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**“Children under three: Teachers' support to peer-relations and play in day care centres.
“Lend. Lend. Borrow. Exchange. Hug”.”**

Introduction

As a result of the increase in maternal employment the last 30 years, many children, also children under three, experience close and lasting contact with peers in day care centres. The amount of small children in Norwegian day care centres is increasing. In Norway the day care centres for children less than three years of age; infants and toddlers, are pedagogical institutions. The core curriculum for these children is everyday life, relations and play¹. According to the curriculum the day care centres emphasise both education and care.

My project has been a case-study in a group with children from 1 to 3 years. There were nine children and 3 staff members working with the children. One of the staff members is an educated early childhood teacher. In this paper I will use the term teacher for all of them. The aim of the project was to investigate how day care centres teachers scaffold, that is, how they support, inspire and facilitate relationships and play between children under three.

When I was in the day care centre I took notes and used a video-recorder. I have about 10 hours of video material. The period of observation was half a year from January till June. In this paper I present some results from my preliminary qualitative analyses of the videotapes. Here I give some examples of how teachers might scaffold small children's play.

Underestimation of infants' and toddlers' competencies

There has been a common misunderstanding that children under three cannot enjoy and benefit from relationships with children of the same age. The heritage from Piaget has cemented a belief that small children are egocentric, and as a consequence of their egocentric attitude, their social abilities are not very well developed (Piaget 1967). Combined with a general underestimation of small children's capacity in many areas, this perspective has probably led to a kind of blindness. We see what we expect to see. We have not recognised toddlers' social interests and abilities because we have not expected to see them. Maybe our underestimation of children's ability to form relationships with peers also has led to a failure when it comes to giving small children opportunities to establish relationships with each other (Lewis et.al. 1975, Weltzer & Peilman 1986). The younger the children, the more their opportunities for different experiences are dependent on what their caregivers expose them to. If caregivers do not bring their infants and toddlers to settings where they can meet peers, the children do not get opportunities to develop relationships with children their own age, and probably their competence in dealing with peers will be less developed (see Howes 1987a).

¹ The curriculum of Norwegian day care centres is regulated by a framework plan “Rammeplan for barnehagen (Q-0903 B)” given by the Norwegian government (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs 1996). There is an English short version of the plan called “Framework Plan for Day Care Institutions. A brief Presentation (Q-0917)” (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs 1996).
<http://odin.dep.no/bfd/engelsk/regelverk/rikspolitiske/004005-990083/dok-bn.html>

The underestimation of infants' and toddlers' social abilities in peer-relations is a part of a general underestimation of small children. Fifty years ago, most of the research in the field of infant and toddler psychology and pedagogy investigated what small children could *not* do, and of course, the researcher found a lot of things of things babies cannot manage. This fact is obvious. But the focus and the underestimation have been so strong that the Norwegian researchers Smith and Ulvund (1999) claim that this period represents a dark period in field of infant and toddler research.

During the last 30-40 years researchers have changed focus. According to Smith and Ulvund the dark years in infant and toddler psychology are over. Researchers have started to ask: "What can infants and toddlers do?" instead of "What can small children not do?" There are many reasons for this shift, which I will not elaborate in this paper.

In summary there has been in the last decades an increased focus on infants' and toddlers' competence in many areas. Today we recognise that small children are active and curious individuals, and there has been huge progress in recognising small children's social abilities. Infants are seen as social individuals who from infancy are able to participate in social relationships. Those between caregivers and infants are seen as mutual, and both children's and caregivers' contributions are essential for ongoing interaction. Infants and toddlers are not only affected by adults however. To a great degree they also affect their caregivers (Os 1991).

But even if we recognise children's social competence when it comes to peer-relations, this field of research has been far behind research on social relationships between children and adults: both when it comes to volume and when it comes to theoretical perspectives. Sometimes it is hard to believe that the researchers in different fields are focusing the same children. For example the definition of children's social behaviour in some important research projects concerning peer-relations has been much stricter than the definition of children's social behaviour in adult-children research² (Os 1994).

