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Is Play Free? Let the Child Play Free!

Abstract

In the article *Is Play Free? Let the Child Play Free!* I debate on how the child can use this freedom, and how the adult, acting as a facilitator and influencer of play, can relate to the infinity and the often irrational, astonishing scenes of play, and how the adult can promote, inspire and catalyse the child in order to bring him into the fullest mental motion and activity resulting in the highest level of joy. The research results gave the empirical material proving the fact that it is the child's stimulating experience and play environment that allows the child's spontaneous initiative, which creates the emotional foundations of a rich motivational system providing the main terrain for voluntary and spontaneous learning.

Key-words: child, play free, play environment

1. Problem statement, utilisation of the research

The most enjoyable, attractive and precious feature of play lies in its freedom. It is crucial how the child can use this freedom, and how the adult, acting as a facilitator and influencer of play, can relate to the infinity and the often irrational, astonishing scenes of play, and how the adult can promote, inspire and catalyse the child in order to bring him into the fullest mental motion and activity resulting in the highest level of joy. This is the question that this paper intends to discuss.

The idea of emphasising early learning appears mainly in writings for parents¹. Even if it means to be done through play, it encourages parents to seek structured, programme-like learning and teaching for their children, allowing learning to gain ground, thus devaluating play. (This typical parental attitude

¹ K. Deákné Dancsó, *Anyá, taníts engem! Fejlesztési lehetőségek születéstől iskolakezdésig*, Pápa 1999.

can be observed in our own research, too). This view and practice hinder and make children's independent, free play difficult to unfold.

There are more of those, though, who regard play as the tool and condition of development².

The problem of today's pre-primary education is that "[...] practice has gone too far in crossing the threshold of free play in order to insert learning and teaching content into it"³, and this way children's freedom and autonomy of play are limited in free play. Respect of the freedom of free play requires the enrichment of our educational toolbox.

This research will help us to learn more about the teachers' behaviour during play. The methodological recommendations will enrich the methodological toolbox of the pedagogy of play. Freedom of play and child autonomy can better prevail in free play.

Aim of the research

Building on the investigations into teachers' behaviour influencing play, this research aims to develop methodological recommendations respecting the freedom of play, and inspiring the child's development, and thus to further develop the methodological chapter of the pedagogy of play.

Foundation of the research

This research has been grounded by the examination of several topics. Play has been the most important research topic of our Faculty for 40 years, especially it from the point of view of the pedagogy of play. Thus, among others, topics such as: kindergarten teachers' play ability, initiation of games by the kindergarten teacher, appearance of creativity in play, play-based learning, what and how children play at the turn of the century can be regarded as preliminary studies and satellite research.

The main theoretical foundation of kindergarten teachers' behaviour influencing play is provided by the specific features of play and children's needs in play (see fig. 1.).

The central concept of our research is free play. Our perception of the adult's role is reinforced in the writings of B. and S. Sutton-Smith, P. Leach, B. Bettelheim, R. Woolfson and D. Einon.

² R. C. Woolfson, *Boldog gyermek: elmélet és gyakorlat a gyermek két és fél évestől ötéves koráig*, Pécs 2002.

³ É. Kovácsné-Bakosi, *A szabad játék, a játék szabadsága*, "Óvónők kincsestára" 2013, February, pp. 9–10.

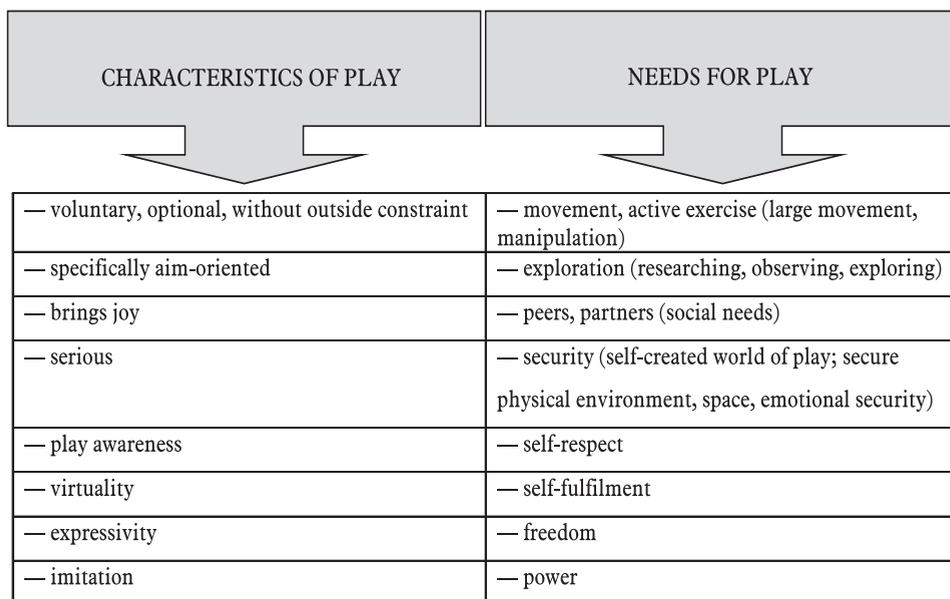


Figure 1. Theoretical foundation

Details of the discussion of the topic

The topic requires at first to present our perception of free play, and then explain our interpretation of the kindergarten teacher’s role in free play. After that we give a summary of the content elements referring to the freedom of play.

We state that free play sets specific obstacles to the kindergarten teacher’s participation in it. For this reason we made a list of what kindergarten teachers can and cannot do in free play. With the help of this list we categorised the types of influences on play. In the parallel of action and reaction we describe the child activities and the kindergarten teacher affecting one another in free play.

Research methods

With empirical data collection (written interview) we investigated into the different categories of the effects on play. As methods we also used making lists, analysis of the parallel of action–reaction, brainstorming and data analysis.

