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The role of interactive play in early self-development and mother-child attachment / psychological and pedagogical aspects

The term 'play' covers a rather wide category. In the early years of life, learning and play are almost equivalent, and those early years are of critical significance with regard to later development, quality of life and social integration.

The chief mission of the toy library, which I shall also show you on video at the end of my presentation, is to draw attention to the opportunities that may be taken or missed in the first five to six years of life.

The **toy library**, a completely novel institution in Hungary, was created to provide children and their partners an opportunity for pleasurable play.

Upon entry, families may feel lost due to the extraordinary profusion of opportunities to play available to both little and grown explorers. **Expert playmasters** including nursery teachers, special needs teachers, psychologists, assistants and speech therapists are on hand to provide assistance with getting deeply absorbed in play.

A tremendous variety of toys are available to both healthy and handicapped children. Their parents can play together with them, or may make contacts with others, talk with the specialists or request help. The toy libraries operated by the Mikkamakka Foundation with community co-operation are open to everyone seeking leisure or company. During play, both adults and children with similar backgrounds **can form friendships and share experiences and information.**

In addition to consultation on play methodology, we run several other **programmes**: we have an exhibition and presentation room, a parents' club, exercise classes and we also host various events and parties.

The facility is somewhat akin to a library in the sense that we also have a special collection, **a collection of toys** which we make available to families. They can use them on site, but if required, they can also **borrow** them to take them home. The specialists working here can handle the various difficulties and problems that arise, whether they be related to early development, the relationship between mother and child, infantile resistance, the blossoming of personality and talent, anxiety, aggression, rewards or punishment. They listen to the parents and **provide assistance on an equal partnership basis.** What is important is the reinforcement and shaping of the relationship between parent and child through the activity of playing – playing together, formal play sessions or play therapy.

It is a fundamental principle of the philosophy of the toy library that it is **open to everyone** regardless of race, abilities or background. Our objectives, targets include the provision of early support for the social integration of handicapped children, the establishment of equal opportunities and the shaping of public opinion. In our view, it is the parents who know their children best, it is with parents that children form the closest ties and spend the most time with. Therefore the playmasters of our toy libraries try to persuade parents to listen to their intuitions and to believe that they have primary authority with respect to raising their children.

In summary:

What is our toy library?

- ☺ It is a wonderful, **magical empire of play!** It is a place where children can **play with their parents.**
- ☺ It is a storehouse of high quality **children-friendly toys.**
- ☺ Friendly, specially trained **playmasters** await the families coming to play together with consultancy, sessions, therapy, programmes and parties – as playmates!
- ☺ Children can **borrow** their favourite toys.
- ☺ It is a place to find information and meet people: **human relationships** both within and outside the family are reinforced.
- ☺ Our toy libraries are members of the International Toy Library Association.
- ☺ **Services:**
 - we try to prevent problems, traumas and to protect mental health,
 - we promote early social integration and acceptance,
 - we provide quality cultural and leisure events for children and families,
 - we use a new approach and methods and transfer them through research, training, publications and articles.

In addition to families, the toy library also receives **nursery and school groups** from both general and special needs educational institutions by appointment. The toy libraries are also **professional workshops:** they participate in the application and further development of the methodology of integrative play as well as its promotion aimed at the professional community and the general public. The toy libraries use the method of integrative play in combination with consultation, therapeutic and developmental activities developed within an educational methodology research project sponsored by the National Scientific Research Fund. Controlled by the National Centre of Mikkamakka Toy Libraries (NCMTL), the establishment of a **national network of toy libraries** has commenced as an experimental pilot project of the Ministry of Social and Family Affairs; the network may later become an integral part of national social services. At present, we have nine toy libraries in place around the country.

In order to make our lives better, we have to improve our experience. Pleasurable, pleasant experiences as opposed to negative ones must form the decisive majority in order to maintain the harmony, order and coherence of consciousness. Pleasurable experiences strengthen and develop the Self and make the personality more complex. Therefore, *the search for and the finding of joy* may become a central motif of our lives. We must learn how to incorporate joy into our daily lives. Play is among the most important sources of pleasure.

Children establish their lifestyles, their strategies for facing the challenges and difficulties of the world in the first five to six years of their lives, in a complex interplay between their own activity and the factors active in their early environments. The proper development of the faculty of "power" (the overcoming of trials and obstacles, struggling) can be traced back to the processes of self-organisation taking place in a context of playful social interaction and in particular, the feedback from carers providing emotional regulation that allow the infant to experience its own efficacy, leading to the blossoming of a sense of self as agent, which allows it to open towards the social world.

In our view, play is an excellent mediator for reinforcing the healthy development of personality and for preventing pathological processes.