Early peer-relations and play

Even if the idea that toddlers are not able to relate to each other has been very hard to extinguish, there is a growing interest in, a recognition of and a knowledge about peer-relations in toddler hood. It is now clear that children from infancy show interest in each other and that they do have social abilities early in life. During the first three years they also increase these social abilities (Schaffer 1984).

In the first year of life infants recognise peers as social partners; they show interest and attempt to influence each other. They look at each other while they are smiling, vocalizing, squealing, flapping their arms, clapping their hands, touching each other and leaning towards each other (Howes 1987a, Stern 1990, Vinze 1971).

From the second year toddlers are able in complementary and reciprocal interactions (Mueller & Lucas 1975, Mueller & Vandell 1979). They exchanges turns and roles. Toddlers also exchange toys, they give and take, and they are able to take turns in vocal-games even before their verbal language is well developed. Peek-a-boo games also emerge. They imitate each other and they play running-and-chasing; a play that often includes many children.

² Compare the definitions of social behaviour in Mueller & Lucas (1975) which is a study on peer-relations with the body of research on interaction between infants and their caregivers presented in Schaffer (1984) or the research of Trevarthen & Aitken (2001).

The Norwegian researcher Gunvor Løkken (1996, 2000) has been investigating toddler's ability to function as a group. Løkken finds that toddlers have a tendency to operate as a group. An example is when they all start to rap the table at the same time as they sing or shout. This is an example of Sherman's (1975) group glee outburst which Løkken has called "laugh concerts". Another kind of group behaviour Løkken describes is a kind of welcoming sermon. When a child arrived in the morning, all the toddlers in the group run out in the hall to welcome the arriving child with laughter, hugs and kisses (Løkken 2000).

At this age children also seem to be able to comfort other children, whether they are the cause of the other child's unhappiness or not, and they also show pro-social behaviour to other children (Caplan & Hay 1989, Zahn-Waxler et. al. 1992). They even are able to establish friendships with their peers (Greve 2004).

Further more, from the age of two the toddler's verbal abilities increase. According to Howes (1987a) this age is characterized by communication of meaning. Toddlers are able to develop a common playing theme and they are able to have joint understanding of the content of the play. Now we can observe early forms of social pretend play for instance pretending being animals or family play. Children who know each other well often play more advanced social pretend play than unacquainted toddlers (Howes 1987a). In lack of verbal language they often use signals for starting and developing the play.

The principle of scaffolding

Children's peer-relations do not exist in a social vacuum; they will always express themselves in a context (Howes 1987b, Hagens 1997, Os 1994, 1998). The context can either enhance or impede social relationships and play between children. The teachers in the day care centres are important parts of the context. How they act or do not act can have consequences for the social relationships between the children.

As a starting point for the analyses I find the concept of scaffolding useful. Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976), inspired by Vygotsky, introduced the concept in the seventies. Vygotsky underlined that children have a proximal zone of development which represents what children cannot do on their own, but can do if they are under the guidance of a more experienced and skilled companion. In short: Scaffolding is about how adults support children so that they master more than they would have mastered on their own. I am inspired by this concept (Os 1994, 1998).

But of course, scaffolding might be a double-edged sword. The question about teachers' interventions in early peer-relations is not unproblematic and simple. There are some discussions about how teachers can facilitate peer-relations between toddlers. Some researchers caution teachers against intervening because intervening might disturb the fragile relationships (see Løkken 1996, Løkken 2000).

I will challenge this point of view (Os 1994, 1998). The question is not if teachers should intervene or not, but how. Even if toddlers have a potential for social interaction with other children, peer-relations in early childhood might be challenging for toddlers, especially when it comes to developing complex play (Schaffer 1984, Howes 1987a,b, Howes & Phillipsen 1998). To take part in complex play in early years seems to be important. According to Howes and Phillipsen (1998) there appear to be some long-term effects of playing styles

early in life. They found that children who engaged in complex play with peers as toddlers were less aggressive and withdrawn as nine-year-olds compared to children who did not. An explanation might be that social abilities develop through successful complex play with peers. Therefore it is an important task for day care centres to support toddlers so they get experiences that give them opportunities to develop their social abilities.

