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Child Development Theory and Planning for Neighbourhood Play

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Playing is defined here as imitation whereby children become acquainted with the world of adults. In this sense playing is an essential component of development. According to this definition, easy access to the world of adults is a prerequisite if play is to fulfill its role for development. In large cities the conditions of urban life make this access to the immediate surroundings of children's homes difficult. Conditions for an urban environment with a human dimension are outlined. In particular the place and function of a playground in a neighbourhood are explored. Specifically, to fulfill its role, a playground should not be "an island" isolated from the rest of neighbourhood, but one of the places that children have access to in the neighbourhood.

INTRODUCTION

Children are a major group of inhabitants in urban settings. Yet when there is concern for this user group it is mostly in terms of guaranteeing children specially isolated playgrounds. Cities are viewed as dangerous and potentially polluted environments that children should avoid. However, by endorsing this view planners and parents are cutting children off not only from danger and pollution but also from life, in particular the everyday life of adults that children enjoy preparing themselves for by playing. I will develop an argument in favour of children having their place among other user groups, but not isolated from them, in the urban setting. This view has strong advocates among authors concerned about children in urban settings. Jacobs (1961), in her classic book insisted on children learning the fundamentals of social urban life by being able to live and play in the streets. Hart (1986) argues that the demise of street playing entails an "erosion of autonomous child culture". Hart stresses that the freedom to move and act, and so to face the unpredictable events taking place in the world, is the basis of adventure—an essential component of children's development. Urban planning might contribute in guaranteeing the material conditions for such an environment. My conviction grows from extensive participant observer research in urban neighbourhoods where children have this possibility (Noschis, 1984). Admittedly, this paper is suggestive and not demonstrative.

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PLAYING AS IMITATION

The necessary outcome of childhood is adulthood and play is in this respect an essential intermediary. Through play, the child not only confronts her peers, but also, and equally important, adults. For the child, playing has the important function of bringing her closer to the world of adults. Among child psychologists, Henri Wallon (1970, see also Voyat & Birns 1972/73) has particularly emphasized that the development of children, and thus their becoming adults, goes notably along with their capacity for imitation. The child learns to imitate early in her life and the definition of play that I shall offer here stresses its importance: when the child plays, she appropriates for herself events that she has witnessed, or stories she has heard, by imitating them. Thus I view play as closely connected with imitation and as crucial for development. Imitation presupposes, with a progression of the distance between imitated and imitator, a capacity to represent events mentally. In the course of the child's development, this capacity will gradually become more sophisticated. Therefore, for the young child exercising imitation is also important for improving her capacity to represent events (Piaget, 1951). At first, imitated events are even the most banal ones that the child meets in her daily

activities. Later, with the growth of the child, the events chosen for imitation become increasingly extraordinary matters, those still difficult to make sense of. Such events are those that have surprised and impressed the child, and, given the opportunity, she will tell and act these out on a first encounter with her friends. This lets her formulate reflections on what she has seen or heard. I am referring here particularly to children who are coming of school age, whose discovery of the world goes increasingly beyond the most ordinary daily events and those overseen by adults accompanying the child: a celebration in the street, a dog run over by a car, the grocery lady at the store who gets furious, etc.—as many events as can be turned into play, prolonged, and transformed, perhaps with the help of little dolls, packing boxes and comments added by the children.

Children play in this way after being exposed to new events because the necessary condition for their development is to render less mysterious things which seem utterly strange at first (or which go completely beyond them). To gain access to the world of adults, the child must feel that events can be replayed on a scale where she can take her own measure of their meaning, where she can tell herself rules of the street celebration, how the dog gets run over and why the grocery lady at the store gets red in the face. It does not matter whether the playing is plausible according to adult logic, so long as it bears some relation to what the child has observed and helps her in making sense of what she has seen. The important thing is that the child feels that she too can grasp the world. Despite the fact that events escape her, it is by giving them a subjective significance that the child gets the feeling that she will be able to manage in the world. In the course of development this subjective significance will then increasingly become a shared interpretation of events, a common understanding of observed events.

ROLE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

It is on the basis of such considerations that I would characterize the role of the environment for the

Figure 1. "For the young child imitation is also important for improving her capacity to represent events." (Reprinted with permission from *Your Pre-Schooler*, by Richard Rubin and John Fisher, Johnson and Johnson, 1982).

