# Conflicts and togetherness in child daycare centres

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*When children play together, they experience the same social issues as adults. During play they learn the social skills and rules that form the basis of our society, for example, learning to share, caring for each other and showing respect for the uniqueness of every human being. Carers in childcare centres can help young children develop their democratic values and skills. This article focuses firstly on studies of peer relations and how young children learn and construct rules in peer conflicts. Secondly, it explores 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 years 3 months) walks around. He sees a beautiful lady's bag on the table. He doesn't know that it belongs to Megan (2 years 9 months), who has carried it with her all day and just left it there for a moment. Samuel takes the bag. Megan has a bit of a fright, 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 on his hand. This makes Samuel even more determined. Then Megan gives him a smack with the receiver on his head. That hurts! Samuel clutches his head and, screaming loudly, he runs to the teacher. Megan follows him with her eyes, conscious of her guilt.

These kinds of conflicts occur often between children, although physical harm is more the exception than the rule. In this example Megan knows that she has done something wrong. Her posture, the way she holds her head, the way she looks, all show that she is conscious of guilt. Megan knows that hitting is not the way to solve problems and that there is a clear moral rule not to hit. Early in their life most children get acquainted with these kinds of social rules: rules of ownership and sharing, power, fairness, generosity, etc. So how do children learn these rules from such an early age?

The social and moral development of young children in group settings in daycare centres is a relatively new field of research and there is an abundance of rich descriptive work about this emergent democratic life. It has become clear that studying the communication between the teacher and the individual child (for a long time the dominant way to do research in child care centres)

falls short of fully understanding the complex interactions between teachers and young children in group settings (Ahnert et al., in press). Studies of interactions between 0–4-year-old children and their teachers often start from a socio-constructivist theoretical approach. In this approach the focus is the development of the child in its socio-cultural context. These studies are inspired by Piaget (1967), viewing the child as an active learner who discovers the world by which it plays an important role in the construction of its own development, and by Vygotsky (1978) regarding development from the perspective of co-construction of shared meanings and appropriation of cultural tools in the social context (see also Brennan 2005; Singer and de Haan 2006). Teaching is thus conceptualised as a collaborative process of teacher and children. The teacher looks for a balance between taking the lead and giving children the lead.

## Shared meanings and togetherness

Young children show an interest in each other from an early age. From around 2 months of age they will touch one another, make noises to draw another child's attention, stare and smile at each other (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). Simple series of interactions can be observed from the age of 8 or 9 months old and, from 18 months old, they will imitate each other (Camaioni et al 1991; Rayna and Baudelot 1999).

When children begin to talk, their non-verbal interaction can be alternated with verbal chants, and these may last for a long time. Dunn (1988) observed a child of 24 months playing a 40-minute duration "loola loola loola" chanting–laughing–prancing game with an older child. Singer and de Haan (2006) noted two 3-year-old girls mixing their Moroccan mother tongue with the Dutch language of the daycare centre in a "pattoyaaaaaaaa, pattoypattoypattoya" long, rhythmic verse. The function of this kind of imitation is "to establish co-presence, joint attention, and shared or agreed-upon knowledge that cemented the dyad" (Katz 2004), and it may be seen as an early step towards verbal communication (de Haan and Singer 2001).

According to Van Emde et al (1991) and Howes and James (2002), early psychological patterns of understanding are based on procedural

knowledge, that is knowledge of how things are done together. Especially important are the infant's most emotionally engaging experiences with caregivers, and later on also with age mates. When the child cries, he or she expects specific soothing rituals that the caregiver and child have developed; when the child laughs he or she expects to elicit a shared game. Ritualised interactions, such as playing 'peekaboo', help the infant learn the rules of reciprocity or give and take. Shared procedural knowledge is crucial for the development of a 'moral self'. A sense of reciprocity is present in all moral systems, i.e., '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, i.e., that she or he can take the lead to obtain a goal. In short, co-constructed procedural knowledge has multiple functions: making contact, developing a mutual understanding and a sense of togetherness and belonging, developing a sense of control and agency, and a establishing a moral sense of reciprocity. It is the basis of learning the moral rules of a culture.