And toddlers might need some support. In social settings they are apprentices. In interactions with adults the latter will adjust to children's abilities to make sure that the social interactions they participate in are most likely to be successful (Smith & Ulvund 1999). But when the apprentice meets another apprentice, there obviously will be some really big challenges to overcome (Schaffer 1984). When a child offers a toy to another child, it often is an invitation to play and they expect something back, and they might be really distressed if the object is carried off by the recipient (Hagens 1997). In this perspective the teachers in day care centres dealing with toddlers peer-relations meet some real challenges. How can they facilitate and inspire toddler's relationships and play during the first years?

Anxiety about disturbing toddlers' peer-relations sometimes seems to rely on an underlying assumption that peer-relations in early childhood have a kind of inherent source: The relations should grow without too much interference from the outer world. The outer-world (with adults) will necessarily disturb the children's fellowships. An extreme variant of this point of view is to assume that development of peer-relations all in all is biologically founded³.

Of course I will not deny the contribution from biology to social behaviour. We are human beings. But when it comes to the development of human behaviour, the social factors seem to be as important as the biological, and they will always interact with each other (see Lerner 1986).

The consequences of keeping away from children's peer-relations, which are an important part of toddlers' lives, might be that the toddlers are left with challenges they are not able to manage. Schaffer (1984) says that there is a real danger that we in enthusiasm over the newly discovered knowledge about toddler's competencies in peer-relations overestimate the children's abilities. According to Schaffer, overestimation is no better than underestimation.

Instead of giving general advice to caretakers, either regarding to scaffold toddler's peer-relations, or to be very careful in intervening, we should investigate different strategies and their consequences for the ongoing relations and play between the children. How do different strategies work for different children under different circumstances? When should teachers intervene and when should they step back? A general warning is not fruitful and does not give practitioners any clues for how to act in a practical situation – and it does not give teachers material to reflect over. But it can never be said too often that a distinctive hallmark of good scaffolding, is reducing the scaffold in correlation with the toddlers' increased mastering. Scaffolding is about giving a little help - at the right moment.

Scaffolding in early peer-relations

³ There is indeed raised a discussion on this issue in international literature. See discussion between Selby & Bradely (2003) and Nash & Hay (2003).

Teachers can scaffold early peer-relations in many ways. I will give some examples of how teachers in my research scaffold peer-relations. But I want to stress the fact that this is not a complete list. I do not think it is possible to reveal all aspects of human interactions in any area. It simply is not possible to capture the diversity of human relationships in narrow categories. The competent pedagogue must take individual differences between children and differences in context into consideration before acting (Thomas & Chess 1977, Volling & Feagans 1995).

Consequently I have made a distinction between two main categories in scaffolding early peer-relations: indirect and direct scaffolds.

Indirect strategies

Indirect strategies can be characterised as teacher behaviour that might give the toddlers a basis for peer-relations. These indirect strategies might be the quality of relationship between teachers and children for example the features of interaction and attachment. In high quality relationships children will learn something about interacting and communicating with other people and the teachers will function as models for how to relate to other people. Toddlers who are responded to with empathy seem to comfort other children and if toddlers have extensive practice in turn-taking with adults, they seem to engage in turn-taking with peers (Howes & Faver 1987, Vandell & Wilson 1987).

High quality relationships will also give children a feeling of well-being and security. This means that they most probably will develop a secure attachment to their teachers. Secure attachment is associated with exploring behaviour (Ainsworth 1970, Howes 1987b). Howes, Hamilton and Matheson (1994) find that toddlers who have obtained a secure attachment to their caregivers are more independent and therefore more engaged in play with peers than children with an insecure attachment.

In general the indirect scaffolds seemed to function very well in the day care centre where I made my observations – for most of the children. Mainly the relationship between children and teachers seemed to be of high quality. The teachers were sensitive, attentive and engaged in playful activities with the children. The children also seemed to have a safe attachment to their teachers. They seemed to trust that the teachers would be present when they needed them.