2. Free play and the adult's role in free play

About free play, the freedom of play

It is not disputed what a significant role play has got in the development of children at kindergarten age. But its realisation is connected to different viewpoints, what is more, to different practices. The outstanding role of play, free play that is, has been further reinforced by the national core programme that regulates Hungarian kindergarten education. The core programme expects us to build on play as the main tool of learning. Nevertheless, we find that while moving toward our goal, time after time we encounter the same old problems, although from a different perspective. And that is the issue of the enforcement of free play. This involves the place free play has got in the daily schedule and the whole structure of activities in the kindergarten, the kindergarten teacher's perception of free play, i.e. the kindergarten teacher's role in free play.

Looking back at the 70's — when I working as a kindergarten teacher I myself had first-hand experience in playing together with children — although a more structured approach and an 'example-following' play management was accepted. In comparison with other socialist countries Hungary was the front-runner in enforcing the freedom of play.

When analysing play it was important to consider the characteristics of it: how much voluntary and free the game was. Of course, it that interpretation allowed the teacher to give a concrete idea to the children ("Take the doll to the hairdresser's"), and if it was accepted by the child, it wouldn't already diminish the voluntary feature of play, even if the clue was formulated as an instruction, which would be — according to our present knowledge — completely strange to the essence of play.

Professor H. Retter⁴ writes that the pedagogy of play in the former socialist countries was often referred to as play-intervening pedagogy, "which limited the child's spontaneity, and restricted it to socially desirable content"⁵. This is confirmed by B. Kramp, who calls the influence on the content of play a feature of the German control over play. "Kindergarten teachers directed play according to her objectives, so it could not become a free activity that would meet the desires and interests of the children."⁶

At that time free play was not yet definitely separated from other forms of play, and it was not even necessary, since play as a part of the daily routine meant free play as it is called today. But what was specifically favourable for free play is the

⁴ H. Retter, *Az óvodai játépedagógia elméletének nemzetközi vonatkozásai*, [in:] 6. *Játépedagógiai Fórum* I, ed. É. Kovácsné dr. Bakosi, Hajdúböszörmény 1992, pp. 19–34.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

⁶ B. Kramp, *A foglalkozástól a játékos tanuláshig*, [in:] 6. *Játépedagógiai Fórum*, op. cit., p. 119.

aforementioned daily routine, which at that time in the middle and big groups did not require the teacher “to create learning situations, or make use of them,” or to initiate “play for development.” Except for literacy development, it was required to initiate learning activities only in the youngest groups. (Probably, to some extent this is where the subordination of learning to play, free play that is, can be traced back.) During that time the teacher could devote herself to play.

As the innovation of the kindergarten started, from the middle of the 80s, the emphasis was shifted onto the quest for learning to be better adjusted to the kindergarteners, i.e. onto looking for appropriate forms of learning. It was done amid strong efforts to raise the importance of play to higher levels for it to gain a more dominant role. Unfortunately, even in present day practice, the biggest diversity can be found at this point, and there are still practices where free play is highly limited.

Educational approaches referring to the further development of play, which resulted in the rather direct influences in the teacher’s guidance in play, was recognisable even in the practice of the pedagogy of play of the 90’s. (Having invented the idea for further development, we planned the child’s play instead of leaving it with the child).

On the other hand, due to a broad interpretation of learning, as well as emphasising the lack of restrictions, nearly everyone identified with the otherwise acceptable statement that “play is the ground for learning.” As a consequence, practice has gone too far in crossing the threshold of free play in order to insert learning and teaching content into it.

Meanwhile, analyses in the pedagogy of play increasingly dealt with the kindergarten teacher’s role in play, the learning of kindergarten aged children gained a different perspective, and the differentiation between the forms of play gained ground (free play, initiated play⁷, learning play⁸, and instructed play). Due to the analyses, the new perspective outlining the kindergarten teacher’s role became increasingly elaborate and more desirable. This leads to a still existing problem, i.e. there are still unfavourable feedbacks regarding the role of free play and the manifestations of the kindergarten teacher’s role (see later in the paragraph on the data obtained from long-time practising teachers and new graduates).

Thus we are facing two problems:

- on the one hand, children need more guidance in learning how to play (they cannot or are less able to play),
- on the other hand, teachers cannot always find the best ways of help and support.

⁷ É. Kovácsné Bakosi, *Az óvodapedagógus kezdeményezett játéka*, 1993 = *Újszerű játékformák, játéktípusok az óvodai nevelésben* (“Játékpédagógiai tanácskozás” 1992), ed. É. Kovácsné Bakosi, HOKE, pp. 87–103.

⁸ J. Páli, *A folyamat játék, a végeredmény tanulás*, “Lépésben a változásokkal” I, 1991–1992 [1992].

Freedom of play

Practice shows that we have to take more into account the boundaries of children's free play which they create against the adult and the kindergarten teacher as a way of protection of their play from the too much or unsolicited adult influence (in this case we may call it interference)⁹.

Several professionals dealing with play (B. Bettelheim, H. Retter, T. Vekerdi) agree that play is unique, special, and different from other activities. H. Retter for example writes: „The child develops his emotional control via a symbolic contact with the world of play, which he can modify according to his desires, in a way as it would be possible in no other activity”¹⁰.

However, this singularity gives a different scope of action to the well-meaning adult: “When the child lives under the spell of free play, the teacher, or parent acts correctly if they do not even try to understand play, because play goes beyond itself; it is beyond the realm of the reasonable”.¹¹ “The game activity is determined by the initiative, seduction and the feelings of inner tension, which stimulate the child — primarily because the child feels safe, as he is in control of the play activity”.¹²

During their play children “can take a ladleful of broth” in circumstances where in the pretend situation there is no accountability, or reprimand if the “soup” is “dripping” or “spilt over”. However, while they are practicing the actual activity over and over again in their play, they even experience it again and again, they strive to do the activity as precisely as they can because they bear the internal need to compare themselves to the adults, and their capabilities are improving. That is why experiences are important, and so are the numberless practice opportunities and access to the props in line with the child's needs, and there is no need to correct or criticise them when the activity does not correspond to reality.

Confusion may also occur if inadequate technical terms are used for the adults' role, like for example statements: “We organise free play”.¹³ This indicates direct involvement.¹⁴

⁹ É. Kovácsné Bakosi, *Az óvodapedagógus szerepe a játékban*, OKI 19; see: B. Muchacka, *Educational Aspects of Children's Play*, “Prace Monograficzne” 492, Kraków 2008; M. Muchacki, *Cywilizacja informatyczna i Internet. Konteksty współczesnego konsumenta II*, Kraków 2014.

