



Vol. 4, No. 2, 2015

Ulrich Paetzold

Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg (Germany)

## **The Free, Childlike Play and the Strengthening of the Parent-Child Relationship: A Report from the Linkage of University Teaching and Practice**

**ABSTRACT.** The basic works on the importance of play for children's development emphasize the holistic and comprehensive importance for all areas of development. As part of the various approaches of pedagogy these effects were harnessed in recent decades and functionalized for different societal and social goals. Though the original meaning of children's play is increasingly faded in professional circles and is seen in its possibilities rather mainly in performance-oriented goals. Most likely the client-centered play therapy still pursues the original sense of the play, focusing on the actual needs of the child in its totality and individuality. As part of a project at the the BTU Cottbus students of Social Work / Social Pedagogy meet families for weekly play visits, to exemplary encourage the parents to play with their children themselves. The low-threshold project aims to have a preventive effect and to strengthen the parent-child relationship.

**KEYWORDS:** original meaning of children's play, client-centered play therapy, a preventive project for educational support of families through weekly play visits

### **1. The Original Meaning of Children's Play and its Change over Time**

The positive relevance of playing for children's development is uncontroversial now for a long time and through different theoretical approaches different meaning priorities have been set. Huizinga with his phenomenological-anthropological based theory of play described it as a fundamental human activity, as a basis (and precondition) for each cultural development (Einsiedler, 1999). Similarly comprising Damon describes the play. It is "a unique part of human behavior, which fulfills crucial and irreplaceable functions in the social life and personal development" (Damon, 1989, p. 153). Overall it is impressive how many

different theories and directions have argued with the play itself and different facets of it. Buhler stresses the child inherent drive, the desire for the activity per se, which in particular promotes the motor development of the child (Baumgärtel, 1982). In the psychoanalytic approaches, such as Erikson's, the emotional aspects of children's play (keywords: pleasure principle, anxiety defense) are stronger taken into account (Renner, 1995). The constructivist theory of Piaget accesses the development and learning opportunities for children in their various fields through the play and also takes the wholeness and totality of the child into consideration (Einsiedler, 1999). Most approaches stress the experience of autonomy and freedom in the child by the end in itself and the purposelessness of the play, the (playful) appropriation of various skills, the stimulation of imagination activity and many other positive consequences (Mogel, 1994). The pedagogy in its various facets has consequently taken up this wealth of positive learning opportunities for children and in some cases developed very elaborated handouts in the recent decades to show how the play as method can be used for various goals, different age groups or different settings (Höke, 2011).

This implies that these pedagogic use is driven by interests, which is a value in itself. This pedagogic sense is the intention to help the child to cope with his current life problems or developmental tasks in the confrontation with his everyday world so that it better and better becomes able to independently solve its problems and tasks, and independently live his life under the rapidly changing living conditions (Spanhel, 2009). In the field of pedagogy there have been and still are times when the free, childlike play with respect to the goals of school preparation, performance or educational orientation had to take a back seat. Through various social changes the play experienced even greater importance. By rapid technological changes step by step computer games have become considerably more important in the world of children (and teenagers). In family life they are now occupy an important place and limit the time of playing, parents spend together with their children. At the same time the economy has recognized the play and toys for children and adults as an important economic factor. Most of them are rule games or predetermined game scenarios that have little in common with the original, free and self-motivated childlike play. The crucial difference between the free, childlike and self-motivated play and the use of the play by pedagogy or economy lies in the intention and goals of different adults who want to achieve something for the child or also seek a specific benefit for

themselves. The view turns away from the needs and motives of the children and focuses on social, cultural, economic or educational norms. In retrospect it is surprising that the original, childish play in its freedom – which was essentially emphasized in the basic works – is hardly seen in its real meaning and also finds little attention in pedagogy, especially since it brings no measurable, controllable “benefit”. This note can be sharpened: Considering the increasingly heteronomous everyday lives of children, you have to ask the question whether in future there still will be a temporal space for this self-determined play at all. Professionally controversial and unclear is the role of the new, electronic gaming possibilities. One might raise the provocative question of whether these new ways to play perhaps create a “more” of self-determination for the individual players. If the original meaning of the play was correctly seen in its entirety, two questions arise: Where is this meaning still most visible and represented, and how could this meaning potentially be strengthened again for the benefit of the child (and his parents and the relationship between both)?