The organisation of the physical environment also seems to have an effect on toddlers' peer-relations (DeStefano & Mueller 1982). Big playing objects seem to encourage toddlers to play together, while small playing objects seem to take the attention away from other children. If we consider that running around is typical for early peer-relations, then day care centres should give children opportunities to do that. But toddlers also start to play social pretend play, and this play seems to be easy to distract, so they also need corners, spaces or rooms that are protected from noise and from other activities. When it came to the organisation of the physical environment in my research data, there were a lot of spaces for running games and tumbling games. There also were protected areas for silent play, for example social pretend play, but the room was very small and not too well organised.

Direct strategies

Direct scaffolding is about direct intervention to initiate interactions or to facilitate ongoing interactions and play.

Directing attention to peers (“Spotlight”)

Teachers might direct a toddler’s attention to their peers by talking about them and directing attention to other children’s activities. This function can be called “**spotlight**”. In my material a child never arrived or left the day care centres without some kind of attention from the teachers: “Look who is coming now. Say hello to Peter.” And when a child left they said: “Can all the children say goodbye to Peter?”. Often all the children hugged the child who left. The staff also talked to children about the other children’s activities, but in my material only on rare occasions other than arriving or leaving.

Administrating turn-taking (“Chain”)

Taking turns, a significant feature in communication, can be difficult for young children to administrate. Turn-taking can be structured by the teachers both in motor activities, conversations and playing activities. They “**chain**” the contributions of two or more children. This strategy contributes to longer sequences of interaction that consist of multiple turns. This also gives opportunities for more complex interactions.

The teachers in this day care centre regulated the structure of turn-taking in motor activities for example when the toddlers were playing in the slide or when they were jumping. Sometimes they gave verbal instructions, but often, especially at the end of the year, it seemed to be enough that they were standing nearby the ongoing activities.

When it came to conversations with the children, the teachers did not often regulate turns between the children. The teachers were often engaged in conversations with one single child, and they seemed to have some difficulties including other children in the conversation, even if there were other children present who easily could have joined in. Their focus was on the individual child and their own relationship with this child instead of the relations between the children. Instead of chaining the contributions of different children to a joint theme, the contribution from each child in a way followed each other like pearls in a necklace. Most of the time the teachers did not succeed in involving several children in the same sequence of play or dialog at the same time.

Facilitating joint activities (“Catalyst”)

Teachers also might mediate contact between peers and help them to start joint activities or play. They are a kind of “**catalyst**” between the toddlers. The tendency to focus on individual children (one at the time) was also dominant in play situations. The teachers were attentive to and active together with the toddlers, but the contact was, even when they were surrounded by a group of children, mainly individual-centred. Sometimes they played social pretend play with the children, but mostly with one child at a time. Even if they tried, it seemed to be difficult for them to help the toddlers to consolidate their activities to a play with compatible and complementary roles. On some occasions I saw them support children in establishing shared meaning around a playing theme by forming links between different children’s playing content. Children at this age, especially the youngest ones, have some real difficulties communicating meaning about non-literal themes which is what social pretend play is about (Olofsson 1990). They might therefore need some support in order to succeed in early social pretend play with peers. But of course, to help toddlers to elaborate non-literal themes is not a simple task. It really is a challenge to create a shared meaning out of different activities, intentions and wills.

The social pretend play in this group mostly lasted for a short time and the theme was not very well elaborated. In the spring I observed that the oldest children in the group, three girls who were almost three years, were working hard and to a certain degree succeeding in common social-pretend play. But they really had to work to obtain a joint understanding of the situation and elaborate a common theme for the play.

Prolonging ongoing play ("Rubber band")

When the first contact is established, the teachers might help the toddlers to maintain the concentration for the play by creating a frame around the play, by focusing on the toddlers who lose focus, or by renewing the playing activity by elaborating on the theme. This function can be characterised as the function of a "**rubber band**".

