

MOTHER - CHILD PLAYWORLD AT HOME

The evaluation of family and bringing up children has constantly been growing in young families. Our preliminary research (Saar & Tuuling 1998) indicated that young parents with pre-school children understand the importance and necessity of their children's development and also consider that play and toys have an important role in it. Parents have got a lot of general theoretical knowledge, but at the same time the research shows that young parents have little actual information about child's play.

There are very many researches, where it is analysed how parents (mostly mothers) play with their children. Studies of Dunn & Wooding (1977), Slade (1987), O'Connell & Bretherton (1984), Fiese (1990), Fein & Fryer (1995) concluded that toddlers are engaged in both quantitatively and qualitatively more diverse and advanced forms of symbolic play when playing with mothers than when playing alone. Studies showed that more complex forms of play were observed when children were playing with their mothers than when they were engaged in solitary play. Maternal play behaviours are grouped according to the directiveness or forcefulness of the mothers' efforts (Fein and Fryer 1995). With respect to the amount of maternal involvement in play, findings indicate an inverted U-shaped function. Fein and Fryer find that mothers who are distant or indirect have little influence on their children; mothers who are intrusive and tutorial have a negative influence. Mothers who offer direct suggestions, solicit pretend behaviours from their children and participate in pretend exchange have a positive influence on their children.

W. Haight and her colleagues (1992, 1993, 1999) have carried out lots of studies of adult caregiver-child pretend play. W. Haight and others have described a caregiver-child play at home and the studies include several research methods as longitudinal naturalistic and videotaped observations, interviewing parents and other ethnographic methods. Haight explores the concepts of "socialization" and "acquisition", the relationship between parents' ideas about children's development and children's responses to them. They found that middle-class, European-American caregivers expressed the beliefs that cognitive development is a priority in an early childhood, that such development is facilitated through interaction with adults, and that caregiver-child interaction in pretend play, as well as in other contexts such as book reading and construction play, facilitates children's cognitive development (Haight 1999, 137). The extensive, longitudinal home observations revealed that in the context of their own homes mothers were children's primary play partners through children's third birthdays.

W. Haight (1999) has written that for the future more extended, longitudinal research should consider longer-term developmental outcomes of caregiver-child pretend play. Cultural context as she emphasizes is important not only to understanding the development of pretend play but to understanding the development of other culturally valued activities of which pretend play may be a precursor.

In the scientific literature there are a lot of studies about the play of a small child and the mother, but how 4-5-year-old children play at home and how mother facilitates the child's play there are only few empirical studies.

The aim of my study is to describe and analyse 4-5-year-old children's play in the family context and the mothers' role in it. In the research an attempt is made to understand what kind of conditions the mother creates at home and how she stimulates the child's play.

In my study I proceeded from the ideas of Vygotsky, Leontjev, Elkonin and Novosjolova about the role play and its developmental stages. According to the point of view of the abovementioned authors about the role play of 4-5-year-old children the object role play begins to change into social play i.e. the player in his play starts to communicate more and more according to his role with the other player or other players.

I have observed and followed several 4-5-year-old children, who play differently at kindergarten. That means I have chosen the children, who play well and diverse social role play and vice versa the children, who play little or not at all the social role play according to the conversation with the kindergarten teacher. In my research I have used different research methods. At first after identifying the child I observed that child myself in the kindergarten, after that I carried out a semi-structured interview with the child's mother. Then I observed the child and the mother in the home context and finally I carried out the subsequent interview with the mother showing her some extracts from the video.

Next I am describing the play world of a 4-year-old boy Toomas (name changed) both in the kindergarten and at home and the mother's interview.

TOOMAS has his third year in the kindergarten but up to now he has been there only half of the day.

The kindergarten teacher spoke about Toomas as a special child, who has got his own interests (most of all technical interests) and other children cannot understand his clever technical stories. The kindergarten teacher considered Toomas an original and sensitive child who is musically very talented. But at the same time the teacher said that Toomas was a child who usually played alone, because he had difficulties in getting on with other children. The boy often joins the other children's plays (even forcefully or using violence), but the play usually falls soon apart because of Toomas's inability to play with the others.