¹⁰ H. Retter, *Az óvodai játépedagógia elméletének nemzetközi vonatkozásai*, [in:] 6. *Játépedagógiai Fórum I*, op. cit., p. 31.

¹¹ M. Eigen, R. Winkler, *A játék*, Budapest 1994.

¹² H. Retter, op. cit., p. 32.

¹³ <http://oviszulo.hu/tag/szabad-jatek/>

¹⁴ <http://oviszulo.hu/tag/szabad-jatek/> (Tag Archives: szabad játék, A. Támtomné Bors).

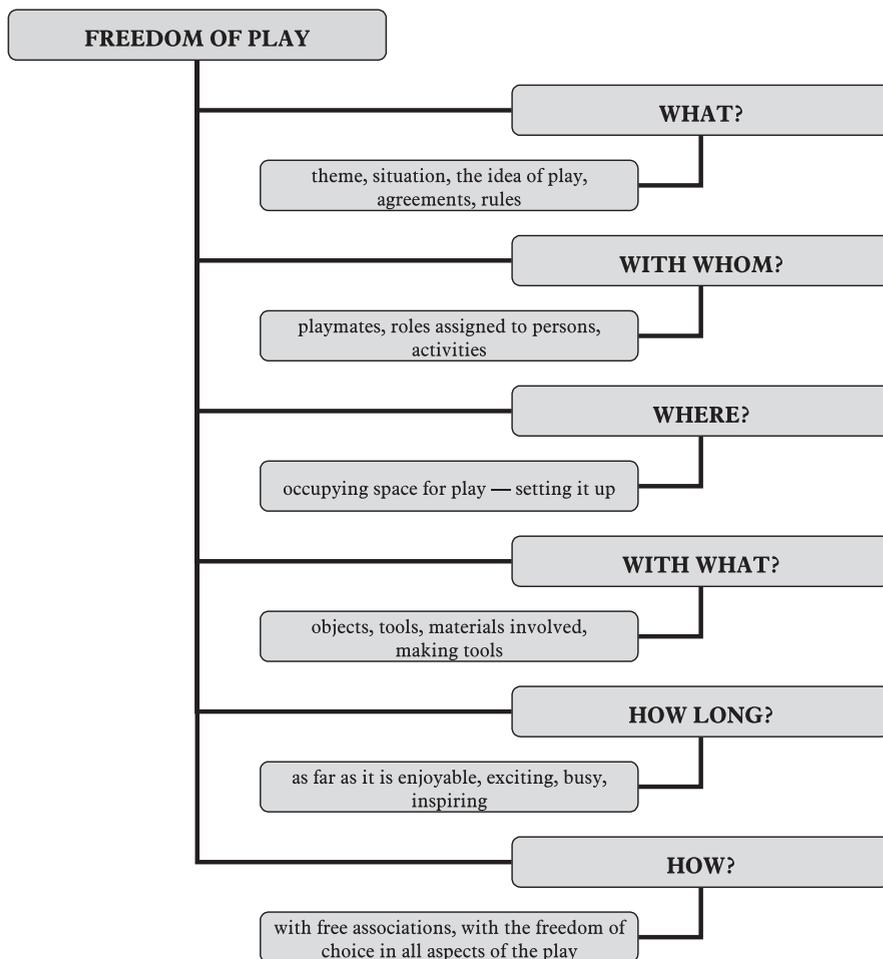


Figure 2. Content elements indicating the freedom of play

Our interpretation is that we create the conditions for free play, we help when necessary and requested, we play together, but it may by no means suggest that we “organise” play instead of the child. Educational intentions often lead to a stronger influence than permissible.

Just as there is no absolute freedom, there is no absolute free play. Play is free within pedagogically purposefully established conditions. But this freedom cannot be further restricted. (Let us not consider here the undesirable situations when you have to intervene!)

The freedom of play extends to the aspects orientating play such as: what, with whom, where, with what, how long and how we play (see fig. 2).

Because of the content elements determining the freedom of play children should be assigned sufficient time to invent the game. For the same reason, it should be carefully weighed how (or whether) we should take the non-playing or querulous child (Teacher, they will not let me play with them!) closer to those engaged in the game and help him to join in. Furthermore, it is also recommended to consider our response to the most unusual, sometimes extreme associations (We live in a refrigerator. We are fishing in a fish tank), because they do not require immediate correction as they are essential for the enjoyment of play.

Such freedom of play is the child's elementary psychical need. If it prevails, the child will enjoy playing, and this will serve his most optimal development.

R. Woolfson also shares our viewpoint, and referring to the kindergarten teacher's role he writes the following: adults should induce, stimulate, test, praise and encourage children; let them accompany the adults and imitate them, let them satisfy their curiosity, allow them to explore, and offer them options.¹⁵

It can be declared: free play takes the road of quest, exploration, finding, recognition, discovery, selection, testing, trial and error, adventure, and self-test, i.e. the road of divergence. This is why every minute/momentum of free play serves the development of the creative potential. There is a need for an educational toolbox adjusted to it and extending this potential.

3. The kindergarten teacher and free play

The kindergarten teacher's role in play and their conduct have always been in the centre of professional interest, and they are to this day. The approach to this issue shows quite a variety, and we are still haunted by the two extremes:

- to ensure children's autonomy and freedom in play by strictly only creating the conditions;
- to try excessively to adjust play to reality.

Another problem is that the interpretation of the relationship between play and learning is still not in line with free play. On these issues we have stated our position on several occasions.¹⁶

¹⁵ R. C. Woolfson, *Boldog tipegők: elmélet és gyakorlat a gyermek 15–36 hónapos koráig*, Pécs 2002, pp. 104–111.