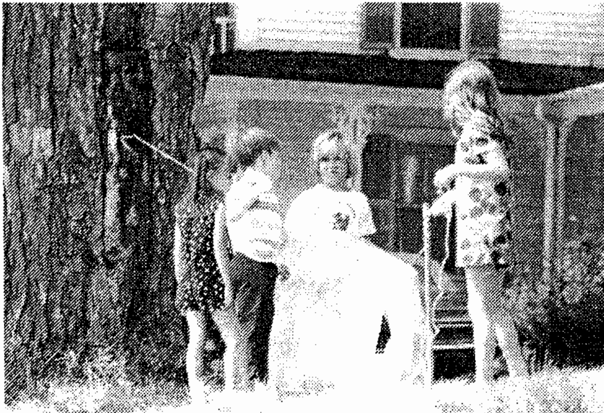

Figure 2. Children building a tent to play "house". "To gain access to the world of adults, the child must feel that events can be replayed on a scale where she can take her own measure of their meaning." (Photo: Hart).

development of the child. The environment is precisely the source of such stories and events, an occasion to observe, witness and take part in what is happening. In the following I will refer to the urban environment although the views I express might equally apply to rural environments. In rural environments natural events—related to the changing seasons and to animal life—would be in the foreground, whereas artifacts and social events predominate in an urban environment. In any case these events are linked to everyday occurrences, but they are particularly relevant for the developing child in that they reveal the life of an adult engaged in society. Therefore, if the child, in moving around in his surroundings, has the chance to brush up against craftsmen, shopkeepers, clerks, public transportation personnel and to enter places such as workplaces, cafés, shops, bus stops and whatever else constitutes his adult life-to-be, he also has the opportunity to make them his own and to draw closer to their mysteries. These can all be played. Among more socially privileged families one often hears negative opinions about this mixture of adults and children,that one should let children enjoy their childhood and not become involved too early with adult life. To the extent that this means a seclusion of children from the everyday world of adults, I advocate a different view.

Entry into the world of grown-ups succeeds if one has been able, bit by bit, to domesticate the mysteries associated with adult urban life by confronting them and also by appropriating them through play. Furthermore, I would venture to say that this may also induce the growing child to develop a relation of concern with the urban environment. At any rate, domesticating the mysteries of adult urban life is what the child will spontaneously attempt to do. The school-aged child, therefore, profits from an accessible environment in which he can move around and meet with the everyday lives of adults. At first the child is closely dependent on his caretakers and learns in fact to explore the environment with them. Progressively he will negotiate his relationship with these adults by a certain use of the environment. When a parent sends his child on an errand, the child might choose a path of his own to go to the shop and not use the streets that he has learned to use with his parent(s). In this case the environment is instrumental for affirming the growing independence of the child, of his acting like an adult, that is "being by himself." In this respect one might say that the errand becomes an opportunity for playing at "being an adult" by imitating the "free adult" and in fact counteracting what the adult has taught the child. Still, this is part of the growth of children in an urban environment that positively attracts children's explorations. Events that the child witnesses on his way might stimulate further questions and activities on his part.

This mobility is hardly safe in larger cities which pose numerous dangers for children in particular as most encounters are anonymous (See Hillman and Adams, in this volume). Parr (1967) noted that with the increase of mobility for adults in cities, children's mobility has decreased. The new locomotion means of adults, private cars in particular, have confined children into special "non-dangerous" areas. In order for children to move around safely, ideally a shared concern and lookout (Rosenberg, 1980) should be exercised by inhabitants. This implies that the environment is restricted to the child's neighbourhood and that it be inhabited by a majority of permanent residents. Thus people get to know each other in the sense that most people are able to distinguish a person "familiar" to the neighbourhood from a "stranger." This would be a guarantee for the child's autonomous apprenticeship of his environment. Adults would have an eye on children as they move around. Parents would know that if something happened to their children there would be someone to help and that they would immediately be notified. The dimensions of large cities—where neighbourhoods hardly have sufficient autonomy to make them well delimited urban entities—as well as car traffic—that still has priority in most big cities—are major obstacles today for maintaining a scale acceptable for free movement of children in urban settings (Noschis, 1992).

The child senses an increasing need with age to test his autonomy of movement with relation to his home. In a neighbourhood where the child "is known" the risks inherent in taking such steps are not of the sort that place him in great physical danger. In such circumstances it is also to be expected that neighbours and other residents be able to draw attention to excessive behaviour or to the risks children are running. The tone of such exchanges between neighbours about their children will not always be friendly, but if there is mutual concern, this tone will not be overly rude, because the person who is complaining knows that his neighbours have their eyes on him.

