

Dear Friends,

At the end of the Conference of ICCP in Krakow, Rimmert Vanderkooij made some final reflections like only he is able to do. His knowledge and overview of the research on children's play, make it possible to situate a conference like this within a broad scientific and historical context. He did this at the end of several conferences and I have always appreciated these reflections very much. Being the new president of ICCP you should not expect me to take over this part of the job of Rimmert.

We have to take this opportunity to express our feelings of gratitude to Rimmert for the work he did for ICCP. We all know that ICCP is more a network than a formal organisation; and someone has to stimulate the networking. Rimmert did it, for many years, and the most remarkable results were the conferences that we all enjoyed because of the opportunities to exchange knowledge and learn from each other. Thank you very much.

More than ever, it is clear that the world needs an organisation that stimulates the research on children's play. Almost all people like children's play (look at the TV-spots), but only very few people realise how important it is for children's development and for children's wellbeing. There is a lot of attention for children's rights, but seldom there is attention for the right to play. Children's play seems to be a very nice but unimportant activity. That is why there is so little research on it. But on the other hand: the more research there is, the more important children's play will be. So there should be both: action and research. And on the international level it should be the objective of IPA (International Play Association), of which I'm president until July 2005, to stimulate the action, and it should be the objective of ICCP to stimulate the research, and both organisations should co-operate. To promote this co-operation, I'm happy to have the opportunity to work in both organisations at the same time.

So ICCP will go on with the networking for play-researchers. We appreciate very much the willingness of the Akademia Pedagogiczna of Krakow, more especially of Prof. Muchacka and Prof. Kraszewski, to organise the secretariat of ICCP during the next years. We are looking forward to the next conference, and we hope to organise it once again in Eastern Europe, because in this part of the world there are a lot of interesting evolutions on our theme. We will explore the possibility to organise the conference in the Czech Republic. But before the conference, you will receive a very handy CD-rom with the papers of all the speakers of this conference. It will be –once again- a very interesting source for information on research on children's play.

On behalf of the whole ICCP board, we thank you for your presence and for your contribution and we hope to meet you again in 2006 in the Czech Republic.

Dr. Jan Van Gils
President of ICCP

WHAT IS PLAYING, WHEN PERCEIVED BY CHILDREN ?

Dr. Jan Van Gils
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Krakow, September 2004

Introduction

Nowadays childhood is no longer unilaterally defined from a modern educational perspective. Children more and more are presented as social actors, having own perspectives, having own approaches and having own opinions. And even while the relation of the protective viewpoint with the participation viewpoint is not yet self-evident, in the research concerning children, more and more there is attention for children's perspectives: children are not just objects in research, but also subjectsⁱ.

The research centre 'Childhood and Society'ⁱⁱ in Belgium organises since 15 years investigation projects in which children are questioned for their approaches and perspectives. Using qualitative research methods, the centre tries to find out how children think about several themes as: the family, sports, childcare, the city, leisure etc. None of it has focused just on play but in all of them children's play has been mentioned. For this conference we prepared a meta-analysis of these projects as far as it concerns children's play. So we looked in all these projects for the expressions of children related to play.

This meta-analysis is an interesting approach for two reasons.

The first reason is related to the qualitative methods. In all these projects the collection of the data was very open, in order to avoid to introduce the researchers' opinions and not to be open to the personal perception and the personal frames of reference and thinking of children.

These methods permit the children to tell their own story, to make connections with other topics (i.e. with play) and to express freely their concerns on related themes.

The second reason is that the projects are focusing on different aspects of children's life, so we are sure that we are looking at children's play in different contexts. It doesn't simplify the analysis, but it enriches the data.

So the ambition is not to propose a definition of play, but to develop some reflections concerning play, forthcoming from the outstanding specialists on the theme: children themselves.