¹⁶ G. Kovács, É. Bakosi, *Játék az óvodában*, Debrecen 2001; É. Kovácsné Bakosi, *Az óvodapedagógus szerepe a játékban*, Budapest, <http://www.oki.hu/cikk.asp?Kod=ovodai-Bakosi-Ovodapedagogus.html>; idem, *Mérőeszközök az óvodai játék és tanulás méréséhez*, Debrecen 2004; idem, *Óvodapedagógia 2. Játékos tanulás az óvodában*, Debrecen 2005; idem, *Játékpédagógiai ismeretek*, Debrecen 2007.

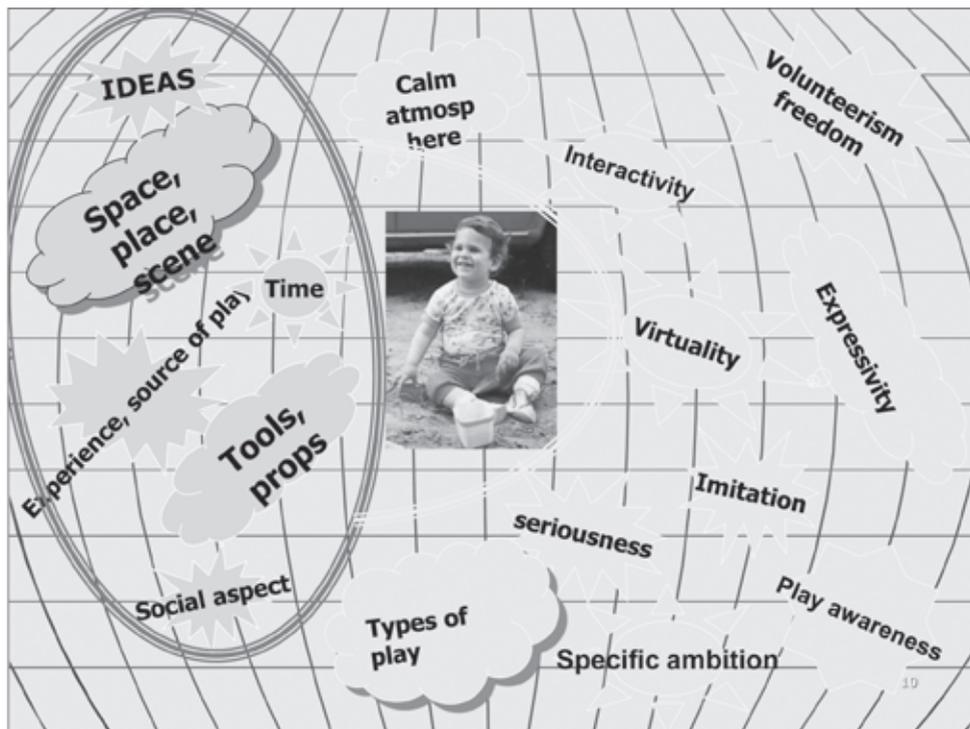


Figure 3. The universe of play

So how is the kindergarten teacher's activity in supporting play manifested? It shows in the role we assign them in the play, namely they:

- create the conditions, and play together with the child when needed and requested;
- react on play.

The condition system of play

In the framework of community life, with the complex system of play conditions the teacher can provide the child with the space favourable for play. However, before outlining the complex condition system let us take a look at the diverse and infinite universe of play using Figure 3. The key elements of play and play itself occur in such an infinite number of variations as the amazingly diverse world of music.

The play that has been started can be turned into experiences and made valuable with the complex conditions supporting it (see fig. 4). The flow of ideas

triggering and then unfolding the joyful play completes it with the help of the elements to be found in the 4 fields of the conditions. Therefore, all of this can occur in the relationship of the activity — atmosphere — space-time-props — social space, social environment.

The emergence of the ideas is a constructive process and production. For it to occur the kindergarten teacher should create the system of interactive conditions. Let us look at these conditions.

At this point, too, we cannot avoid criticising the practice in which free play is subordinated to organised learning (for example, play themes which can start the lesson, i.e. the activity, or use of a particular moment of free play to start the learning process).

Organised learning imbedded in free play is not accepted, because free play is based on the child's free associations, which allows only the forms of spontaneous learning to occur.