Play as an activity, play as a way of thinking, play a pleasure and social interaction and finally play as a way of life is the linking factor that has a determining effect on our lives, our development and the modes of existence of both adults and children.

Early relationships form in the context of play, and in order to ensure that the child's capacity for play develops appropriately, it is important that carers should be playful, that they should be good playmates who are able to understand the unique world of child in an emphatic manner. Playfulness or the capacity to play in that sense requires a certain degree of maturity (we may even call it wisdom) and emotional complexity from the adult.

M. Ainsworth (1967) described the patterns and various types of bonding during his so called "*strange situation*" research (the key factor in those research situations was the reaction to the return of the mother). He established three main categories: the *anxious / avoiding*, the *safely bonded* and the *anxious / resisting* (uncertainly bonded or simply anxious) types. Since then, further research has established a fourth type, the *confused* one, which has no coherent pattern of behaviour. The causal background of the bonding patterns were assumed to include motherly responsiveness, the child's characteristics and cultural influences.

Motherly responsiveness is a very important category, but the coin has two sides: sensitivity and speed may be helpful and positive, but if it is intrusive and results in excessive stimulation, it will have negative effects. The ideal, so-called "A" mother (B. White, J.C. Watts, 1973, in: Cole 1998) is a loving mother in perfect tune with her child's needs who, however, is not tied too closely to the child and does not constrain the child excessively but rather provides the illusion of physical support and the experience of a secure, supporting background thereby allowing the child to display independent initiative, to experience its own successes, to expend effort and to persevere.

Naturally, the development of bonding is influenced to a great extent by the child, the child's main characteristics. In the early period, the primary factors are *the characteristics of temperament*. When the infant becomes increasingly restless, demanding or cries more, mothers sometimes have a tendency to interpret it as an attempt to annoy them, so to speak, or to provoke some kind of response. Subsequently, they attribute intentions to the child erroneously and react accordingly, and that erroneous interpretation and behaviour confuses the child even more. Therefore it is very important to discuss the interpretation of the child's actions (in a partnership between specialist and parent), to decode those messages appropriately and to advise the correct response behaviour. The majority of research found no direct relationship between temperament characteristics and bonding, and they do not seem to be stable characteristics of personality. Nevertheless, it is clear that they do have a special role with respect to early attunement.

As explained by Gergely and Watson in "*the social biofeedback model of parental emotional reflection*", the mechanism of contingency detection, parental emotional reflection and emotional awareness play important roles in the development of emotional awareness and self-control. The essence of the model is that through parental reflection as a natural social biofeedback mechanism, procedural self states (basic emotions) that are initially not conscious become consciously detectable (Gergely, 1999). According to the theory, the parental reflection of an expression of negative emotion by the infant can have an emotional regulatory effect on the infant. Such reflection takes place in a special manner so as to ensure that the parent does not reinforce the negative states of the child but rather modifies them. A great deal of empathy is required in the parent to allow them to assume the child's perspective, to attempt to understand the child and to transmit attention and the intention to help so as to participate actively in the alleviation of discomfort. In order to be able to calm a crying baby using those methods, the parent has to be able to use specific techniques of communication to display and modulate the child's own emotions. As a result, the child will not attribute the emotion so displayed to the parent, but to itself, and the interchange will induce positive arousal in the infant, which will help alleviate the state of negative affect. That reflective communication will only be successful if it has the following important characteristics (Gergely, 1999):

"*Marking*" prevents the attribution of the perceived emotion to the parent and makes it easier for the child to attribute the emotion to itself, to link it to its internal sensations. Marking means that the parent does not display the real emotion but rather a symbolically presented, tamed version – just like the coding employed in the "as if" game. Here we see again that it will be those who are able to play, able to pretend "as if" that will be able to reflect emotions to an infant in an emphatic, playful manner, in varied interactive situations, which is of prime importance in the early phase of the development of the self.

The suspension of dispositional consequences also reinforces the "as if" attitude, the playful framework, as the consequences associated with realistic expressions of emotion do not occur. It also indicates an understanding, mature, emphatic attitude in the parent.

A *high-level contingent relationship* helps the infant to perceive those contingencies, leading to an increase of positive arousal and the elimination of the negative emotional state through the sensation of efficacy and control.

According to the theory of social biofeedback, parental reflection of emotions also plays a key role in the formation of *the self as self-regulating agent*, as the infant learns that it can achieve successful homeostatic regulation of its emotions through the externalisation of negative emotional state. Therefore the role of the parent, who is indispensable at first, is modified when the child gains the ability of emotional self-regulation – this is clearly observable in the adaptive emotional regulatory use of the "as if" game, when the child, reflecting itself, so to speak, projects its emotions to the imaginary players.

