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# **Real Play – a Socio-Motor Behaviour**



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The cultural patterns of adult-motor display are well known: sports, dancing and outdoor life. We are far less conscious when it comes to such cultural patterns among children, patterns which are fundamentally tied to their normal development, and in perspective of evolution, more basic than the related adult-motor display.

This article will be about

- the philosophy behind play environments for real play
- how different concepts of knowledge influence the understanding of children's play
- why the project of real play is a challenging alternative to the traditional playground
- experiences so far with environments for real play
- the consequences for future playgrounds as I see it

An article in The Sunday Times, January 2 2000, gave me the following association: On entering a new millennium the British and the Norwegian governments revealed a joint concern for important elements in our children's growth and development. David Blunkett, at that time the education and employment secretary, launched ambitious plans for free six-weeks summer camps for all 16-year-olds. This multi-million-pound project should be financed through earmarked lottery money. The main aim for these camps was to develop collaboration and teamwork through exciting outdoor activities like for instance rock-climbing and rafting.

There are common elements, but more interesting also important differences, in the way the two governments planned to meet the above mentioned concern. Both governments see the value in the unique socialization process that may occur through challenging activities where interaction is needed. And they both planned to meet the costs with lottery money.

However, the differences are more remarkable. Here we talk about the difference between the *organised* and the *spontaneous*, about *adults' culture* and *children's culture*. The 16-year-olds in Britain should get a concentrated six weeks summer camp, while Norwegian children were given possibilities to develop their own movement culture throughout their entire childhood. The 16-year-olds should be offered transfer to special camps, while the Norwegian children should get this offer where they live, in their own neighbourhood and/or where they go to school. What is typical for the neighbourhood playgrounds is that they build on the knowledge of inherent social and movement dispositions and that they must get the optimum possibilities for development through genuine play and spontaneous sports. This is also my topic here.

### **What initiated my interest for real play?**

My understanding of the type of play that I am going to describe here, did not spring out from studies of theories on play. Instead it results from real life studies through years of filming and observation of children's spontaneous play in a stimulating environment. The theory towards the understanding of the phenomenon of play has been tried out in practice, in both summer and winter conditions, and there is now documentation available when it comes to the validity of the theory. The definition of this movement phenomenon, *real play*, is as follows:

*Real play is a spontaneous and social activity, dependent upon its environment, where interaction takes place through extensive use of gross-motor movement.*

Since gross-motor movements are very central in the subject physical education, and also in athletics, the children's spontaneous movement display was especially interesting to observe.

The more I observed, the more I realised that real play, both qualitatively and quantitatively, was superior to the PE teaching I was performing in my primary school classes. It was possible for me to compare the children's play and physical education because several of the children I observed were my pupils. This made me deeply frustrated! I had to admit to myself that I would have done a better job for children's physical development if I had put all my working effort into the preparing stimulating movement environments instead of giving lessons in PE classes.

I was also frustrated because I had never been given any knowledge about this unique phenomenon, neither during my general teacher education nor my PE education. My frustration grew even stronger when I started showing these films for the teacher students. I had very few answers to give to their questions concerning fundamental understanding or basis for what they could observe in the films. It soon also became necessary for me to answer the following essential question:

*What is a stimulating environment for real play?*

This is the most important question – as I see it – to ask those who are responsible for children's total development today.

### **Searching literature to find someone who had seen the same in children's play as I had**

My academic challenge has been to find someone who has had the same understanding of play as me. After a period of intensive search through the literature that is being used in teacher and nursery school education, it was clear to me why real play was so bad off, in teacher training as well as in public area planning. I had to draw the conclusion that real play is not included in the theory of knowledge that is dominant in the literature being used in teacher education. Their theory of knowledge is very much based on the behaviouristic science concept which learns

- that all human behaviour is acquired
- that man has not inherited anything except a few reflexes, and dispositions to use these reflexes (e.g. sucking and grasping reflexes)

If we, based on this classical paradigm, ask the question:

*What makes a stimulating environment?*

the answer will be that the environment that at any time is surrounding the child, is a stimulating environment for the child's development. The logical reason for this answer is that it is this environment the child has to be socialized into.