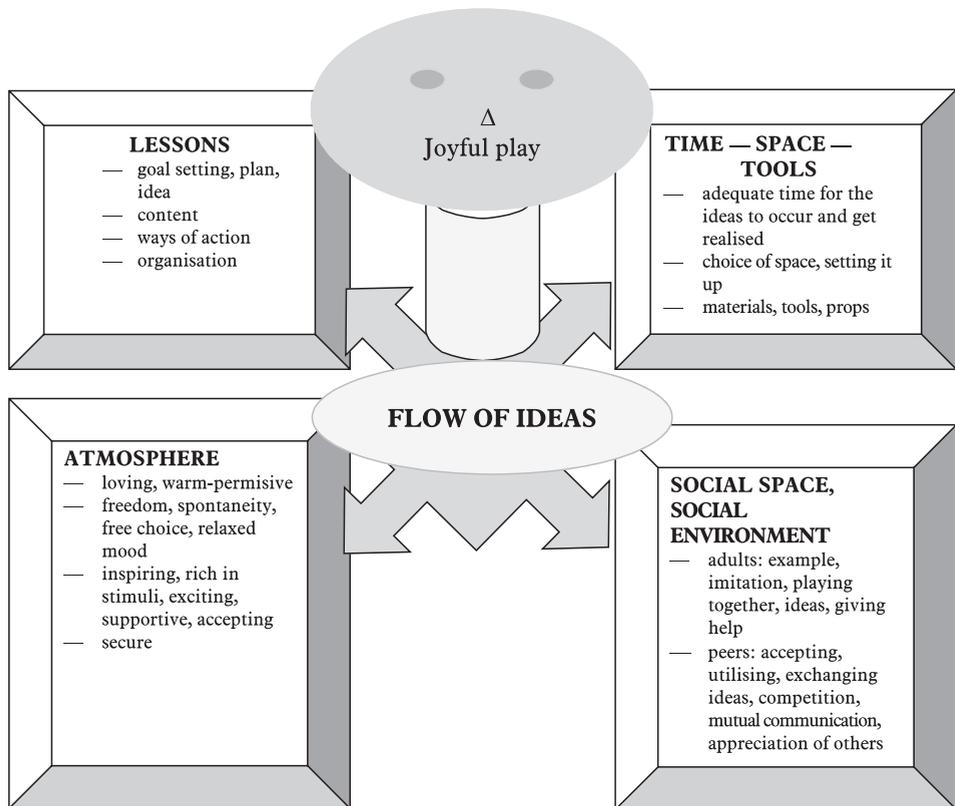


Figure 4. The complex system of the conditions of play

It is possible that during free play the child comes up with a specific problem that requests addition to or rearrangement of his existing experience. It spontaneously creates a learning situation in which the kindergarten teacher temporarily suspends play and “exploits” it for learning purposes. The purpose of this intermezzo is the continuation of play, and is not meant to achieve the learning objectives set by the kindergarten teacher. Consequently, in the process of free play we must not conduct direct learning tasks. We must not disturb it with asking questions, or with ideas aimed at learning, e.g.: “Why do you think it is like that?”; “What do you think?”; “Who could say that in a different way?”; “Where else can you find such a thing?”; “I have also brought...”; “I will show you another...”; “Can you tell me...?” and such, which matches the teacher’s learning objectives, i.e. aimed at intentional learning instead of play.¹⁷

Always, it is the child’s actual play that will decide which form of the kindergarten teacher’s deeds affecting play is beneficial for the development of play. There are times when:

- the teacher just observes play;
- they should leave the solution of the problem with the children;
- they should provide help.

Playing together with the child means the biggest joy.

The teacher has to interfere.

But the opposites of these statements are also true:

There are times when we must not merely observe play and situations that are impossible or hard for the children to solve.

There are times when we must not hurry to help as in the context of play the children can experience a variety of problem-solving situations.

Sometimes we are not needed.

There are times when the children want to play without us, with their peers or alone, to contemplate or to do something else.

There are times when children are able to stand up for themselves, and can solve conflicts without us.¹⁸

¹⁷ É. Kovácsné Bakosi, *Mérőszközők az óvodai játék...*, op. cit.

¹⁸ É. Kovácsné Bakosi, *Az óvodapedagógus szerepe a játékban...*, op. cit.

List of opportunities and constraints

We analysed the characteristics of play, children's needs and adults' possible involvement in terms of compliance to one another. After the analysis of factors two lists were made to help find the correct approach to free play, but they are also suitable for estimating adults' role in play.

What can and what does the kindergarten teacher have to do in free play?

They have to create an adequate atmosphere which is: family-like, acceptive, happy, relaxed but not unleashed, safe, calm, friendly and free from disturbing factors, or is able to restore order. Such disturbing factors can be e.g.: parents' intrusive presence, loud sounds (noise of machines, traffic, hubbub of the pre-school classroom), children breaching the rules, crowd (too many children, small classroom, and improper equipment, too many or too few props), free from conflicts, basic needs are met.

- Children's ideas must be allowed to prevail.
- Children's different ideas should be taken into consideration.
- Children's imagination should be approved and even encouraged to soar freely.
- Give the child freedom of self-expression.
- The development of children's personality should be facilitated: psychical cognitive processes (perception, cognition, attention, imagination, memory, thinking, including the operations of thinking, problem-solving ability and logical thinking ability, creativity); emotional and volitional qualities (such as the ability to express emotions, perseverance, self-control, delay of gratitude, self-regulation); movement (small movements, manual skills, large movements, physical ability, skills); social relationships, social behaviour, adaptability — taking other people's aspects into consideration, tolerance, empathy, acceptance, cooperation — understanding, acceptance, assertiveness, social influence (social penetrance), patience, compliance with and mastery of general norms of behaviour, accommodating rules.
 - Must provide assistance if necessary and upon request.
 - Must provide motifs if necessary and upon request.
 - Must reinforce and encourage children.
 - Must adapt to the process of play.
 - Can give play a boost with: new ideas or thoughts, new props, questions, problem statement, by playing together, joining the play, providing sources for further experience.

- Must take play seriously.
- If necessary, should provide example/pattern to the child.
- Must play together with the child if necessary and upon request.
- Can be a playmate for a child playing alone.
- Must provide objective conditions for play: with props; by setting up the place; by providing time; with calm and cheerful atmosphere; by providing sources: experience, experiences; must be prepared to facilitate the unfolding of play (long-term, short-time planning).
 - May instruct or conducts games with rules.
 - May modify the rules of the game
 - Can encourage the child to formulate play idea: with question, with problem statement, when there is a choice, placing props in the sphere of the child's perception, by providing an example/pattern of play.
 - Can and if necessary, must initiate play.
 - According to the daily schedule, provides behaviour clues marking the end of playtime or its continuation at a later time.
 - Can gently divert play when it takes a wrong turn.
 - When necessary, the teacher must interfere with the game.
 - Must establish habits and rules accommodating the nature of the game to ensure calm atmosphere for it.

What may kindergarten teachers not do during free play?

- They may not instruct.
- They may not exercise favouritism (in assigning roles, with props, — in playing together).
 - In free play they may not determine for the child what to play.
 - They may not impose their will, ideas and plans on the child's play.
 - Deprivation from play may not be a form of punishment.
 - They may not be little the child's play.
 - They may not oblige the child to play.
 - They may not rush the child in play.
 - They may not disturb, or distract the child's engaged play (initiate new activity, new play, new idea).
 - They may not correct the child's plan for play.
 - They may not have a say in the process of play.
 - They may not force the child to participate in play which they do not want to play.
 - They may not question the child's play design, may not interfere until it goes well.

- They may not restrain the child's choice of place for play unless it disturbs other children's play.
- They may not constrain playtime assigned in the daily schedule.
- They may not assess the quality of play.
- They may not impose themselves on the child engaged in play.
- They may not engage in detailed explanation.
- They may not enforce "developmental" behaviour (just in the case of specific children, according to actual plan for development).
- Play may not be taken casually.

Studying the above list from time after time may help us to judge whether the frameworks of free play or our influence on it accommodate the children, their freedom of play, and to see what it is that cries for change.