## Co-constructing social and moral rules in peer relations

The conflict between Samuel and Megan (see introduction) shows that young children are acquainted with moral rules. There is a firm consensus that conflicts help children to learn the moral rules of a culture (Piaget 1967; Vygotsky 1978; Killen and Nucci 1995). In daycare, children are continually making social choices when they take an object from another child, permit another child to play with them and their friends or do things that another child doesn't like. These are all learning moments, through which the child becomes a social and moral person.

Children are faced with conflicting wants and interests. On the one hand, conflicts make them aware of the need to belong and have good relationships. They also motivate young children to reconcile after a conflict with their caregivers or peers (Verbeek et al 2000). 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.
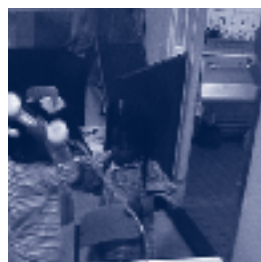


Megan smacking Simon. Stills from a video taken at the daycare centre.
Video stills from Frank Hamers for Bureau Mutant, The Netherlands.

What rules do children learn through their conflicts in daycare? The most frequent types of conflicts in daycare are disputes over ownership or possession of objects, action encounters or physically irritating behaviour, entry disputes or conflicts about joining into the play of other children, and arguments about ideas (Shantz 1987; Singer and De Haan 2006). Object and action conflicts are the most frequent in 2- and 3-year olds (Shantz 1987) but, as the children begin to play at a higher cooperative level, disputes about ideas become more frequent.

When children compete for an object, they learn to cope with the contrary rules of 'share your belongings' and 'respect another's possessions'. They also learn social skills like not snatching, taking turns and playing together. In a quarter of all conflicts, 2- and 3-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 taking turns (Singer and De Haan 2006).

In physical encounters, children learn the basic moral rule of 'don't hurt one another' and they have to discover the boundaries between respect for 'another's physical domain' and 'valuing physical intimacy'. The social skills of not intruding and touching only when the other child agrees are very difficult for young children to abide by. Pim (3 years 8 months), for instance, has trouble understanding why the other children don't like to join in his rough-and-tumble play. Because of his need for physical contact and his impulsivity, he repeatedly falls into minor conflicts and his advances are frequently rejected.

In entry or territorial conflicts, the opposing rules of 'respect another's social domain' and 'be generous and share with newcomers' are central. If a child wants to play with another child, he/she has to compromise and adapt his/her style of play (Corsaro 1979; Garvey 1984). Garvey (1984) suggests 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 where children play a similar game physically close to another is a useful strategy and allows a child to watch and figure out what the others are doing.

Arguments about opposing ideas help children to learn the rule '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 play together, children have to coordinate their pretend acts and extend each other's contributions into a narrative. As each child takes its turn, there is potential for agreement 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 (1987), play is 'memory in action' and enables children to elaborate on their representation of social situations. In this way they get acquainted with social structures by enacting the roles and rules in their play. In addition, acting according to how they should behave in a certain situation can prevent the child from reacting too impulsively in play situations and in later life.

## The teachers' role

The quality of peer interactions depends to a large extent on the teacher's group management and supportive behaviour. Three levels of teacher–peer relationships can be distinguished: a) the teacher and the individual child in a group setting, b) the teacher and group together, and c) teacher intervention in peer conflict.

**The teacher and individual child.** Supportive, responsive interactions with teachers are very beneficial for the child (Kontos 1999; 1996). Most early childhood experts agree that the individual child–teacher relationship is vital for establishing the emotional security of the child in group settings (Howes and Ritchie 2002). Therefore most daycare centres stress the importance of individual care.

