

Conflicts and togetherness in child care centers

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Abstract

During joint play children experience the same social issues that adults have to deal with. They learn social skills and rules that form the basis of our society: Learning to share, caring for each other and showing respect for the uniqueness of every human being. In this paper we want to show that child carers in childcare centres can help young children to develop their democratic values and skills. The focus is, firstly, on studies of peer relations, and how young children learn and construct rules in peer conflicts. Secondly, we discuss how teachers can foster and co-construct positive relationships and a feeling of group cohesion with young children and how they may intervene in children's conflicts from the perspective of democratic social life in the peer group.

Introduction

Samuel (2;3) walks around. On the table there is a beautiful big ladies bag. He does not know that it is Megan's (2;9) bag, which she has carried with her the whole day and just left it there for a moment. Samuel takes the bag, Megan has a bit of a fright and shouts "No!" and tries to pull the bag out of Samuel's hands. But Samuel keeps a firm grip on the bag. Then they start pulling, and they are equally strong. Megan has the receiver of a telephone in her other hand and she hits Samuel with it on his hand. This makes Samuel even more determined. Then Megan gives him a smack with the receiver on his head. That hurts! Samuel grabs his head and, screaming loudly, he runs to the teacher. Megan follows him with her eyes, conscious of guilt.

These kind of conflicts do often occur between children, although physical harm is more the exception than the rule. In this example Megan knows that she has done something wrong: from her posture, the way she holds her head, the way she looks, we may see that she is conscious of guilt. Megan knows that hitting is not the way to solve problems, that there is a clear moral rule not to hit. Early in their life most children get acquainted with these kind of social rules: rules of ownership and sharing, power, fairness, generosity etc. How do children learn these rules? In this paper we will argue that they learn them from a very early age.

The social and moral development of very young children in groups settings of day care centers is a relatively new field of research and has resulted in an abundance of rich descriptive work which has opened up our eyes for this emergent democratic life. It became clear that the dyadic model of the caregiver-child interaction – for a long time the dominant model – falls short in studies of complex interactions between teachers and young children in group settings (Ahnert, Pinquart & Lamb, in press). Studies of interactions between 0-4 year-old children and their teachers often start from a socio-constructivist theoretical approach: inspired by Piaget with regard to the conceptualization of the child as a active learner; and inspired by Vygotsky with regard to co-construction of shared meanings in the social context, appropriation of cultural tools and the role of the teacher (Brennan, 2005; Singer & de Haan, 2006). Teaching and learning of young children is conceptualized as a collaborative and co-constructed process.

Co-constructing shared meanings and togetherness

Young children show interest into each other from an early age. From at least as early as 2 months of age they touch one another, make noises to draw one's attention, stare avidly at an age mate, and smile (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 166). Simple series of interactions can be observed from the age of 8 or 9 months old. From the age of 18 month old reciprocal imitation plays a central role (Camaioni, Baumgartner & Perucchini, 1991; Rayna & Baudelot, 1999; Völkel, 2002). When language comes in children's life, their non verbal co-acting sequences alternate with verbal chants, which may last huge periods of time as Dunn (1988, p. 112) shows for a child of 24 months who plays a forty minutes 'lola lola lola' chanting-laughing-prancing game with an older child, and Singer & De Haan (2006, p) for two three-year-old girls, who mix their Moroccan mother tongue with the Dutch



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language of the day care center in their ‘*pattojaaaaaaa, pattojpattojpattoja*’ imitation as part of a long rhythmic verse. This kind of imitation functions “to establish co-presence, joint attention, and shared or agreed-upon knowledge that cemented the dyad” (Katz 2004, p. 341) and may be seen as one of the means of relational language of young children (De Haan & Singer, 2001)

According to Emde et al. (1991) and Howes and James (2000), early psychological structures are based on procedural knowledge of the infant’s most emotional engaging experiences with caregivers, and later on also with age mates. Shared procedural knowledge is crucial for the development of a ‘moral self’. In ritualised interactions the infant learns the rules of reciprocity, for give and take. A sense of reciprocity is basic in all moral systems, and expressed in the Golden Rule “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”. Moreover, the predictability of shared procedural knowledge empowers the young child. He or she knows how to influence his parents, teachers and peers, and experiences a sense of agency. In short, co-constructed procedural knowledge has multiple functions: making contact and mutual understanding, sense of togetherness and belonging; sense of control and agency and a moral sense of reciprocity. It is a basis to learn the moral rules of a culture.