The list can provide a good basis for the kindergarten teacher's conduct affecting play during free play, and a check list for observation. As the elements of the list appear in practice, certain types of effects influencing play can be established. We have also attempted to classify them and have set up the following types:

- ICS: inspiring, supporting, cooperating;
- ICSP: inspiring, supporting, cooperating and willing to play together with the child — the conditions of true play;
- AWS: arranging, warning, sending signals;
- CIRC: circulating (corrects, asks, reinforces);
- AO: active observer — reacts to problems, meets requests — motto: "Play belongs to the child";
- DEV: developing — their every deed suggests a developing attitude.

We examined which type on the above list kindergarten teachers (long-time practicing and beginner teachers) fall into (see Table 1), and what the rank between the types affecting play is (see Table 2).

Table 1. Types of kindergarten teachers affecting play

Types of teachers' conduct affecting play		Long-time practising teachers [%]	Beginner teachers [%]	Total of respondents [%]
1.	ICS	18	21	19.5
2.	ICSP	32	40	36
3.	AWS	7	13	10
4.	CIRC	6	8	7
5.	AO	12	6	9
6.	DEV	25	12	18.5

Teachers who are new to the profession wish to keep control over the game rather than “just” taking the role of the active observer. Also, they are the ones to be more willing to play together with the children (+8% difference from practicing teachers), while the percentage of those taking the role of the developer is half of that of the teachers being in service for a longer time (12% of beginner teachers against the 25% of practicing teachers). The percentage of the arranging, circulating and actively observing type of teachers is 26% altogether, which we consider high. The reason behind this can be partly the theory of exaggerated freedom of play, and extreme control. Further examinations reveal more details.

Table 2. Rank of teachers’ types affecting play

Rank	Long-time practicing teachers [%]	Beginner teachers [%]	Total of respondents [%]	
1.	2.	2.	2.	ICSP
2.	6.	1.	1.	ICS
3.	1.	3.	6.	DEV
4.	5.	6.	3.	AWS
5.	3.	4.	5.	AC
6.	4.	5.	4.	CIRC

The rank between the different types of the two samples shows diversity. Altogether, more than half of the respondents (55%) are inspiring, cooperative, supporting and willing to play with the child. The behaviour aiming at the development of the child is significant (18.5%), which already has a negative influence on free play.

The analysis of kindergarten teachers’ activities affecting play demonstrates how the “freedom” of free play prevails (see table above).

A higher proportion of longer-time practicing kindergarten teachers let the children play independently than beginner teachers do. Hopefully, behind this there is no negligence, but that the justified and necessary freedom of play can actually prevail. About the same proportion (one-third) initiate play in the two sample groups. This also confirms the approach encouraging autonomous, independent play.

Questions 3, 4, 5 examine the freedom of the choice of the theme, place and props. Nearly 10% of practicing kindergarten teachers rejecting the child’s play theme seems quite high. The percentage of beginner teachers with the same tendency is just 3.6%. There can be about the same amount, 5% of play ideas which are not recommended to play in a community. The child may have sev-

Statements	always [%]	
	PT	BT
I let children play independently.	39	20
I start, initiate play.	3	0
Children play what they wish to.	34	36.4
Children play with whom they want to.	42	42
Children form the place for play the way they want to.	20	34.5
I arrange the classroom for play in advance.	11	14.5
I stick to habits; toys and props have their own place.	22	16
I refer to adults' deeds, ways of conduct: "Mummy does it this way."	4.5	16.4
I modify play so it is connected to the content of the learning activities.	22	11
I 'introduce' the non-playing child to a group of playing children.	17	24

PT — practicing teachers

BT — beginner teachers

eral ideas, for which we have to find ways how to play them and how to give an outlet for the emotions hiding in them, so they are beneficial for the whole community.¹⁹ Beginner teachers are more tolerant regarding the freedom of setting up the place.

The freedom in choosing the props shows nearly the same data in both examined groups (always, or often around 90%). 60% of teachers with more practice, and 50% of those fresh to the career always or often insist on the permanent place of the props. Beginner teachers seem a little more flexible with the props' location. This can be significant as an element of the freedom of play with the purposeful interpretation of tool-space relationship.

Nearly 50% tend to arrange the classroom in advance (always or often). This, however, indicates strong influence on play. And if we add the data telling us about the percentage of kindergarten teachers directing play to connect its content with the themes of the learning activities (80% of practicing teachers and 70% of beginners), then free play is affected by quite a lot of factors.

It can also interfere with play if during play we try to correlate it to real life (there are various ways). This is more typical for beginner teachers (only 10% does not do it), but we find the 26% of practicing teachers high, too. It

¹⁹ A. Richterné Kropf, *Legyőztük a pomogácsokat!*, "Óvodai Nevelés" 1995, 8.

often [%]		rarely [%]		not applicable [%]	
PT	BT	PT	BT	PT	BT
53	67	8	11	0	2
34	31	52.5	64	10.5	5
56	56.4	9	3.6	1	3.6
51	56	7	0	0	2
58	53	19	13	3	0
39	38	39	33	11	14.5
40	35	25	33	13	16
27.4	49	42.1	25.5	26.3	9.1
59	58	16	29	3	2
45	60	19	14	19	2

may hinder children’s free associations, resourcefulness, creation of novel variations, the joy of discovery, the production of something unexpected, unusual, which is not only their self-test, but a means of their peers’ acknowledgement. Yet, it can bring some peace of mind to know that with lots of opportunities to gain experience outside play, and opportunities to replay it, it can be restored.

“Introducing” the non-playing child to an already existing game can also be tricky. We have seen that it can disturb the play in process. This happens to beginner teachers more often (84% marking always or often) showing a high percentage. The 62% of practicing teachers is alerting, too.

By way of summary of what has been said so far, fig. 5 demonstrates the procedure of the interaction between the child and the teacher in free play, in the structure of the phases of preparation for play, play in process, and in its closing.

CHILD/CHILDREN



PREPARATION

Emergence of idea, thinking up the play, elaboration of play in thought, planning, building play strategies, negotiation, bargaining, at times disputes

Formation of social dimensions:

- Who plays?
- In which role?
- In what status?