This classical paradigm puts *consciousness* into the centre for human existence. This again has led to an intellectualization of our relations to children, where what was found to be rational was commanding our actions. Some examples:

### **"Pedagogization" of play**

Scientists have for years done research on play, and when analysing play behaviour they have found that it consists of certain elements. The next step is that educators extract the elements they find most valuable for certain purposes. Models for scientific analysis are used as a basis for teaching.

One of the first researchers was Charlotte Bühler. She found the following elements in play: *functional, constructive, illusionary, receptive and social*. Literature on developmental psychology gives yet another model for how to dissect play: *cognitive, physical, emotional*

*and social.* Children's play has in a way been dissected and reduced to methods for reaching educational goals.

### **“Sportification” of play**

This term is used to illustrate that the distinction between the children's movement culture and the grown ups' movement culture has been removed. It happened in connection with a White Paper from the Norwegian Government in 1974. This paper used the one term *athletics* when talking about the movement oriented part of our culture, such as athletics, sports, PE, exercises, trim, outdoor life, etc. Through this White Paper children's movement play was erased out of Norwegian culture policy until 1992.

Because of the “pedagogization” and the “sportification”, real play has fallen between two chairs; the educational system and the organised athletics system. Both of these systems ought to be responsible for children's development through real play. The school system, because play is of vital importance to children's holistic development, and therefore included in the school's teaching aims. Sports, because the phenomenon athletics has sprung out from real play. *The childhood of athletics is movement play.* Neither school nor sport seemed to realise the value of the type of spontaneous culture we are talking about here. Spontaneity does not seem to fit into well organised systems. The spontaneous was replaced by the organised.

### **The dualistic view of Man**

In addition to the prevailing science based theory of knowledge, it is part of the picture that our culture is marked by Descartes. The dualistic view of Man, body and soul, mind and matter, has paradoxically led to the fact that those who exercise often have to explain why they move! In our society *sitting* is considered to be the norm. One day I was out jogging, I was stopped by a new neighbour. “Tell me,” he said, “are you a heart patient, or are you a sports idiot?”

This dualistic view of Man certainly led to a suppression of the body. Man was a creature of spirit. The spirit lived its own life released from matter. The church supported the suppression of the body. The body was regarded a sinful and dangerous part of Man. The church burned as heretics those who claimed Man's relationship with other living creatures. The aim of body control was to displace the physical aspects of man and promote the spiritual aspects.

### **Consequences of different concepts of knowledge on understanding children's play**

The internal forces that drive forward real, genuine play, are not to be held back. This fact is long ago picked up by business interests. Play that fell between two chairs landed softly on shock absorbent ground, in a landscape of specially constructed furniture called “play apparatus”. The by far most common equipment on Norwegian playgrounds are the swings. Together with slides and see-saws, the swings are special devices for *sitting*. Hour after hour, day after day, month after month, year after year, the children swing back and forth, up and down, or they walk up some steps to slide down a shiny steel plate. In addition a sandpit may create some variation. Here they can sit in the sand or on the edge. In kindergarten they can also sit on tricycles, and even in boats. These boats may give years of practice in “sailing without wind and rowing without oars”. Time passes, and soon childhood is over.

The paradox is easy to see. In 1997 Norway got a new school reform. A completely new discipline in the new curriculum is called *sensory-motor training*. Children meet school so under stimulated that they every day need sensory-motor exercises organised by adults. This subject is introduced in school to help lift children up to a *normal* level of function!

The “sitting-playgrounds” that are offering monotonous movements without excitement and motor challenges, must take their part of the blame. Specific sensory-motor training in school could be compared to a charwoman who dries and dries to keep the floor dry from water, at the same time as the drain is clogged and the tap is widely open. So – what is the alternative?

### **The new paradigm**

Let me begin by stating this: The Pope has accepted Darwin. It was more than a sensation when the Pope acknowledged Darwin in 1997 and thereby acknowledged the Theory of Evolution. This world-wide sensation was presented as a small notice in one column of our newspapers. I see it as if the Catholic Church because of this has in a way, started on the road based upon a new paradigm. When will the educational programs follow up? The scientific concept of *real play* has the theory of evolution as its theoretical framework. I name it *The behavioural-biological science concept* which is based on

- the acknowledgement of man’s behaviour being directed by inherited biological mechanisms
- the fact that we have acquired our patterns of behaviour and ways of reacting from series of animal forefathers

This in fact means, among other things, that it is our genes which give the force to fellowship and co-operation. In addition, it means that we have an innate drive for activity which makes us active and restless and which provokes display of movement during the childhood years.