An overview of the 18 research projects in the meta-analysis:

For this analyses, we refer to the research into the perception of time and the passing of time among 8- and 11 year-oldsⁱⁱⁱ, but also to general research into the social environment of children^{iv}, to research into the perception of sports by 11 year-olds^v, (in cooperation with the University of Antwerp), to the international research about what children think about their family^{vi} (in cooperation with the KUL, Catholic University of Leuven), to the research into the perception of TV by children^{vii}, into the way they perceive nurseries^{viii}. I also refer to two investigations, performed in East-Flemish boroughs (Hamme and Wachtebeke), into the leisure time of children and to the research, established in co-operation with the University of Ghent, into the way young people formulate their need for care^{ix}.

We also used the piles of letters that we receive through some very renowned children's magazines concerning very different themes and which are a source of inspiration again and again.^x The most recent research projects tried to understand children's approaches of different parks^{xi}; children's autonomous mobility^{xii} and children's perspectives on the city of Brussels^{xiii}.

This table gives a quick view of the target groups of these investigations:

	<i>Age</i>
Sports (1)	10 years old
Leisure (2)	11-14 years old
Nurseries (1)	5, 8, 11 years old
School (1)	6-11 years old
Family (1)	8-11 years old
Care (1)	10-11 years old
Perception of time (1)	8, 11 years old
Perception of TV(1)	10 years old
Magazines (many)	8-9 years old, 10-11 years old
City of Brussels (1)	10- 11 years old
Autonomous mobility (1)	10-13 year old
Green areas (7)	8 – 14 years old

1. Playing: an open concept

We can develop a first idea of children's ideas about play directly from the research into the perception of time. It strongly seems that children very often use the word playing to define a certain occupation that cannot be described by a more concrete name. Children talk about playing in the garden, playing in the streets as activities that cannot be described in more detail.

- *What have you been doing?*
- *I have been playing.*
- *And what were you doing while playing?*
- *I played with my dolls in the garden.*

So children describe some circumstances, but about the activity itself we don't receive a more detailed description. We often saw it.

There is a difference between the description of concrete activities and the description of playing. When they are discussing the concrete activities, they talk about going for a ride on their bikes, about going roller-skating, about having a talk with the neighbours. But the description of playing is vague: they talk about playing outdoors, playing indoors, playing hairdresser, playing with the dog and so on. The word 'playing' is used for a wider scope of activities, a more open category, a less sharply outlined category, it is a name for activities, still to be interpreted.

Children talk about fighting with water and playing with water, they talk about practising judo and playing judo, and there is a distinction between the two. Playing is referring to a quality of an activity saying that the objective of it still has to be interpreted by the children. The real purpose of it is various, and not yet clearly defined.

Another illustration is children questioning: "Can I go and play?" It is a fairly fundamental question. They are not asking for something very definite, they are asking for a very general permission. By asking the question "Can I go and play?" children request to have a say in their passing of time. "Can I go and play?" is a request for the right to self-determination. By saying, "Yes", parents give their children a kind of *carte blanche*, a free hand. Parents do not know what their children will do, among other things because the children themselves don't know it (yet). If they want to get outside to play in the streets, it is because there is always something interesting to do, or because they have arranged to meet a friend, or whatever. What they are planning to do is not yet defined. They are going to play.

Perhaps, development psychologists will claim that the above-mentioned linguistic usage is simply linked up with the development of concepts: as long as they don't have a better word at their disposal, children use the word "play". In that case, "play" is just a primitive word. This kind of interpretation is a typical example of adulto-centrism: the adult considers himself the standard and proceeding from this approach children are not yet fully-grown people: the only purpose of being a child is to become an adult; being a child is a temporary phase, a necessary evil, a waiting room for the real life; what they will be when they grow up, is of major importance, that's what it is all about, that is the only finality.

The interpretation that the linguistic usage involved with playing is merely an early phase in the development of people, doesn't respect the child's perspective nor the play of the child. Someone who really tries to understand what playing means to children, will not lose oneself in such educationalism, psychology or sociology, which start from the adult frame of reference; they will listen to the child and try to understand the personal interpretation of the child.

Consequently, from the children's viewpoint, to play is an open concept; being a child you can use it in order not to have to define a very concrete objective of it. It offers the child the possibility not yet to know what to do, or to hide the real objective of the activity.