According to the observation in the kindergarten, it can be claimed that Toomas really played alone or watched the others' game from the side. If he wanted to join in the others' game, it created aversion in other players. E.g: two girls are "dogs" in a game. They imitate dogs, they are on all fours and run about in the room, barking. Toomas comes to the girls and says: "Let's do so that we are dogs all three of us, then there'll be a male dog too". One girl says with a determined voice "No, we don't want it." Then the other player says: "We are actually cats by the way"

In the observation a short-term joint play with the other children in the role play could be noticed. E. g. in the shop play Toomas wanted to be a shop assistant. He said at the beginning of the play, that he would be a shop assistant and in coming to the shop it has to be asked exactly, what they intend to buy. Toomas was also the one who appointed "the buyers", who were allowed to come to the shop. Toomas was also the one who determined what could be bought from the shop. Playmate called Marek wanted to buy chewing gum, but Toomas did not have it. Toomas offered a plastic bag instead of chewing gum. But the player did not like the idea, he accepted that reluctantly. The players did not like Toomas' shop and they did not come to buy there any more. To the Toomas' question about why they would not come to the shop, the children said that the shop was wretched and that was why they did not want to buy anything from there.

Interview with the mother

To my question about Toomas' games , the mother answered...*whereas he actually imitates that what is, what happens in life. For example just for a while we have played juice steaming at home. Then he has bricks and, well, with these he builds, other times watches, looks at the picture, then he does himself .*

I asked at once, whether she was playing together with her child. The mother answered that in general she does not play much indeed. The mother notes in the interview that she actually doesn't play together with the child. Mother thought that earlier it had been necessary to play together with the boy, but not any more now. Mother says: *A year and half ago I had a feeling, that he is tied up with me, that he doesn't get along with and can't play. So that we always had to start together. But now it seems to me that it is not this way any more. I think that he can play himself and he manages himself.*

I asked then, if Toomas invited her to play. The mother said: *Yes he did. Yes, Yes. He always, when he invites. I always go and always watch. I never say, that I cannot. Or when I really cannot, then I say, that wait a little, that I'll come at once. And then also the thing, that if he has to wait, then he himself thinks something additional to that, so that don't come.*

I also asked from the mother, that when she joins the play, what she will have to do there. The mother replied: *Well, it depends on the game. I have to take part in it or be there. So that for example that shop assistant play. So that I must ask, how many sweets I want. That when he gives me a sort of money and then I can give him that money back.*

Object play environment

Toomas lives with his mother in a 2 room flat of a typical part of the town. Toomas does not have a room of his own, his toys are in the toys` cupboard and in a special box. In the town, the mother never allows the son out alone to the yard, because one reason is strangers, but the other reason and even worse one is cars. The roads between the buildings are narrow and well they speed so that it is simply awful.

The mother turns a lot of attention to the joint activities with the child: For example they have travelled a lot together in Estonia and abroad. At the week-ends they go to the cinema and to the theatre or visit acquaintances.

Toomas has got a lot of books, toys (cars, garage, radiophone, electrical piano, Lego locks) and means. Toomas' wishes are taken into account while buying toys. The mother said about the toys, *that Toomas would not play with a toy for a long time, that certain thing is boring for him. He must be able to add something to that. The mother explains: He always thinks something additional to the toys. He makes something new from it. It is like a part of some game, that he has thought then out...well, that certain things interests him for exactly half an hour.*

Toomas has got a lot of toys at grandmother`s place too: a garage, an assembled railway, a toy plane. At the same time there are a lot of leads, hose, an old vacuum cleaner and an old radio at the grandmother`s.

Video observation

The ordinary **evening at home** looks like so that Toomas is either in the bedroom or in the living-room and the mother is engaged in the kitchen. When I went to Toomas' home the mother told us in entering: " It is a real life, as it really is. I am in the kitchen and Toomas watches TV. " And the mother added: "Toomas can manage by himself. "

The life at home went on so that Toomas was on his own and the mother on her own, so both of them were on their own in their own rooms. Once in a while Toomas went to talk to his mother about what was happening on TV or asked for some missing means for the play. What does Toomas do at home? First of all he watches TV a lot, listens to music, plays or does his repair work. The mother and the child mainly meet in the kitchen, where a great deal of the time under observation was passed. The mother paid a lot of attention to the feeding of the child and was often concerned. That the child eats so little.

According to the observation it can be seen that there are few mother and **child`s joint activities**. It turns out from that joint activity example, that the mother constructs on her own. It seems that Toomas wants that the plane would be ready, but he is not interested in the assembling process. Toomas tries to teach his mother, but the mother does not pay much attention to that. At the same time the mother is disturbed by the fact that Toomas is not interested in assembling. Still the mother would love Toomas to watch attentively, how to act. The mother notes, that Santa Claus would not bring such things for the child next time.

At the video observation we can see, that Toomas usually plays alone. Toomas plays either with a big plastic car or car park or cooks.