If, based on this paradigm, we ask: “What constitutes a stimulating environment?”– the answer will be quite exact: A stimulating environment for the child’s own movement culture will be the environment in which our behaviour is developed, or a substitute for such an environment.

### **What consequences do the new paradigm have for the understanding of genuine play?**

In the same way as the dolphin’s shape and movements reflect the environment it is created to live and move in, and in the same way as the bird’s shape and movements mirror the environment it is created to live and move in, the human body is a reflection of the environment we are originally created to live and move about in. Common for all species is that they have to solve the fundamental premises for life, such as:

- gathering of food
- finding a place to live
- protection against natural forces
- competition against other fellow creatures with the same primary needs
- reproduction
- co-operation in groups

Our gross-motor behaviour

- transport movements on ground
- transport movements in trees
- movements for use of tools
- movements connected to reproduction, religion, and art

- movements connected to communication

cannot be understood unless seen in the perspective of the evolution of species in order to solve these primordial life functions. In other words, our gross-motor behaviour is there to tackle skills for survival. Expressed at a higher level of precision the behaviour is concerned with

- crawling, walking, running, jumping, rolling, balancing
- hanging, oscillation/swinging, climbing
- thrusting, throwing, hitting, grasping, lifting, carrying, pushing, pulling, catching
- dancing, performing rituals and rhythms
- gesticulation

For me as a creator and constructor of environment for real play these basic movements are the foundation for the arrangement. *My task is to prepare the environment where there's a need for this particular behaviour.* It takes place in a perspective of

- **width**, meaning that the environment will challenge the wide range of our motor
- **depth**, meaning that there is an abundance of simple activities, so that everyone can master something, but still more importantly that there is much the children do not yet master and do not dare to do at this point.

### **Real play – a socio-motor form of behaviour**

The concept *socio-motor* expresses the idea that in real play the social ingredient and the movements are as integrated as the warp and the shuttle in a loom. It is a well known fact that the social motive forces are the most significant drive in real play. The consequences of this constitute the greatest challenge in the preparation of a stimulating environment for real play. The environment must motivate for interaction/co-operation as well as stimulate discussion. In a real situation this means that in the environment conflicts may arise, conflicts that must be solved by choosing various types of movement and solutions. A good play environment is an eldorado of movement, a compact environment of the kind of elements which make up our behaviour. Socialisation of real play can be summed up as follows:

Interaction takes place through movements

- on ground
- in trees
- when using tools
- in connected rhythm and rituals (dance, drumming, singing)

after agreeing on

- what to play
- how the play should go on
- what is allowed/ what is not allowed to be used in the environment concerning preparation and choice of material or equipment
- roles and the distribution of them /adjustment of rules and the changing of roles.

## **The sensory-motor aspect in real play**

Real play perceived as socio-motor behaviour expresses the totality in playing. An important element within this totality is children's sensory-motor development.

The concept *sensory-motor* refers to the fact that the senses govern the movements via the brain. The brain is the steering gear. It is the connection centre which makes interaction between senses and muscles possible. The brain is, in other words, an apparatus for processing the senses and is constructed in and for the life situation of millions of years ago. Through evolution the capacity of the nervous system has grown hand in hand with the demands any individual meets from the surroundings. This has led to the fact that in the brain and the rest of the central nervous system there are, among other things, predispositions for our gross-motor movements. They exist as more or less well-established nervous structures.

Sensory-motor development focuses on the brain developing considerably and continuously throughout childhood years. All the influences and stimuli children get through their senses in situations that require sense integration is the nourishment which promotes this development.

*The drive for activity* and the great display of energy through gross-motor behaviour is therefore obviously in relation to the development of the brain. The same demands for mastering of challenges in a species-specific environment are the basic nourishment for the brain's development today. The optimal environment for children's total development is consequently the environment that originated the behaviour, or a substitute for such an environment.

The brain's dominating importance for adult life has led to the strong inherited forces in children to seek those situations which at any time provide the stimulation that leads to maximum development of the brain. Children are sense seekers! They are, to a large extent governed by the "lust centres" in the brain. One example is children's incredible desire for anything that challenges the equilibrium / the balance. The organ of equilibrium, the finest and most sensitive in the body, seems to be in a class of its own when it comes to providing nourishment for developing the brain. In a stimulating atmosphere, however, the sense of gravity is forced to continuous interaction with the kinesthetics (motor senses), senses in muscles, sinews and joints, and the senses of orientation, sight and hearing. It's when this interaction is functioning that the child experiences that it succeeds in what it takes pleasure in doing.

