Playing with rules – Spielmarkt 2019

In the Journal of the Spielmarkt 2018 the Spielmarkt team refer in their article 'Less play more' to the Swiss psycho-linguist and teacher Paul Moor: 'The nature of play does not lie in its purpose, but in its own self. The play itself is sufficient of its own. It does not have a purpose. It already owns everything it needs'.

Does this also mean that play is safe enough in itself and that it doesn't need external rules? In other words does play have enough internal rules?

Moor (1961) describes in his book 'Die Bedeutung des Spieles in der Erziehung' the development in children's play from Sensorimotor play, followed by Role play, to Constructive play and finally Play with rules. Although Moor considers Play with rules the last stage in the development of play we should not forget that rules are present in playing from the very beginning. In Sensorimotor play a child already discovers that a small ball is moving in a different way than a bigger one. The Role play in which the child realizes that choosing for a specific role, like for instance a policeman, means that in playing it has to behave like a policeman. In Constructive play a child has to deal with the attributes of the play objects.

Vygotskij (1962) underlines that, especially in role-playing there is always 'a hidden rule'. When playing for instance somebody who has been shot you have to lie down and wait for help. An attitude that in real life may be difficult to do but in play can be more easily done. In playing there is the possibility to fulfill a desire that in real life is not possible or has to be delayed. You can pretend to be a fantastic football player while in reality you are not so athletic. That's what Vygotskij means with the 'zone of proximal development'. In play a child is able to perform on a higher level than in real life.

El'konin (1978) is convinced that the role in role playing contributes to self-control and regulation as the child is constantly comparing his real behavior with the role behavior.

Peter Gray (2013) describes that 'play is a freely chosen activity but not a free-form activity. Play always has structure, derived from rules in the player's mind' (…) To play is to behave in accordance with self-chosen rules'. And he mentions an always-present rule in play fighting where you mimic some of the actions of real fighting but you never really hurt the other person. 'Play fighting is much more controlled than real fighting; it is always an exercise in restraint'.

The Dutch play theorist Edith Vermeer (1955) explains in her model of illusive play three means a child uses to control these rules in playing. First of all a social role play begins with negotiating by the children about the choice of roles. The play partners have to agree otherwise the play cannot begin. This does not mean that pretend play is static because during play many changes can happen and then again new agreements have to be made about the form and content in order to continue playing..

For instance, when the child in the role of a king shows behavior of a criminal the play partner will protest. The child who was playing the king will explain that he changed into a thief who wanted to steal the crown jewels. If so there will be a redefinition of roles. May be the prince will become the king to arrest the thief etc. Agreement about roles is an essential part of playing and is helpful in

continuing playing. Children will remind each other of the chosen roles, influenced by the behavior they are showing in their play.

The second means is the use of language in the past tense: let's pretend that I *was* the king and you *were* the prince, ok ? They use the past tense to underline that what is going on in play is happening outside the real world.

A third instrument that helps to maintain a feeling of safety in playing is that of the as-if actions. Pretend actions differ essentially from real actions. They are done without any consequences. If you pretend to be injured or ill, you are not really injured or sick. You only do as-if. Those as-if actions are seriously performed so all the players believe in what is visible in play behavior. As-if actions usually show high concentration and demand much control.

In play the child learns the difference between real movements and as-if actions. It is an enormous step forward in the direction of the symbolic development. Like words replace the real things do as-if actions replace the real behavior. By playing the child learns the difference between being angry and doing as-if, between reality and fantasy (v.d.Pol, 2016).

The ability to perform as-if actions has to be developed. Pretending to be a knight who is beating another knight with a sword claims the possibility to inhibit the real physical action, so nobody will be hurt. This also involves the capability of inhibition, which is a maturation of the brains.

If one of the three elements of assuring the safety of play is missing we should help the child to master them again. For instance by interrupting the play and talk about another way of playing. By showing how to perform the good as-if actions or, if necessary, to do it together. We do not need to hesitate to interrupt the play when things are going wrong. Not interrupting may create more damage. The 'agreement' in the beginning of playing about the chosen roles and the belonging behavior gives us the opportunity to redefine the world of playing and hence remaking it safe again.

Legislation of play conditions is becoming more and more important in creating safe playgrounds. However a domination of this aspect may result in losing play-attractiveness for the children, because without challenging experiences a child loses the opportunity to deal with risks (Hajer, 2016).

In play a child creates a special world in which self-created rules and meanings are created (v.d.Heuvel, 2017). So let's trust the inherent structure of play, which also means that we, as adults, should be reluctant in intervening or even forbid playing when things are going wrong. The best thing to do is to use the wealth of the play structure in order to help the child regain the right play attitude. This is of great importance because a well-playing child is a protective factor in education.

Dr. Pim J. van der Pol, orthopedagoque/play therapist

REFERENCES

El'konin, D.B. (1982) In: Pedagogische Studiën, nr. 59.

Grey, P. (2013). Free to Learn. Basic Books, New York.

Hajer, Fr. (2016). Werk maken van spel.

Heuvel, W. v.d. (2017). Spelsignalen in de niet-speelwereld.

Moor,P. (1962). Die Bedeutung des Spieles in der Erziehung. Verlag Hans Buber.

Parten, M.B. (1932). Social participation among preschool children. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 27.

Pol, P.J. v.d. (2016). In: Buitenspelen, 2.

Vermeer, E.E.A..(1955). Spel en spelpedagogische problemen. Utrecht, Bijleveld.

Vygotskij, L.S. (1962). Thought and language. Cambridge, M.I.T. Press.