Occupying the space, setting up the place

Selecting props: play things, objects, tools, material, equipment, accessories.
Making, transforming the props

TEACHER



ESTABLISHING THE CONDITIONS

Observes, waits, leaves children alone and when requested:

- encourages to formulate play idea,
- inquiries, acknowledges, praises,
- indirectly provides clues,
- invites to play together,
- brings up experiences, memories

Observes, and if necessary or requested:

- takes a role,
- is invited,
- volunteers,
- offers options, but leaves decision with the children.

Observes, leaves children alone.

Observes, and if necessary or requested:

- helps to choose and set up the place,
- helps them to harmonise with other groups of playing children

Observes, and if necessary or requested:

- facilitates access to the props desired,
- inspires to replace or make news props
- provides pattern for technical operations.

THE PROCESS OF PLAY, PLAYING

Taking possession of the space and props	Observes
Taking up the roles, acquiring the behaviour adequate to the idea, the theme of the play.	Observes
Brainstorm, flow of ideas and appropriate content: play activities and conduct	Observes, and if necessary: — encourages children to come up with new ideas, praises, — in an indirect way, gives new clues, — by taking a role they give examples to imitate in play, and stimulates the playing child to new reactions, praises.
Possible change in a social field — entering and exiting the game	— Observes if those wishing to join the game are accepted. — Estimates if the child wishing to join the game at a certain phase disturbs the children engaged in it.
Setting up the space, enlarging the toolbox	— Observes if the possible change in space (need for bigger area) does not disturb the game of other groups of children. — Stimulates the creative usage of props, possible enlargement of toolbox, praises.

FINISHING, CLOSING THE GAME

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Game dissolves, children have “worn out” the theme. — Talking about the game, the possible changes, new ideas/solutions, continuation of the game while rearranging the space. 	<p>Observes the closing phase of the game:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — shows interest in the game and appreciation, — makes inspiring remarks on the continuation of the game.
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Figure 5. Free play and the kindergarten teacher

Methodological recommendations

The role of the teacher includes: stimulating, encouraging (the child is free to make choices, has a right to decide, enjoys greater autonomy), initiating, supporting, and “developing” when requested.

When the teacher takes the role of the stimulator, they facilitate play ideas to emerge (they refer to the continuation of the game as early as in its closing phase, they ask the children about their further plans, i.e. in the process of gaining the experience they already refer to new possibilities), state

problems; make hints requiring the child to make choices; encourage children to choose props in a combinative way.

When the teacher acts in the role of facilitator, they adjust to the children, above all. This adjusting assistance is always changing to adapt to the child's growing abilities, and for the "zone of proximal development"²⁰ to apply. Vygotsky said: "During play the child is always above his age, his everyday behaviour, as if in play he was a head taller than himself." Under the guidance of the adult he is able to do more, because with assistance he can mobilise his potentials.²¹

Play idea — providing ideas

When children are already independent in play, have got ample play experience and experiences triggering their imagination, they are able to establish deeply engaged yet dynamic and exciting play process, utilising their increasingly novel play ideas. So play culminates in the series of the child's play ideas (flow of ideas). However, there are situations when they need help in doing so, and the proximity of the kindergarten teacher proves helpful. The teacher's previous observations will help them to decide what kind of support the children need. Most efforts should be aimed at helping the children, encouraging them to formulate play ideas. Inventing the game is as much fun as the game itself. The kindergarten teacher has to find a special style to facilitate the start and the unfolding of the game for the child to be the one who formulates the play idea. How can it be done, with what kind of solution? I know it from practice that it is easier to find a specific play idea than finding the way how to provide clues leading toward the play idea, which will then be transformed into a play idea by the child. It can be for example a statement, a question, or an exclamation, a wish, a problem statement, or perhaps a flexible piece of advice.

Example

Statement: "Hats are in fashion again"

What kind of play ideas can the children come up with? It can be, for instance: wearing hats for walk; designing and making hats; opening a hat shop; making a fashion show with hats; selling hats in the shop; compiling a fashion magazine with a collection of hats; making hat boxes; delivering hats.

²⁰ M. Cole, Sh. R. Cole, *Fejlődéslektan*, Budapest 1997, p. 237.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 363.

Question: “Who won Formula 1 yesterday?”

Expected ideas: building a race course; making racing cars, racing; constructing car repair pit, repairing cars; crashes, collisions, accidents, clean-up of the track, organising the announcement of results; making racing gear; car racing coverage; interviews with the drivers; stewards — race flags to start and finish the race — flaggers.

Exclamation: “I have won a traveller’s check on the raffle.”

Expected ideas: creating raffle prizes; drawing the raffle prizes; several ideas on travel destination; tips on how to travel (air, car, boat, sailing, cycling); packing; shopping; beautifying (haircut, manicure, tanning); itinerary, drawing programme; making cards; making and buying gifts.

Wish: “I would like to make a surprise for my grandson, who is coming to spend his holiday with me!”

Children’s ideas of surprises may be: some food, cake, toys, trips, travel, jewellery, barbecue cooking on open fire in a cauldron, horseback riding, carriage rides, and fishing. Select one by the decision of the children, prepare for that play.

Problem statement: “I have to go to work, and I do not know whom to leave my child with because his grandmother fell sick.”

Children’s play ideas: family game — more than one child in the family, care, getting dressed, walking, cooking, storytelling; visiting grandmother, care, medical check at home, pharmacy, ambulance, hospital.

Advice: “If we were planning a very long trip, it would be good to make a list for loading of the ship.”

Ideas on the list: rope, spare mast, compass, sail, animals, food, flour, sugar, apples, bananas, oranges, water, rum, crew, skipper, captain and officers, ship’s doctor, medicine, binoculars — making the props and loading.

“The kindergarten teacher provides children with play ideas mostly when initiating play, but it occurs during play, too.”²² These ideas are offered as options, and the freedom of choice and decision should be reflected in the formulation of the offer.

The kindergarten teacher’s actual play idea is especially needed when for example:

— The play is difficult to get started. The location, physical and social environment send the teacher signals about what kind of play the child or the group of children are interested in. For instance, the children are selecting, positioning the building blocks but the construction will not begin.