The teachers in my research often vitalised the play theme by bringing in new objects. Often they gave similar things to all the children, for example diapers for the dolls. When all the toddlers had similar play objects this seemed to inspire them to parallel activities. But sometimes the adults helped the toddlers to play with objects that inspired the children to joint activity and cooperation. When one child had a mug and others had cups the children went into different roles and the contributions of each toddler fell in into the play as complementary contributions. Frequently the teachers had to leave the children for a while in order to pick up the objects. On several occasions I observed the play situation falling apart when the adult left.

Explaining signals ("Interpreter")

Small children might have some difficulties to understand each other because of relatively limited verbal language. They might need an "**interpreter**" who helps them to find the right signals or words to establish and keep playing activities going, and help them to interpret each others' signals (see Hay, Payne & Chadwick 2004).

The teachers helped the children in understanding each others' signals. They often explained the intentions of one child to another: "She just wants to look at your shoes. She thinks they are so pretty". They often told children how to meet different situations; what would be an appropriate reaction.

Regulating behaviour ("Regulator")

What surprised me most of all, was not the fact that the teachers regulated questions concerning property, but the way they did it. Who has the right to handle which object when, is an important theme of life at this age. When a conflict was looming, often about objects, the adults often gave short instructions: it was almost like a signal or code. They said: "Lend" (which meant: you can lend him the object; he only wants to borrow). "Share" (which meant: you can share the object or the objects). "Exchange" (which meant: you can exchange objects). Or when the situation almost went out of hand for the children, maybe one of them were almost crying or it was just before one of them attacked the other physically, the staff often said: "Hug. Hug."

I am not sure how I am going to understand these ways of acting. Truly I would think that a teacher should talk to the children and explain why things have to be the way they have to be. For example: I would think that a good teacher would say to the children that "It is wrong to take things from another child, but look here, we have another one that is exactly, almost the same. And certainly you are not allowed to hit other children because it hurts". But the staff

did not give the children all these “pedagogical” explanations that in time would make them “good” and “moral” people. No, they shouted: “Lend. Lend. Borrow. Share. Hug.”

And this seemed to function very well. I have rarely been in a day care centre where the frequency of conflicts was so low. The children followed the instructions from the staff; and the activity went on without any further interruption. The conflict was over before it had started.

It was really amazing for me to see that three of the oldest girls that spring seemed to have internalized these strategies, and used them when they themselves tried to establish joint play. This can not be characterized as simple imitation of the adult’s actions, because these children seemed to use the strategies to approach each new situation in a functional way. Hence they had developed a competence far behind the intellectual capacities Piaget describes for children at this age.

Conclusion

In this day care centre the teachers are facilitating good peer-relations in general. They seem to build sufficient indirect scaffolds for most of the toddlers. Like many teachers they seem to have sufficient knowledge about the importance of quality in the relationships between children, and teachers, but they seem to lack knowledge about peer-relations. They are physically and emotionally present and accessible for the children, but sometimes their presence seems to disturb the toddlers’ relationships. As Howes (1987a) suggests, peer-relations in this period of life might be fragile and easy to disturb. But the problem is not that the teachers are present and that they are interacting with the children; the problem is how they do it. Maybe they need to focus on their own role more and be more aware of consequences of their own actions. Because their presence and actions are not always disturbing; sometimes their absence seems to be the problem. As already mentioned I saw joint activity between two or more children on several occasions break down when the teacher left the playing area - even for a short time.

When it comes to direct scaffolds these teachers did direct the toddlers’ attention to each other, structure turn-taking in motor activities and regulate the children. Hence they seemed to concentrate on structure and objects. But they had some real difficulties in contributing to elaborate the children’s social-pretend play. It seemed to be difficult for them to support toddlers to obtain shared meaning in non-literal themes. Maybe the scaffolds in this day care centre are more adjusted to the youngest toddlers than to the oldest.

My conclusion is that teachers need knowledge about peer-relations and play in the toddler period of life, and that this knowledge must be carried out with sensitivity regarding when to intervene - and when to withdraw.

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