## **2. Play Therapy and the Freedom of the Child in a Self-Determined Role**

Play therapy has a long tradition. For instance one may recall the outstanding approaches by Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, Zulliger from Switzerland or the individual case reports of Axline that could appeal to a wide audience (Goetze, 2002). In my opinion the play therapy with children is rooted in the origins of the play and therefore seize them. She is very different from more fragmented, to certain areas of development of the child oriented training measures or support programs that want to develop specific areas of the child, starting from expectations of adults or societal norms and requirements. Taking the theories and models for childlike play seriously, the most important factors are the holistic view of the child (with all its senses and body sensations, with its perceptions, feelings, thoughts and experiences) and its active and self-constructing role. In contrast to e.g. support programs, thus, the needs and motives of the child are centered to take them up and accompany them in the context of play therapy. In this way the intrinsic motivation is addressed – one of the key points of the play. And due to the simultaneous relationship with the child, which builds up through the regular, joint playing,

the holistic growth of the child can succeed. Thus, it is not a problem, technique, a method or societal expectations that are the center, but only the child in its entirety. Further advantages of the play therapy and the intrinsically motivated play are obvious: Language is not essential, so that smaller children as well as children from other cultural backgrounds with limited language skills can be addressed. Also the child with his fantasies and actions is in an active and self-formative role (as a therapist you always follow the child) and this makes it more and more possible to understand the inner world of the child. Especially the aspect of self-determination, which is an essential point across all theories in the basic works, is a crucial factor for the efficacy of the play therapy. In summary, the basic principles of play therapy after Axline illustrate the approach very well: The principle of unconditional acceptance, the principle of establishing a climate of permission, the principle of respect for the child, the principle of letting the child lead the way, the principle of non-acceleration, the principle of shaping the relationship, the principle of recognizing and reflecting the children's feelings and the principle of limiting (Goetze, 2002). In my opinion the centrality of the child and its successful development is the actual impact factor and also the actual difference to other, external motivated approaches of playing. In retrospective it is surprising that these fundamental insights are increasingly faded and barely picked up from a professional perspective. Only in recent years concepts for playing-based therapy with chronically traumatized children could be positioned more professionally (Steinkopf, 2011).

### **3. The Project "Playing at Home" as a Place of Learning in Higher Education and as a Chance of Preventive Education Support for Families (Paetzold, 2013)**

Originally the project "Playing at home" was developed and established in the 90s in the Netherlands. Back then it was used as a way of integrate immigrant families and hence started with migrant children. For over 15 years now the project is a constant and integral part of higher education in Cottbus (first at the University of Applied Sciences, now at the University) and firmly anchored in the curriculum of Social Work / Social Pedagogy. With the establishment in Cottbus the project has

been opened with regard to contents for all families and another basic idea was put at the center: The original idea of the play is brought into the families by the children, with the claim and the goal to preventively strengthen the educational competence of the parents. Through weekly play visits with the families in their homes, over a period of 20 weeks in the presence of at least one parent, the parents (exemplary) should be encouraged to more engage in the play of their own children. At the same time a learning opportunity is provided for the students to test themselves in the method of playing in direct contact with children and their parents.

The implementation of the project requires certain structural conditions:

- Establishment in the curriculum as a project opportunity over one year with a time share (for students) of about four hours a week. A limitation of the number of participants is reasonable to guarantee that an intensive and content-related monitoring can take place.
- A limited social area (district, city), so that students can manage the play visits in the families without long and time-consuming ways.
- A good networking with all institutions that have to do with children (kindergartens, schools, family centers, health department, pediatricians, etc.) so that interested families can be obtained.
- An easily accessible room (in Cottbus e.g. at the University) with a variety of play materials for different age groups, from which the students can take the materials as needed.