Co-constructing social and moral rules in peer relations

In our introduction, we used the vignette of the conflict of Samuel and Megan to point to children’s acquaintance with moral rules. There is a firm consensus about the view that conflicts are conducive in learning the moral rules of a culture (Piaget 1967, Vygotsky 1978, Killen & Nucci, 1995). In day care, children encounter a continuous flow of moments in which they make social choices: taking an object from the other child; permitting the other child to play with me-and-my-friend; doing things that the other does not like. These moments confront the child with conflicting wants and interests, and basically they are learning moments in becoming a social and moral person. On the one hand, conflicts make them aware of the need to belong and of good relationships, and motivate young children to reconcile after a conflict with their caregivers or peers (Verbeek et al., 2002). On the other hand, conflicts make them aware of their own agency and their opponents’ desires, and of social and moral rules. During conflicts children learn to deal with conflicting rights and to co-construct rules with their peers.

What rules do children learn in their conflicts in day care? The most frequent types of conflicts in day care are object disputes, action encounters, entry disputes, and arguments about ideas (Shantz, 1987, Singer & de Haan, 2006). Object conflicts are the most frequent in two- and three-year olds (Shantz, 1987), and, as the children play at a higher cooperative level, disputes about ideas become more frequent (Bekkema, Singer & De Haan, submitted).

When children compete for an object, they learn to cope with the contrary rules of ‘*share your belongings*’ and ‘*respect another’s possession*’, and they learn social skills like not to snatch, taking turns and playing together. In a quarter of all conflicts two- and three-year olds use strategies to de-escalate the conflict by showing positive emotions (smiling and gently touching), giving an alternative object, asking questions, proposing a compromise or turn taking (Bekkema, Singer & de Haan, submitted).

In physical encounters, children learn the basic moral rule of ‘*don’t hurt one another*’; and they have to find out the boundaries between respect for ‘*another’s physical domain*’, and ‘*valuing physical intimacy*’. The social skills of not to intrude and to touch only when the other child agrees are very difficult for young children. Pim (3.8), for instance, hardly can understand why the other children don’t like to join in his rough and tumble play. Because of his need of physical contact and his impulsivity, he repeatedly falls into minor conflicts and is frequently turned down.

In entry or territorial conflicts, the opposing rules to ‘*respect another’s social domain*’ and the rule to ‘*be generous and to share with newcomers*’ are central. Successful play-entry requires the social skill to focus on the other child’s frame of reference and participation structure (Corsaro, 1979; Garvey, 1984,) and to join in smoothly. Garvey (1984, p.164) pointed at three ‘don’ts’ for successful entry: “Don’t ask questions for information”, “don’t mention yourself or show your feelings about



the group or its activity”; and “don’t disagree or criticize the proceedings”. Parallel play offers a good arena to attune. It makes it possible to watch and figure out what the others are doing.

Arguments about opposing ideas bring children to learn the rule to respect *another’s ideational domain*. Opposing ideas may be seen in all kinds of play. The most advanced form in the social domain is pretend play. To act in concert, children have to be able to co-ordinate their pretend acts and extend each others’ contributions into a narrative. Each turn is a move of potential accommodation or opposition. Children have to know how to interweave their concern for relationship and agency with the complex requisites of pretend play. According to Vygotsky (1976, p.552), play is “memory in action” and enables children to elaborate on representations of social situations. In this way they get acquainted with social structures by enacting the roles and rules in their play. Besides, acting according to a concept, a representation of how one should behave in a certain situation may free the child of being bound to impulsive reactions to stimuli in the here and now.

The teachers’ role

The quality of peer interactions is to a large extent dependent on the teacher’s group management and supportive behavior. We will distinguish three levels of teacher–peer relationships: the teacher and the individual child in a group setting, the teachers and group affiliation, and the teacher and peer conflict.

The teacher and the individual child: moments of affectionate-intersubjectivity

Research documents the beneficial effects for children of supportive, responsive interactions with teachers (Kontos, 1999; NICHD Early Childhood Research Network, 1996). Most early childhood experts agree that the individual child-teacher relationship is basic for emotional security of the child in group settings (Howes & Ritchie, 2002). Therefore most day care centers stress the importance of individualized care. The significance of the teacher-child relationship becomes especially clear in situations in which the child is confronted with demands of being part of the group. Brennan (2005) analyzes how, in case of non-negotiable rules, the teachers created an affective-intersubjectivity between themselves and the child. During group activities the teachers were concerned to make personal contact by working alongside the children; by physical contact; by smiling and saying some nice words. According to Brennan, the teachers created a ‘culture of tenderness’ to communicate that they care for all children.