In order to make that projection to be successful, it is important that the parent should be the child's partner in the "as if" game to an appropriate extent, in harmony with the child's needs. If the parents are to assume a playful attitude towards the child, in many cases they must first learn to play – and that is where the developmental pedagogical approach and methods promoting joint, interactive play by parent and child can play a very important role.

In summary, the mother's attunement to her child, her capacities for expressing and reflecting emotions and her communication skills constitute the foundation for the healthy emotional development of the infant. The quality of mother-child interactions has a determining effect on the changes of the emotional state of the infant. Mothers are usually able to read the emotional expressions of their babies and express their internal states for them successfully. Weinberg and Tronick have shown that in mother-infant interactions, attunement through imitation is frequent and results in increased synchronisation. According to the consistent opinion of several researchers of infants, the reflection of affective behaviour through facial expressions and the voice has a key significance in the first years of life within the emotional regulatory interactions between parents and children. Healthy development of the child's self is promoted by the occurrence of playfully distorted expressions of emotion among the mother's reactions to negative affective behaviour, as such expressions ease the tension accumulated in the infant and help it to regulate its emotions. It is important that the mother should be emotionally balanced, as that will allow her to care for her baby in a more active and happy manner. Mothers burdened with problems or suffering from depression communicate less with their children and express negative emotions more frequently. Research has shown that the emotional self-regulation and security of bonding of the infants of depressed mothers is correlated to the status and behaviour of their mothers. According to the social biofeedback model of Gergely and Watson, up to the age of three months, infants prefer perfect stimulus-response contingency, while afterwards they show a preference for high quality, but not perfect contingency. The responses provided by mothers who are "good enough", who pay attention and are emotionally attuned to their children. As Watson (1985) pointed out, contingency detection is the fundamental mechanism for the detection of social objects and also contributes to the formation of early bonding. Parents teach their children in an unconscious fashion. Through emphatic behaviour reflecting expressions of emotion and through the external display of emotions, they initiate the learning process that leads to the infant acquiring the ability to attribute its own internal states and emotions to itself. Brief communicative gestures expressing emotions in an emphatic manner also help the infant to relieve its discomfort. In such episodes, the infant also experiences causal efficacy, attributing the change of the negative state to itself, resulting in the formation of the experience of the self as a self-regulating agent. It is clear that the mother's reflective behaviour or communication is of vital importance. Later, building on experiences of that mechanism, the child acquires the ability

to display its internal states externally without parental co-operation or mediation in the "as if" game (Gergely, 1998). The conclusion is obvious: deficiencies, disturbances of the early, playfully reflective, interactive relationship determine the extent to which the child will be able to use symbolism, an ability that is a catalyst not only of emotional, but also of cognitive development.

Therefore the promotion of undisturbed interaction during the earliest period plays a tremendously important role in ensuring healthy personality development later, and impressions not made at an early age can hardly be supplied later, if at all. The parent's psychological health is an essential prerequisite, as otherwise the parent would not be able to control her/his behaviour and pacify the child using an appropriate reaction of emotional reflection. If the mother did not reflect the infant's behavioural and emotional expressions in a playful, somewhat altered manner, the negative emotional states would be aggravated, the baby would be frightened and would not begin to internalise its own emotions. The mother plays a definitive role not only in meeting the baby's needs and regulating its states, but also in the construction of psychic structures and the establishment of self-control. *Motherly empathy and playfulness* are essential preconditions for that process.

Fónagy and Target (1998) attribute great significance to early family interactions with respect to the development of the psychological self and emphasise the role of play and playfulness within that developmental process. In their view, normal development is characterised by the integration of two fundamental modes of operation, the non-playful, adaptive one (according to the terminology used by Grastyán, the automatic mode), in which the child attempts to adapt to the external world, and the "as if" game (or "search" mode), in which the internal experience is not a representation of external reality. It is that integration that facilitates the acquisition of the capacity for mental representation. Parental reflection always take place in play, primarily in the complex, interactive "as if" games that provide a sense of security. If the environment is incapable of playful reflection, the child will experience its negative experiences as tortuously real and external, and therefore it will be unable to process them appropriately in order to make them acceptable to itself. As a result, they will generate constant tension in the child and they shall also disorganise the bonding process. Those who receive inappropriate treatment from their parents or are abused face the risk of being unable to see themselves as intentional entities, of having deteriorating capacities for emotional and cognitive representation. Those children are traumatised not only physically but also psychologically. In such cases, the parent does not treat the child as an equal partner, does not explain and interpret emotions, thoughts and desires for the child, hence the child is distanced from the world of the mind and will be unable to deal with abuse or bad treatment. Abused children are also unable to participate in symbolic games adequately, as their mothers had failed to assume a proper playful attitude and behaviour in their early interaction with the child, they had been unable to pay sufficient attention to them, their needs and signs and were unable to provide positive feedback to their children. If that pathological process is not cut off in time, it will lead to the development of severe developmental psychopathology, a general disturbance of the ability to establish interpersonal relations and permanent personality disorders at an adult age. Secure bonding also facilitates the specific processes of mediation that contribute to the child's development of advanced capacities for mental representation. According to Fónagy and Target, the main mediator processes are the "as if" game, speech and peer interaction. Playful attitudes help to understand the internal mental states of others, and children who have bonded securely have already developed the basic trust (original trust?) that allows them to rely on the perceptions of others and to integrate their representations into their own, thereby enriching its mental world. Those who are unable to do so or can only do so to a reduced extent will withdraw from the world, avoid challenges in the environment and their play will also be impoverished. Speech is an excellent medium for exhibiting and explaining emotions as well as for outlining ulterior motives. Later on, the child will be able to think about emotions, intentions and beliefs, and the playfulness of early verbal interaction (nursery rhymes,