To concretize the procedure, I would like to briefly describe the implementation in Cottbus. Before the start of the semester an application process is conducted, so that preferably motivated students can be obtained. The selected students will then pass through a two-day bloc seminar, amongst others dealing with topics like the significance of the play, the play at different ages and cultures, preparation and follow-up of play visits, the use of different materials, how to interview parents and children and managing critical situations. Thereafter, students start weekly play visits, each with one family for 20 weeks. Every single visit is followed up together with a tutor. About once a month a supervision is carried out with the whole course. At the end of the 20 weeks a final report has to be written. The selection of the families is carried out before the first students visit by a project manager, who visits the interested

families and conducts a preliminary interview, so that the parents do not develop false expectations. The primary goal is, to encourage the parents to become involved specifically in the play with their own children. Therefore, the play visits only take place if at least one parent is present. The age group of children lies between three and twelve years. Thus, each student attends two families within a year.

As general aims of the project can be named: The preventive promotion of education in the family, socio-educational intervention prior to the manifestation of behavioral problems of children in preschool and primary school age, resource-oriented strengthening of parents in their parenting skills and parent-child relationships, promoting the integration of children from emigrant families and families of asylum seekers, evaluation of the effects of the approach through scientific monitoring.

The advantages and strengths of the project as opposed to a specific, professional assistance are obvious. It forms a (cost-efficient) supplementation of the existing regional aid structure and so is used as an offer, if no specific problem situation even arose, ergo no special service is already required. By networking with various facilities, in case of need, further help for parents can be arranged quick and uncomplicated. It is an extremely low-threshold and early access for parents and children, hence eliciting to no defensive reaction. This impression is further enhanced by the fact that the offer is made by a university or college of higher education, what opposed to state institutions triggers little fears.

At first glance, the claim to the students seems to be simple (“a little playing with children”). However, considering the action and the process in more detail, the complexity and the demand becomes clear. The learning goals can be assigned to different levels.

On the theoretical-cognitive level: Knowledge of the method of play, child development as well as stimulation of various areas of development and prevention. In addition this content is completed through teaching of intercultural approaches of education support.

On the level of action: Strategies for observation and assessment of child behavior / development, the use of different methods of play, leading conversations with parents, networking and cooperating with other institutions, reflecting one's own behavior, dealing with resistance, the development of an action strategy comprising the steps of observation, goal planning, implementation, evaluation.

Overall the students become acquainted with preventive socio-educational interventions for children, they acquire social skills in con-

tact with children and their parents and learn the strategic planning of targeted action and problem solutions, as well as action strategies in dealing with different cultures and observation expertise in child development. Considering the complexity of the requirements, it is also clear that this project cannot be realized on honorary basis, because one's own actions has to be under permanent reflection. Single attempts to integrate (older) volunteers in the project regularly failed, because they seemed to be a much stronger education competition for the parents as the younger students. And also they inclined much more often to an attitude that they themselves know the best how to play with the children.

At first glance, the development of such a project for a university seminar may seem very time-consuming. The time required and the number of arrangements with the practice are actually really high in the first years. However, they reduce rapidly, if it is possible to select experienced student tutors from the first year of training courses in the project, for the weekly visit reviews with the new students. From this group of experienced tutors in turn, a project manager can be chosen, which carries out the selection interviews with the families and extends the networking with other practice facilities. Ideally, it is possible to recruit an experienced professional that is exempted from work by his or her institution for some hours to take over the management tasks. Then the project will become – like in Cottbus for now 15 years – a “self-runner”.