2. Playing outdoors

A second conspicuous phenomenon: when children are talking about playing, about really playing, they are talking about playing outdoors.

When you ask children: 'tell us about your playing', they immediately start talking about playing outdoors: in the streets, in the garden, in the playground, in the woods, on the beach.

Only when asking more specific questions on indoor activities, we obtain information about playthings, about a playroom, about the computer and so on.

Inside their home children play with dolls, or on the computer, but that doesn't seem the 'full' playing, the playing in the real sense of the word. Playing indoors is a kind of substitute for real playing; to do the activities you want to do outdoors, is impossible: for example: if you're jumping and running, you're causing noise nuisance for the neighbours. This is also conspicuous in the context of school: if children are talking about "playing" in this context, then they are talking about playing outdoors. Party games, knocking things together, it is all fun, but if they are talking about really playing, they have to be able to get outside.

A strong illustration of this statement can be found in the audience survey of children. In the summer, children watch TV only half as much as in winter. It is a conclusion, come to over and over again in many studies. In the summer, children go play outdoors, and the playing in this context can counter watching TV. Playing in winter cannot beat the TV-offer; but the summery playing can.

3. Playing and sports

And so we near the sports area. When we zoom in on the way children perceive sports, we see that practising sports has to do with control, competition, teamwork and spectators. These four elements keep popping up when children are talking about sports! Even an informal sport is characterised by it. In this way, the trainer is no entertainer, no animator: he needs to know this particular branch of sport, he has to teach the sport. And before and after the training session, children will play: in the changing rooms, in the shower, on their way to and from the sport grounds...

It is not about a certain gradation: playing is no underdeveloped form of sport, or sport is no excrescence of the playing; they are fundamentally two different things. This illustrates among other things the complexity of children: children do not just want to play, they want to practise a sport as well; children do not just want to explore the world at their own pace, they want to be taught all sorts of things: they want both.

4. Play and fighting

In a nutshell, starting from the above-mentioned data we came to the conclusion that playing is a quality of activities that still can be defined, that it is preferably done outdoors, and that it is fundamentally different from practising a sport.

For the next step, we let ourselves be guided by a study by Suzanne Kuik^{xiv}; she conducted an ethnographic study at the school playground among children of the age of 10 or older. She spent a long time with the children in order to discover their personal interpretation of their activities. She was hoping to write a nice story about playing; instead it turned out to be a story about fighting. The activities of the teenagers couldn't be characterised being playing in the sense of playing games. The word 'fighting' was more appropriated. This fighting turned out not be about changed moral categories or about big conflicts, about less tolerance or about great mutual discrepancies. It turned out that children were constantly

arguing, about what is beautiful and what are not (earrings, piercing for instance), about what clothes were in vogue and what music is up to date, what drinks and what sweets are tasty. They compared the ways someone talked back at someone, and whether that person was overdoing it or not, and they also had arguments about what they were going to do. The children were constantly arguing. In fact, Mrs Kuik concluded: the children were always looking for standards and rules: they were constantly having a row with standards. Obviously this fighting being a way of interpretation, seems to be an extremely important activity: the search for values, for standards is to a considerable extent-taking place by fighting. This study is especially important since it allows looking at these children's rows from a different point of view; they contribute to the human process of sense giving. This study supports the plea to give children more space for self-development and to suppress the adult impulse to react with 'classic educational intentions'. That is why it is advisable to be rather careful with all kinds of preventative campaigns against bullying: they may restrict – proceeding from a typically adult way of perceiving fights – children's field of experience.

However, in this context it is important to determine that this fighting happens in the context of playing. And we recognise a similar fight, when children are organising their games: the fight about the rules often takes more time than the game itself. Perhaps, every way of playing is a form of fighting: fighting with yourself, fighting with your environment, fighting with others and while fighting finding your own place. Perhaps, playing is constantly being at odds and trying to untie the knot. Children are busy exploring; and exploring contains a lot of conflict material. Material for conflicts with yourself (playing is often accompanied by crying), material for conflicts with the material environment (children are very strongly concentrated on getting a grip on that environment), material for conflicts with others (rows). Perhaps many educational ideas about a harmonious development are very naïve, and maybe playing should rather be considered to be dealing with conflicts.

