; Michélsen, 2004). The opportunities to play with peers can enhance their social competence, for instance, through negotiations and taking the perspectives of others (Alvestad, 2010). This competence is of special interest because confidence in dealing with peers is considered as a life skill in today’s society (Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006).

As was concluded by Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart (2010) and Siraj-Blatchford (2009), there is a need for balancing between instructional techniques and guidance, between child-initiated and adult-led interactions, play and activities. The findings from this study indicate that child–child interaction and time for self-initiated activities during play can be crucial for developing social skills in how to interact with peers. Peer play is a rich arena where toddlers may develop their communicative and negotiating skills. The results from this limited study show interaction and communicative competencies among one-year-old toddlers. Drawing on these results, fundamental and continued training of preschool staff should stress young toddlers’ interplay competencies and the importance of play.

Notes on contributor
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References