The teacher and group affiliation: rituals and routines

In a meta-analysis of studies of the quality of caregiver-child attachments in day care group settings Ahnert et al. (in press) found that group related sensitivity of the teachers predicts children’s attachment security better than the teacher’s sensitivity towards the individual child. In this respect studies of enhancing a sense of belonging and security in group settings are illuminative. Shared procedural knowledge is crucial for the development of a sense of belonging between individuals. But recursive interactions are also basic in the creation of group affiliation. They motivate to participate in the group (Brennan, 2005; Hännikäinen, 1999). Rituals and routines make the world predictable and safe, and central values are communicated at a concrete level of action (Butovskaya et al., 2000; Corsaro, 1997); for instance rituals to celebrate birthdays, to console a hurt child or for keeping in touch with a sick playmate or teacher.

Teacher intervention in peer conflicts

A special issue is the teachers’ role in peer conflicts. Young children playing in group settings have a mean of 5 to 8 conflicts per hour (Shantz, 1987). In general these conflicts last very short, in average 18 seconds (Singer & De Haan, 2006). Most conflicts, between a quarter and a third of all conflicts, are solved without help of the teacher (Singer & De Haan, 2006; Singer & Hännikäinen, 2002). When children are playing together, in most cases (80%) they keep on playing together after the conflict,



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whether there is a teacher intervention or not (Singer & De Haan, 2006). Probably, the desire to continue with their joint play is stronger than the urge to win (De Waal, 2000).

So, in general teachers are no better at resolving conflicts than young children. Should we conclude from these data that teachers ought to refrain from intervening in conflicts? Of course, teachers have to intervene immediately in cases where children are bullying each other. Singer & de Haan (2006) found that teachers do intervene in 74% of the serious conflicts in which children cry or hurt each other. In case of small conflicts and disagreements, teachers were involved in only 16% of the conflicts.

What kind of interventions do teachers perform? Singer and Hännikäinen (2002) and Singer & de Haan (2006) found that half of the teacher's interventions could be classified as a form of high power strategy, in which the teacher is following her own agenda solely to restore order. In this type of intervention, the teacher may become part of the conflict (Sim, Hutchins & Taylor, 1996). For teachers, it is hard to know what solution will be acceptable for all children involved. In most cases she will not know the full history of what happened before the conflict erupted. Therefore, a mediating role of the teacher is more promising in fostering positive conflict resolution. Teachers intervene in this way in about 45% of children's conflicts (Singer and Hännikäinen, 2002, Singer & de Haan, 2006). Although teachers may be very clear about rules and appropriate behavior, the basic attitude in mediating is sensitiveness to the logic of all children involved in the conflict. Buzzelli (1995), Göncü & Cannella (1996) and Singer & de Haan (2006) found a number of mediating strategies of teachers in day care. Based on these results, the latter authors distinguish a mediating approach of the three R's: Recognize, Resolve and Reconcile.

The first group of mediating strategies relate to *Recognizing* the logic-in-action of the children-in-conflict by soothing them, asking questions and verbalizing feelings and points of view. In this way the teacher models that she cares for all children.

Secondly, teachers use strategies to *Resolve* the problem. The teacher asks for or suggests what children may do: she may model behavior: "Look, when you give Samuel the purple stamp, you may have the orange one."; proposes an alternative or compromise: "Cas may have the plates, and you the forks and knives."; she suggests to talk about motives and needs: "You may ask 'Can I sit on the seesaw?'" and uses humour to relax or gives it a playful turn. In this way, she might remind the children of a simple set of shared moral rules of:

- reciprocity: turn taking
- equality: all children may have a piece of fruit
- individual rights: she has got it for her birthday
- relationship: Billy is so young, you have to help him a bit
- leadership: if you want to join, you have to adjust.

Finally, strategies are found in which the teacher assures that children *Reconcile* and restore the relationship by suggesting concrete actions. She asks for a plan: "How can we make Rodni happy again?"; gives an advice: "Look you can do it together"; compliments the children when they do relation work: "That's nice. You may say thank you when Branco gives it to you"; or refers togetherness: "It is so nice when all children take part".

These strategies may provide a structure to behave in a positive way. When children are upset, they may give them a moment of stand still to get out of a spiral of growing anger, to pause to think. In this way children may redirect their emotional energy. In the long term, these mediating tools may help children to regulate their emotions and direct their behavior.

Conclusions

Recent research of peer interaction has shown that young children are much more able social beings than was thought before. Their curiosity in others and their desire of communication provide them of a strong force for achieving basic social capabilities. Young children appear to be agents in creating togetherness, and they do that with their own ways of acting and talking.

Although the family context is a rich resource to learn social and moral rules, today, day-care centres increasingly become an important environment for young children. Here, they become real



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little citizens in their interaction with teachers and peers. Their day-to-day conflicts teach them about ownership, inclusion and exclusion processes, respect for the physical and psychological territories and the ideational world of others. In short, day care centers are the first public places for many children to learn about democracy.

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