5. Social characteristic of playing

In the study on the family, playing was brought up in two different contexts: playing with parents and playing with a brother/sister.

It was conspicuous that children of the age of 7-8 talked about playing with their parents with more enthusiasm than about playing with their brothers and sisters. This playing very strongly reflects the 'being together'. In this context, playing means getting attention, having fun, being occupied with something very intensely, larking about, teasing, tickling:

the feeling of solidarity, of belonging together is here at the centre stage. Here, playing is acting communicatively, dialogically.

The older children (9 to 10 years) have similar feelings of belonging together but they prefer chatting with their parents to playing. They do know about playing with their brother or sister, playing with pet animals: the being occupied in an exploring way, the looking for meaning, the interpreting, the exploring, the looking for a place of their own gains the upper hand and in that way partners are more than welcome (as we explained in relation to the fighting).

Philosophising with children on the city, the neighbourhood and the street, children explain they really like to hang around with other children, to chat with neighbours (young and old) and finally to play with peers.

Thus, other people are very important for a good and inspiring play-environment.

Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological circles, and the research on the range of action of children, we can understand that the partners are changing with the age of the children, but more important is the general statement that to play has very strong social characteristics.

We saw the same phenomenon in before and after school child care and also at home.

The children of 9 years old were very clear about it: when there is no peer in the nursery, it's unpleasant to be there. They also often are complaining about not to be allowed to go to play with a friend.

So the most important quality of a good play-environment is the presence of other children. The next quality is to have a private place for you and your friends. That's why in parks rhododendrons are so popular. They offer the best opportunities to find a place to stay, to chat, to be together. A last illustration of this statement: children are characterising their important activities in the parks by: being together, being contemplative^{xv} and being explorative; but the first they mention is being together.

6. Playing as privileged domain for autonomous time management

The nursery study as well as the study on the perception of time, shows that children from the age of 8-9 onwards talk about having control over their own agenda, their own programme, their own organisation of the day. It explains the number of very strong reactions against homework. What seems very unjustified to children is that their so-called leisure time is taking in by homework and lessons. For example when the teacher is going on with the lesson after the sign to stop, they become very angry about it: the teacher should not take over the break-time. The ability to control their own time is of major importance to children; that's why they spend so much time discussing what they are going

to play. “We want to play”, they say to the teacher, and they first start discussing it with each other for ages.

But this fight for autonomy is also a fight for space for self-development, for learning what you want to learn: sports, computer, knocking things together, working clay, acting and so on. This way of learning doesn't exclude adult support; but it offers the children the possibility to make an appeal to guidance, to teach them all kinds of interesting skills.

These observations learn us more about human's nature as about children's play. But nevertheless they inform us about the symbolic value of children's play: the right to play seems to be evident for children; to play is their privilege. Pleading for autonomy, they use playing as lever.

The price they have to pay for it calls 'boredom'. When children themselves decide about their activities, sometimes they don't know what to do. Adults understand it as a very negative moment and they are afraid of it, because for them this kind of boredom is at the origin of undesirable behaviour. But children explained us that they developed several strategies to fill up these empty moments by looking at the television, sitting in the swing, talking to their mother. These moments they are going to decide what to do, they don't know yet what to do. They have to make a decision. Indeed this is the price they have to pay for autonomous time management.

7. Polychronical life

While conducting our research into children and television, we ran into the concept 'polychronical life'. Children watch TV polychronically, while adults proceed from the idea that children watch TV monochronically.

Polychronically being occupied with something refers to 'being occupied with a number of activities at the same time', it refers to fluently switching from one occupation to another; 'being monochronically occupied with something' means being concentrated on one occupation and exclusively being occupied with it.

Adults teach children to work monochronically: when you watch TV, you don't read and vice versa; when you are doing your homework, you make sure you won't get distracted. If you want to play with something else, you first have to tidy up.