I am giving one examples of Toomas' **solitary play**. The play starts so, that after eating in the kitchen Toomas asks two plates from his mother, then he takes a knife, a fork and one more plate from the drawer of the kitchen cupboard and takes them to the bedroom. After that he starts dismantling a lego construction and puts the small lego bricks into the bowl. The bowl is soon full and Toomas goes to ask for another bowl from the mother. At first he wants a big bowl from the bedroom, but the mother does not allow that. Instead he receives a yellow plastic bowl on the mother`s permission. He also starts putting lego bricks there. Toomas plays this way for quite a long time. To the recorder he told that he is cooking, cooking macaronis. Toomas presses a lid onto the bowl and says: We must first repair it ready with the Mummy, then the food will be ready.

In that play Toomas played object play using all kinds of toys, for that- lego bricks, that were in a replacement function that time replacing foodstuffs - macaronis, besides that several of quite real means - a knife a fork, bowls a plate were used. Toomas went to his mother for several times to ask the means for the play. The mother gave him those, but at the same time she did not ask why they were needed and without being interested at all, what the child was engaged in.

Or another example of Toomas' play, that starts so, that Toomas plays in his room with a car and attaches all kinds of leads to it. Mother is busy in the kitchen. After 10 minutes mother comes to the door to see what Toomas is doing.

Mothers asks: What are you inventing here?

Toomas gets the lead through the window: Ready.

Mother: What is that now?

Toomas starts showing his car to his mother: That is a car, see. It takes electricity from here and puts it here and from here puts electricity to the upper part and closes the lid this way and the lid is closed. And this is an electric lead and that is also an electric lead. And it gives that blue electric lead, lead electricity and this is water, that lets off (takes the lead into his hands and spills mother).

Mother: Prr

Toomas: That lets off ice cold water to your face.

Mother is at the door sputtering, laughing: Uh, I have got so wet now. Let off the heat as well.

Toomas lets it off.

Mother: It`s so good, pleasant.

Toomas lets off some more water with the hose.

Mother: Now I understand, what it was (looks enquiringly at Toomas). It was probably cold.

Toomas lets off more water: But what is it now?

Mother: Lukewarm. Will you come to eat as well?

Toomas: I cannot now. Toomas looks archly at mother. But now you`ll atartle youself flat onto the bed.

Mother: Mm

Toomas lets off water with a hose to the mother.

Mother sputters, waves he arms: Uh.Oh God, it`s hot.

Toomas: Yes!

Mother: Yes.

Toomas laughing: But now I am afraid you'll jump onto the cupboard, past the cupboard.

Mother: Past the cupboard?

Toomas takes slowly the hose, lets off water to the mother.

Mother: Oh, how icy it is. I don't want, help, how cold it is.

Mother goes to another room, but Toomas calls the mother back

Toomas lets off water to the mother

Mother: But I do want water, I do want to be wet.

Toomas lets off water: Pr! Well be then, you'll get then.

In that episode we see, that Toomas' mother comes for a minute to see what Toomas is doing and also joins the play. The mother is interested in what is going on. Toomas shows his car to his mother and gives additional explanations. After that Toomas pours some imaginary water at the mother. The mother goes into the child's play and goes along with the play's symbols. She waves her arms, laughs and sputters and makes a face as if she has got wet. We can see that the mother went along to her son's play world with pleasure and the son spoke and played along with the mother with great pleasure.

Conclusions

It appeared from the kindergarten teacher's talk that Toomas was a child who plays little in the kindergartn and who almost does not have a social role play. I also got confirmation to the kindergarten teacher's words in the kindergarten observation that Toomas has difficulties in playing together with the other children. It turned out from the mother's interview, that Toomas plays a lot at home, but mostly alone, because Toomas is so big that he can manage by himself and does not need his mother any more. Toomas turns repeatedly to his mother in order to get a means that is necessary in his play. Once it could be seen that Toomas went to show his mother his vehicle.

The mother's reaction to her child's building is favourable but short and laconic. When she came for a moment to see the playing child, it could be seen, that the son immediately wished to play together with his mother. The mother joined the play. There are images in the play: cold and warm water, the clothes getting wet. From the interview with the mother her idea that I must always have a look at everything, everything, I must always give my opinion and motivate that opinion too. When the child calls, I must go or you are to react. The mother's emphasizing- I must or I am to- rang in my ears for a long time. When I asked the mother in the subsequent interview to speak more precisely about the child's activity according to the video, then she spoke a lot about means- toys in the play, but not so much about the content of the play. Toomas needs his mother's help in getting the means-toys. The mother gives her son the objects while not being interested in, why they are necessary and how they are used. Toomas usually does play at home, but alone and an object play. The mother thinks that she does not have to play with her child, because he can manage by himself already.

In the plays of the four and five- year-old children the role of the parent is different from that of the younger ones. Uzgiris and Raeff (1995) have pointed out three roles of the parents (audience, facilitator or partner) in their children's play. What role are exactly playing the parents of the children of that age needs a more precise study in the future.

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