singing, reassurance, storytelling) also contributes to the enrichment of the child's social and emotional development. Secure bonding is also fundamental to the development of appropriate communication skills for communicating with adults and with peers, for initiating interchanges and becoming socially sensitive, community individuals. The background to social competence and popularity in the peer group is constituted by high-degree empathy based on secure bonding, which will allow the child to be open, interested, adventurous and brave.

Unfortunately, in many cases the early environment fails to provide suitable stimulation, which may result in pathological development and disturbances in several areas of development of even generally. Early intervention using modern methods may allow us to prevent the commencement of pathological processes or to eliminate or correct such processes. We believe that the toy library environment and the theoretical background detailed above allow us to use one specific method of that type, a combination of the integrative play method.

Integrative play, as a method, attempts to understand the child as a whole, including its social context. Our work at the toy library consists of several phases coming under the main headings of **advisory services** (advice on play methodology, provision of information), **consultation** (integrative play consultation), **developmental sessions** (general, special and complex sessions of play pedagogy) and **therapeutic activities** (integrative play therapy).

In our work at the toy library, we lay great emphasis on the requirement that specialists should respect the specific, unique needs and requirements of the child and the family and that accordingly our staff should provide tailored services. In order to do that, they need to know the families very well. That can only be accomplished if the family accepts the specialist and allows her/him to gain access to their family life, thereby creating an opportunity for change. This requires good interpersonal and co-operation skills, empathy and tolerance on the part of the specialist.

There are several approaches and methods of intervention (ours is relationship-centred), but it is a frequent complaint that parents are left to their own devices with their increasingly difficult child raising tasks, with everyday problems. We believe it is important that fathers should also participate in early development – in the rich experiences of co-operative play – as far as possible. During the application of any form of integrative play we also try to establish a maximally active and co-operative relationship with the father as soon as possible. The specific environment of the toy library is helpful there, the atmosphere of play helps parents to pay less attention to the uncomfortable circumstance that they have also come to discuss problems and to co-operate in order to find possible solutions in addition to spending their leisure time in a stimulating, eventful manner.

Understanding the language of play, identifying symbols provides a great deal of assistance with understanding the child, the wellsprings of behaviour, in discovering the background and recasting the relationship in order to achieve positive changes. Today, it is a central hypothesis of professionals working with the parent-child relationship that influences within that relationship are truly bi-directional. Effective education and development requires sensitive and timely reactions to the child's messages on the part of the parent that do not take the form of goal-directed teaching. However, the parents' own emotional crises decrease their sensitivity and their capacity to respond adequately. For precisely that reason, the observation and indirect influencing of the parent's mood, emotional state through the method of consultation is an important aspect of the work of the toy library. Naturally, the situation is aggravated when the parent experiencing depression or a crisis situation is faced with a so-called difficult child. Differences of temperament and the type of bonding that the infant had achieved may also have an effect on the development of the early relationship. In addition, we also emphasise the role of parental expectations, attitudes and perceptions. The successful adjustment of unrealistic expectations and negative attitudes will improve the quality of interaction, too. Many researchers have shown that the parents of children with developmental deficiencies *initiate ad hoc play, especially play that is suited to the age of the*

child less often than the parents of healthy children. Parents initiate such occasions in the hope that they will secure pleasurable and reinforcing interaction for themselves and perhaps pleasant experiences for the infant, improving their opportunities for teaching it. At the toy library, uncertain parents get a lot of opportunities to experience successful play and communication and we are also able to encourage them to make use of spontaneous opportunities and to alleviate their tension.

And now, let's see the setting in which we do all that (video demonstration)!