But that is not how a child's perception works. Children live polychronically – they are very open to all that is happening in their environment, they play along with it, they react to it. Educators then tend to say that children are easily distracted, but play experts stipulate: these children react in an extremely alert way: they have spotted everything; they are all eyes and ears.

Children watch TV polychronically: they are watching a programme, but at the same time they are playing, or reading. They zap very easily from one programme to another and they switch just as easily between TV and playing; and at that moment the TV is switched on for nothing. For children, this polychronical way of life has many advantages. Children learn to deal with the TV while zapping: they learn how to quickly assimilate information, they learn how to deal with images in an incredibly skilful way, they quickly spot connections, they quickly link up the connection between two things. Children are able to think circularly, adults tend to think linearly.

Playing too is pre-eminently such a polychronical way of being occupied: it is characterised by similar fast changes in rhythm and activity, by a tangle of connections, constantly linked up by children. They start to play with a ball, suddenly they spot a skateboard and the next moment, they start to skate. This is how the playing evolves, how it develops. This is a very open lifestyle, a very creative one as well.

A temporary summary:

Playing is a quality of activities that still can be defined by children. That's why these activities can be changed so easily. It is preferably done outdoors, and it is fundamentally different from practising a sport. To have partners to play with is an important quality of a playful environment. Within the perspective of autonomous time-management, playing is the first activity children want to master. Even while to play is an exploring way of being occupied with quite some conflict material, it is also characterised as a social activity.

8. Conclusion

In itself, this analysis offers no spectacular novelties. But again it puts the emphasis on a number of dimensions, which for children are probably the essence of playing, and these are often the same dimensions adults sometimes have problems with. For instance: quick changing activities often are interpreted as a lack of concentration; playing outdoors is easily related to social unsafety, and exploring while fighting is often seen as disrespectful to each other.

For the sake of convenience, adults tend to forget some dimensions of playing, or in every way they find them less important than all kinds of educational occupations: the value of the education comes before the value of playing.

Recognizing children being actors in the process of growing up, especially while playing, complicates the discussions on play. On the other site it situates playing in the broader context of the process of sense giving which is one of the most fundamental human

activities. Human beings have to explore their own capacities, the qualities of other persons, the characteristics of the environment and the interaction between all these. They have to do it during their whole life in order to find their specific place in a changing community. For children this process goes very fast, but as they are like unwritten books, it's easier for them to find a place for all the new impulses; their cognitive structures, their view on human beings and on the world are very flexible and have to be adapted many and many times. They have a very nice tool to work on it: playing. Playing is exploring the world and is sense giving without being bound to it; it's like sense giving on test. It always allows the child to say: it's not for serious; it's just for fun. Adults aren't that flexible any more; they have problems to integrate new ideas, new experiences, and new approaches. Their cognitive structures and opinions are more crystallized, coagulated and less supple.

A few years ago I made a comparison between philosophizing with children and playing with children. Children who reflect with other children on their daily life and discuss all that occurs in their environment, and children who play, turned out to have a whole lot in common^{xvi}, all the more if we proceed from the fact that playing is in fact fighting (in the broadest sense of the word) and that fighting is looking for standards. In both activities the children appreciate it very much when giving shape and form and meaning to these activities in their own way. What these activities have in common, tells especially a lot about the children themselves and about their occupations:

- Being occupied in an open-minded, exploring way with oneself, with others, with the environment
- It's a self directed activity
- It can focus very quickly on different topics
- It is a circular movement
- It is by preference a social event
- The fundamental motive seems to be: looking for meaning.

If all this would be recognized more in our society, the fact that playing is looking for meaning, the fact that children, while playing, are looking for coherence, for connections, for standards, then playing would gain a lot of importance and should be able to escape the educationalism of the last decades.

ⁱ Jans M., (2004), Children as citizens, towards a contemporary notion of child participation. In *Childhood*, Vol 11 (1), 27-44.

ⁱⁱ Childhood and Society is a non-profit, independent research centre focussing on the social position of children in the society. <http://www.k-s.be/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Van Gils J., (1992), *De tijdsbesteding, de tijdsbeleving en de opvoeding op woensdag*. Leuven, K.U.L., Senior dissertation, 1992 (“The passing of time, the perception of time and the education on Wednesday”).