Kindergarten teacher: “Which building plan shall I bring, that of the kindergarten, the railway station’s or the skyscraper’s plan?”

²² G. Kovács, É. Bakosi, *Játékpedagógiai ismeretek*, Debrecen 2007, p. 212.

Statements	always		often		rarely		not applicable	
	PT [%]	BT [%]	PT [%]	BT [%]	PT [%]	BT [%]	PT [%]	BT [%]
I wait for the child to formulate their play idea	39	27	57	71	4	2	0	0
I give concrete play idea	4	3.6	40	25.4	46	65.4	9	5.5
Children accept my play idea	20	21.8	78	73	2	5.5	0	0
I inspire children to formulate play ideas	32	25	59	67	9	8	0	0

PT — practicing teachers

BT — beginner teachers

— Even before they start playing, children may already quarrel over the roles. In general, available options will help to settle the conflicts.

For example, the children are quarrelling over the role of the pilot. More roles should be made more attractive: “If there is high passenger traffic, several airplanes are needed”; “Without air traffic control, the planes cannot fly”; “The assembly hall is the most important place in the preparation of planes”.

— The children have started playing but play is apathetic, high emotional mood is missing. There are children who experience this more often, they need more attention. In their case, from giving direct clues we have to reach the independently formulated ideas of the child.

We have in mind ideas such as: “I’m off to the shop, would you like to join me?”; “We haven’t had morning snack yet. What shall we make for the child?”; “Do you sell Pizza here?” “I’d like to have a two-storey house with a garage built. Will you make that for me?”

We examined the application of the kindergarten teachers’ methods regarding play ideas, too (see Table below). We found that a high percentage of the children accept the teacher’s ideas (98%). It is alright. But it is less fortunate that in nearly half of the cases children are provided with concrete play ideas. This means that the kindergarten teacher formulates, invents the idea of play, and the children’s activity is limited to deciding whether to accept the idea or not, or whether to change it or not. The desirable solution would be to see it higher percentage when the teacher encourages and triggers the play idea in the child.

One of the questions examined how patient we are in waiting for the child’s productive thinking. 57% of teachers wait for the child to formulate their ideas, which then means quite high frequency of adult initiation. The question is how much it is justified.

Play ideas

Beginner teachers tend to be more patient regarding children's play idea. Providing children with specific play ideas instead of encouraging the child to come up with an idea is quite characteristic of them, too. At the same time, they can adjust well to the children, and try to get to know them better as the acceptance rate of their play ideas is very close to that of the longer practicing teachers.

The summary of the responses in the "always" and "often" columns shows that the beginner teachers are more likely to wait for the child's game initiation, and support them in doing so than their longer practicing colleagues. Beginner teachers provide concrete ideas less often.

The rate of longer practicing teachers' answers in the "always" column demonstrates a more favourable result, though. The two samples do not significant differences, but in both groups the teachers have to establish stronger play inspiring behaviour.

A lesson to learn from the analysis of play ideas can be that more attention should be paid to children's active role in the flow of ideas affecting the beginning, and the whole process of play. The actions preceding the game have great emphasis, as well as waiting for and encouraging the child to 'invent' an idea. Providing the child with specific play ideas also has its place at a given stage of play development, what is more, adjusting to the child may even require it. However, it would be advisable to develop some kind of graduality in the methods of offering/providing play ideas. Depending on the play situation and the child, we could reach from offering a concrete play idea to encouraging children to formulate one by themselves. Let us see some examples for this.

Example

Contemplation: "How shall I start this day? How can I make this into a clever structure or invention?"

A little more direct way: "Where shall I take the child this morning?"; "What shall we put on?"; "What shall we put on the shopping list?"; "What shall I (we) cook for the guests today?"; "What kind of birthday surprise shall I (we) make?"

Options: "Where shall I take my child today: to the puppet theatre, the play school or to the zoo?" "How shall we get there: by car, by bus or by a carriage?"

Game idea to invite to play together:

"I am taking my child to the play school. Are you also taking yours? Are you coming, too?"

"I am going to the market. Would you also like to buy something there?"

Your child may have a fever; he feels hot and is red. Mine has a cough. We could go to see the doctor together.”

“Have you also been invited to the play school? We should start getting ready.”

Concrete idea for the play theme:

“Your child seems to be bored, doesn’t he? Perhaps he would like the programme in the play school.”

“The meal you cooked in the cauldron yesterday was very delicious. What are you cooking today?”

If the child does not have an idea:

“I like grilled sausage very much. Shall we make some? I’m sure you have a good recipe.”

4. Closing the theme

The changes in the child’s environment trigger changes in the play conditions. In this regard, the kindergarten and the teacher have an equalising, compensating role. Respect for the freedom of play and organising life in the kindergarten has gained prominent significance. The peculiar nature of free play demands specific methodology toolbox.

The role of the teacher is decisive in the unfolding of free play. Their role adjusted to the game will prevail if they possess the rich toolbox of indirect influences to bring the child’s psyche into motion.

Their encouragement and catalysation apply both within the play of an individual child as well as in that of a group of children while ensuring the absolute freedom of play. The most important manifestations of the teacher’s behaviour inspiring play are:

- joint preparation for gaining experiences to expand and intensify the source of play;
- joint preparation for the possible games;
- ensuring freedom in the choice and set-up of space for play (disturbing other children’s play can be the only restriction): What and where shall we play? How to set up, how to construct?
- ensuring freedom in the choice of the activity;
- guaranteeing the widest possible freedom in children’s decision making and autonomy;
- strengthening community actions;
- mobilising creativity, imagination, utilising the rich supply of natural environment.

As you can see, the kindergarten teacher provides mental and physical support for free play. We believe that free play is so important in a child's life that a happy childhood is impossible without it. On the other hand, the kindergarten teacher as a catalyst, as a guide, fills the gaps in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky²³); playing does not only make the child feel good, but also it is the irreplaceable treasure of the child's development.

It is the child's stimulating experience and play environment that allows the child's spontaneous initiative, which creates the emotional foundations of a rich motivational system providing the main terrain for voluntary and spontaneous learning.

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