A good child–teacher relationship is especially important when the child has to be involved in group activities. Brennan (2005) analyses how, in case of non-negotiable rules, the teachers created an affective mutual understanding between themselves and the child. During group activities, these teachers aimed to make personal contact by working alongside the children, touching them, smiling and using encouraging language. According to Brennan, the teachers created a 'culture of tenderness', communicating that they cared for all the children.

**The teacher and group affiliation.** 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 the group-related sensitivity of the teachers is a better predictor of children's attachment security 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 rituals are also important in the creation of group affiliation because they motivate children 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). Appropriate rituals include those to celebrate a birthday, console a hurt child, or keep in touch with a sick playmate or teacher.

**Teacher intervention in peer conflicts.** Young children playing in group settings have a mean of 5–8 conflicts per hour (Shantz 1987). In general these conflicts are short, lasting 18 seconds on average (Singer and de Haan 2006). Between a quarter and a third of all conflicts are solved with the teacher's help (Singer and de Haan 2006; Singer and Hännikäinen 2002). In 80% of cases, children will continue playing together after the conflict, whether there is a teacher intervention or not (Singer and de Haan 2006). Probably, the desire to continue with their joint play is stronger then the urge to win (De Waal 2000).

In general, then, young children do not need their teacher to resolve their conflicts. So should teachers refrain from intervening in conflicts? Of course, teachers have to intervene immediately in cases where children are bullying each other. Singer and de Haan (2006) found that teachers do intervene in 74% of the serious conflicts in which children cry or hurt each other. With smaller 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 and 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 follows his/her own agenda solely to restore order. In this type of intervention, the teacher may become part of the conflict (Sims et al 1996). Teachers may find it difficult to decide what solution is most acceptable. In most cases, they will not know the full history of the situation and a mediating role will be the most promising approach. Teachers intervene in this way in about 45% of children's conflicts (Singer and Hännikäinen, 2002; Singer and de Haan, 2006). Although teachers may be very clear about rules and appropriate behaviour, the basic attitude in mediating should be sensitivity to the logic of all children involved in the conflict.

Buzzelli (1995), Göncü and Cannella (1996) and Singer and de Haan (2006) found daycare teachers adopted a number of mediating strategies. These can be grouped into three R's: Recognise, Resolve and Reconcile. The first involves recognizing the logic in the conflict by soothing the children, asking questions and listening to their point of view. In this way, the teacher shows that all the children are important.

The second step involves using a range of strategies to resolve the problem. The teacher asks for or suggests what children may do: "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"; suggests a verbal approach: "Ask if you can sit on the seesaw"; and uses humour to relax everyone. These strategies help the teacher remind the children of a simple set of shared moral rules:
- reciprocity: taking turns;
- 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.

The final step is to introduce strategies to help the children reconcile and restore the relationship. The teacher asks for a plan: "How can we make Rodni happy again?"; gives advice: "Look, you can do it together"; compliments the children: "That's nice. You may say thank you when Branco gives it to you"; or refers togetherness: "It is so nice when all the children take part".

These strategies provide a structure to help the children behave in a positive way. When children are upset, they may need a moment to stand still, think, and get out of a spiral of growing anger. 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 behaviour (De Haan and Singer 2003).

**Conclusions**

Recent research into peer interaction reveals that young children are more able social beings than was previously thought. Their curiosity in others and their desire to communicate gives them a strong force for achieving basic social capabilities. Young children appear to be able to create a sense of togetherness, and they do this in their own way through actions and words.

Although the family context is a rich resource for learning social and moral rules, daycare centres are becoming an increasingly common environment for young children. Here, they become real little citizens in their interaction with teachers and peers. Their day-to-day conflicts teach them about ownership, inclusion and exclusion processes, respect for physical and psychological territories and the ideational world of others. In short, daycare centres are the first places where many children learn about democracy.

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