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□ Van Gils J., (1992), *Wie niet weg is, is gezien. Hoe beleven kinderen het gezin, de school en de vrije tijd*. Brussel, KBS. (“If you’re not gone, you’re caught. How do children perceive family, school and leisure time”).

^v Van Pelt H., et alii, (1995), *Sportbeleving bij kinderen*, Antwerpen, UIA (“The perception of sports by children”).

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□ Van Gils J., *Kinderen over het gezin. Vergelijkende kwalitatieve studie betreffende de beleving van het gezin bij kinderen van 7-12 jaar in België, Frankrijk, Nederland, Portugal en Spanje*. Meise, Kind en Samenleving, (1995). (also available in French and Spanish) (“Children about the family. Comparative qualitative study on the perception of the family by children at the age of 7 to 12 in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain”).

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□ Van Gils J., Bosscher M., (1997), *Kinderen en televisie, tegengestelde belangen ? Over hoe kinderen televisie beleven en hoe ouders en opvoeders daarmee om kunnen gaan*. Leuven, Garant, (“Children and television, conflicting interests ? About how children perceive television and how parents and educators can deal with that.”).

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□ Bosscher M., (1997), *Kwali-tijd in de buitenschoolse kinderopvang*. Meise, Kind en Samenleving, (“Quali-time in the nurseries outside school”).

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□ Verschelden G., Bouverne-De Bie M., Van Gils J., (2000), *Belevingsonderzoek bij kinderen en jongeren. Kinderen en jongeren over hun behoeften aan zorg*. Gent, RU, 2000. (Children and their needs vor care)

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□ We take care of the discussion columns in the following magazines, *Zonneland* (“Land of the sun”) and *Zonnestraal* (“Ray of sunshine”). In these columns, children between the age of 8 and 11 bring forward topics for discussions, which they would want to present to their peers.

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□ Several projects on how do children experience green spaces:

Jans M., (2003), *Kinderen in het Vrijbroekpark*. Meise, Kind en Samenleving.

Jans M., (2003), *Kinderen en jongeren in het provinciaal domein d’Ursel*. Meise, Kind en Samenleving

Vanderstede W. (2004), *Kinderen in de Provinciale Groendomeinen*. Regio Antwerpen: het Rivierenhof. Meise, Kind en Samenleving.

Vanderstede W. (2004), *Kinderen in de Provinciale Groendomeinen*. Regio Antwerpen: het Hof van Leysen. Meise, Kind en Samenleving.

Vanderstede W. (2004), *Kinderen in de Provinciale Groendomeinen*. Regio Antwerpen: Vrieselhof. Meise, Kind en Samenleving.

Vanderstede W., Dekeyser P., Van Der Wee B., (2004), *Kinderen in de Provinciale Groendomeinen*. Regio Kempen, Provinciaal Domein Prinsenhof. Meise, Kind en Samenleving.

Vanderstede W., Dekeyser P., Van Der Wee B., (2004), *Kinderen in de Provinciale Groendomeinen*. Regio Kempen, De Avergten. Meise, Kind en Samenleving.

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□ Research project 2004 – 2005, of Belgian Federal Public Planning Service, Science Policy.

^{xiii} Van Gils J., (2000), *Kinderen filosoferen over de stad. Een belevingsonderzoek op basis van filosofische gesprekken van Brusselse kinderen van 10 à 12 jaar*. Meise, Kind en Samenleving. (Children doing philosophy on the city)

^{xiv} Kuik S., (1996), *Mag ik op je rug ? Van de kinderen en hun dagen in vriendschap en ruzie*. Amsterdam, Het Spinhuis, (“Can I have a piggyback ? About children and their days in friendship and fights.”).

^{xv} ‘being contemplative’ should be understood as enjoying, being open to impressions coming from outside.

^{xvi} Van Gils J., (1998), *Children playing and children doing philosophy: why are they both so interesting ?* In *Thinking*, year 12, number 3.