Therefore, children just love to challenge the force of gravity! As toddlers they will climb on to window sills and book shelves and slide down banisters. In playgrounds the areas where they can hang, swing or climb attract the children more than anything else. Preferably they should have ample opportunities for natural challenges in their own neighbourhood. However, in modern urbanisations and in our institutions for children and adolescents the poverty of environment is overwhelming, so that any challenge beyond sand pits, slides and swings, is practically non-existent. The source of energy to further development is misused. The energy is drained into leisure and employment measures. Today we have enough knowledge to be able to counteract this tendency. Jungle-like playgrounds with lots of swinging ropes and means for challenging your balance is just one example. Ski centres within reach are another. Skiing is just a game where the opponent is the force of gravity.



## **Excitement, the driving force in real play**

The social motive forces in children are manifested in the searching for challenges in an exciting environment. Excitement is a driving force in all play and is a special ingredient the inborn desire to learn demands from the environment. *Excitement is a systematic uncertainty that the children create in their play to make sure the outcome is unpredictable.* Learning is the moving of borders. Excitement is the strange phenomenon which keeps us in the borderland of mastery, and it's only by being in this borderland that we can move the limits of personal mastery. The borderland is the real growing zone. Through the search for excitement the inner reality is challenged against the outer world. Unknown factors bring about uncertainty if the outcome is successful or not!

Excitement has many faces. *Curiosity*, the titillation between richness of detail and variety in the environment is one. We want to investigate things we don't know anything about, are uncertain of, or do not know the outcome of. Curiosity may easily lead to *conflict*, which is another source of excitement. Conflict presupposes a disparity between the perception of the present situation and the skills and expectations we have. Although we consider conflicts as something negative, they are of fundamental importance for the socialisation process. The active action in real play is based upon consensus! That is why the children through the tough process have to get away from "only me" and approach "the play and us". They must learn to compromise. Yielding and changing opinion is a painful process, but genuine play is such that no individual person may dictate the rules. The key word in conflict solving is: "OK, then!" Can you imagine any one more fundamental remark in inter-human relationship? There are reasons for claiming that real play is the basic schooling for all democracy.

We are likewise titillated by situations where there is an element of *risk*. Risks are also part of human life. Risks include the possibility that something may go wrong. By trying out "dangerous situations" the children learn something extremely vital. They realize the limits of their sensory-motor capacity. Therefore, it ought to be a human right for the children to find the limits for this capacity themselves. With our, often misunderstood ways of arranging so called "safe environments for play", we set the limits for what the children can do and what they cannot do. This type of environment is usually completely without excitement, and consequently the kids will not play there. The majority of what is today called playgrounds is deserted. They remain solely as monuments of grown-ups having "done something" for the children.

The association of paediatricians in Norway has in a note to all health centres of local authorities warned them against the hysterics for safety as a consequence of rules and regulations for playground equipment. Similar reactions have been uttered by the Association of Norwegian Medical Doctors who in a lead article in their journal referred to the issue under the heading: "The dangerous safety".

If we value real play, we must realize that the environment has to be exciting. If this element is absent, the play will not function. We have confidence in children's strong vitality and that it will not be endangered by hazardous extremes. Experience shows that there's a clear margin between what the kids really master and the risky type of excitement they expose themselves to. Anything the child does is safely anchored in something the child has done before. That's why it is delightful to challenge "danger" and let yourself go as long as the children are confident that they are masters of the situation and are in control.

*Competing*, the desire to match others and compare their skills and strength with our own is an inborn human trait. Contest is basic in the development of a child's identity. Within groups there is always a form of social ranking. In this process everyone wants to test out their

knowledge and skills. Accepting the fact that some are gifted in one area, others in another, is a social characteristic which strengthens solidarity and unity in the group. The authorities represent good qualities and knowledge that others may benefit from in certain situations. Competition is, to a large extent, governed by feelings and will take place within the framework of unity. Even if the unity bursts now and again, it happens in a way so that the participants in the play do not lose their friends.