#### **4. Critical Review and Future Development of the Project**

The project is very popular with students, as it is offering an – apparently – simple and clear learning situation, while providing intensive supervision. And also in the families it predominantly is experienced as a great enrichment. Intuitively one can also assume that the play with the kids certainly promotes development. However, on closer examination there are also some critical aspects that need to be considered. An unsolved problem is the process or quality measurement, i.e. which development steps the child / children could learn through the project and in addition, how sustainable e.g. parental behavior changes. Currently and in the past few years we at least were able to develop standards for the participating students, in what form a family visit has to be evaluated and what aspects have to be considered in this evaluation. And even if

this is indeed reflected additionally in the joint evaluation of the visits with the tutors, it still remains dependent on the subjective impression of a single student. On the issue of quality measurement we entangle in fundamental questions of developmental diagnosis, because the different spheres of influence (impulses from kindergarten or school, influences of friends, changes in parental behavior) cannot be separated. Also the question of medium- or long-term effects on the parental behavior remains mostly unanswered, since follow-up interviews were conducted only sporadically (for lack of time). Even with a regular follow-up interrogation of the parents (e.g. after one year), this would not be objective or meaningful enough, because too many different factors would influence the perception and the statements of the parents. Another critical aspect can be found in the motivation of the students. Is their intention for a visit the general promotion of the childish play or do they have specific support and development goals for the child as a motive? That means, each family visit is located on the border between the intention to stimulate the passion for playing and an educational support, which does not want to be the core purpose of this project. Perhaps in these matter there lies the answer to the question "Why it is so hard for approaches with the method of play to take a proper place in professional circles?" We currently experimenting with our partner SOS Kinderdorf e.V. Cottbus in expanding the project to other locations in Germany. Another further development by a colleague (Prof. Dr. Jost) refers to the age group of one to three-year-old children and the inclusion of video recordings during the play visits, to maybe get a new form of process analysis.

#### REFERENCES

- DAMON, W. (1989) *Die soziale Entwicklung des Kindes. Ein entwicklungspsychologisches Lehrbuch*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- EINSIEDLER, W. (1999) *Das Spiel der Kinder: Zur Pädagogik und Psychologie des Kinderspiels*. (3<sup>th</sup> ed.). Bad Heilbrunn: Julius Klinkhardt.
- GOETZE, H. (2002) *Handbuch der personenzentrierten Spieltherapie*. Göttingen: Hogrefe.
- HÖKE, J. (2011) *Die Bedeutung des Spiels für die kognitive Entwicklung*. Last retrieved on November 16, 2015 from [http://www.kita-fachtexte.de/uploads/media/KiTa\\_FT\\_Hoeke\\_2011.pdf](http://www.kita-fachtexte.de/uploads/media/KiTa_FT_Hoeke_2011.pdf).
- MOGEL, H. (1994) *Psychologie des Kinderspiels: Von den frühesten Spielen bis zum Computerspiel*. (2<sup>th</sup> ed.). Berlin: Springer.



- PAETZOLD, U. (2013) Das Projekt "Spielen zu Hause". Report on the Symposium of the SOS – Kinderdorf e.V. Cottbus.
- PIAGET, J. (2003) *Das Weltbild des Kindes*. (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). München: Klett-Cotta.
- SPANHEL, D. (2009) Die Bedeutung des Spiels für die Entwicklung der Kinder in einer mediengeprägten Alltagswelt. *Offene Spielräume. Eine Zeitschrift für die offene Arbeit mit Kindern und Jugendlichen*. 4(9). pp. 3-9.
- STEINKOPF, H. (2011) Treatment of complex trauma in children; a multi-family approach. *Today's Children – Tomorrow's Parents*. 30/31. pp. 117-127.
- WEINBERG, D. & HENSEL, T. (2012) Traumabezogene Spieltherapie. In: Landolt, M. A. & Hensel, T. (ed.) *Traumatherapie bei Kindern und Jugendlichen*. Göttingen: Hogrefe. pp. 150-174.