The background for this apparent antagonism between competition and solidarity is found in the characteristics of real play. Equality in skills makes for excitement. Through the rules the children create situations which make it impossible to foresee the outcome. In no way must the final result be given in advance. A consequence of this is that the children give one another different rules. In practice this means that the most skilful give themselves handicaps. In this way they arrange "equal" matches where participants with unequal physical abilities will still do their very best. The more even a fight or race is, the more exciting. Often the rules will be adjusted in the course of the game, only to give more balanced and equal conditions. In this respect competition in real play differs from that in sports, as competing sports events have fixed rules and ensure equality by division into classes.

Competing and the developing of rules in real play is an inherited process which strengthens friendships and results in new ones. Everybody finds their place in the social hierarchy. Taking inequalities into consideration is an obvious part of real play. From a social point of view, consensus about the rules implies listening to and heeding other people's opinions. This is how play stimulates loyalty!

## **A renaissance for children's own culture!**

In spring 1992 Norway got its very first White Paper on athletics. (White Paper no 41, 1991–92, *On Athletics*.) In this paper REAL PLAY – and thereby children's own movement culture – has found its place on the political agenda. In clear (explicit) words the basic values of real play are presented together with the values of sports and athletics. The presentation describes the natural development in children from *nature* to *culture*, a development from child culture to adult culture as displayed below.

### **Two movement cultures - similarities and differences**

**Children's** movement culture is *spontaneous*: "self directed"

#### **Intrinsic, genuine motivation:**

Innate drive for experience by children's own command. Occurs in collaboration with others through basic movements

The spontaneous culture: *horizontal* passing on – from child to child like an underground stream

In the spontaneous culture the *rules are made by the children* themselves

When children end a sequence of playing they often ask, "What should we do now?"

**Grown-up's** movement culture is *organised*: "directed by others"

#### **Extrinsic, artificial motivation:**

A wish for qualification, ranking, prizes, good marks, or to satisfy grown-ups' expectations

Organised culture: *vertical* passing on – from someone who knows to someone who is supposed to learn, from someone who guides to someone who is being guided

In the organised culture the *rules are made on beforehand*

Competitions in sports ends with a *prize-giving ceremony*

*Excitement, the motive power in sports and play, is a systematic uncertainty about the outcome. The exciting unpredictability is reached through the best possible equality.*

**In play** equality in competing is achieved when the children eliminate differences in performance agreeing on rules where they use handicaps

*Big differences in achievement are balanced to equality through rules*

In the spontaneous culture children decide

- What** to play
- Where** to play
- How** to play
- Who** to play with

In the spontaneous culture the grown-ups influence the activities by “directing the environment” (preparing situations/animating)

*Real play* is the name of children’s own cultural pattern of motor display, the spontaneous culture

**“Self-directed culture”**

**In sports competitions** equality is achieved through classification into classes and divisions based on age and level of achievement

*Small differences in achievement result in big differences in the form of prizes*

In the organised culture the grown-ups take the initiative

- decide on the contents
- organise the activity
- decide where to stay
- guide the activity

In the organised culture the grown-ups influence the activities by “directing the behaviour” (instruct)

*Athletics, dance and outdoor life* are the names of the grown-ups’ cultural pattern of motor display, the organised culture

**“Directed by others culture”**

To emphasise the importance of “arenas of transfer” for the children’s own culture, the arenas for spontaneity, the Ministry of Culture will now give priority to neighbourhood areas.

In order to underline the importance of this, the Department now gives a financial support by 50 per cent of the total construction cost. This surprisingly high priority for neighbourhood arenas is a new and great challenge for all who are working with real play and spontaneous sports in school and for leisure. The politicians have challenged sports people to develop know-how on arenas for real play and spontaneity sports.

A new White Paper (No 14, 1999–2000) *Alteration in Sports* emphasizes the Government’s decision to go in for neighbourhood arenas. This is still a prioritized area. It is stated especially that “the Government wishes to focus on the development of neighbourhood arenas in connection with the outdoor areas of schools”. This statement is a result of my efforts, as I have worked for the idea that money must be channelled to where the children are. More and more of children’s leisure time is linked to institutions. That is why we must make sure that school is like an “oasis” in the local areas.

During the 40 years of my engagement in play and the arranging of real play playgrounds, I have developed a deep respect for what is happening in children’s own movement culture. Therefore, the first paragraph in a declaration of children’s rights should be their obvious right to genuine real play.