This theme of mutual lookout and concern is thus closely related to the scale of the environment where the child is free to move. This subject has been hotly debated by urbanists and sociologists since the beginning of this century in discussions about the ideal size of the neighbourhood (e.g., Perry, 1929; Park, 1915). As already mentioned, neighbourhoods surpassing a certain size, will no longer permit shared concern and attention for children's safety. Now, this might even be the case in neighbourhoods with well defined limits. If the planning of such urban areas has not taken public spaces and other places favouring encounters into consideration, then it will be difficult for any kind of shared social life to develop.

This is certainly the case where chances for encounter are physically non-existent because of planning characteristics, frequent moving of families due to unsatisfactory working or dwelling conditions or insufficient time to get acquainted due to the working hours, commuting distances, etc. Therefore satisfactory living conditions are a prerequisite for an urban environment favourable to children's development. From a spatial planning perspective, such conditions comprise an accessible courtyard among blocks of flats, a primary school within walking distance, a nearby playground or green area, which is not isolated from the rest of the neighbourhood, places and occasions for social gathering as well as some workshops or stores where children can become acquainted with the world of work and business. Commercial and working activities on the ground level obviously improve the possibilities for mutual lookout. While the human dimension is dependent on planning characteristics of the site, even more essential to it are

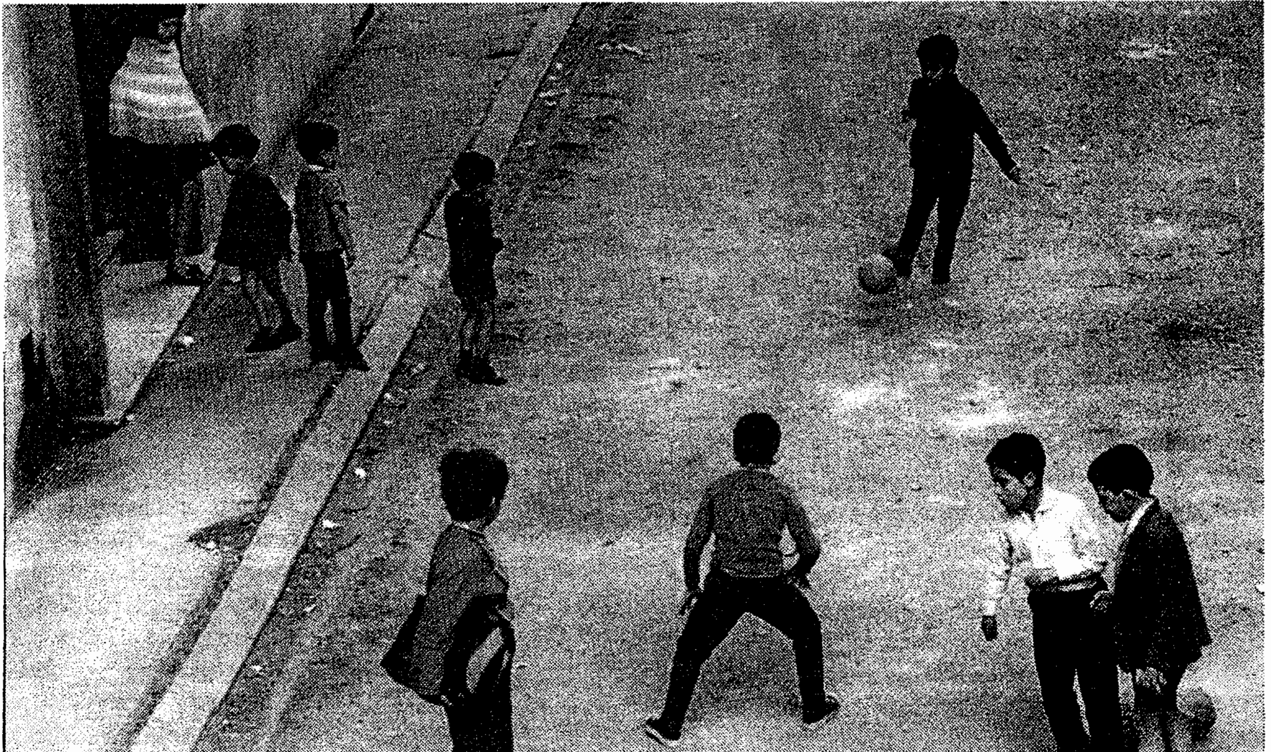

Figure 3. "When the child goes off to school his friends, in general, become his special partners in discovering and learning about the environment near to where he lives." These boys playing soccer on the streets of Algiers have just returned from school. (Photo: UNICEF/Bernard Wolff).

acceptable living and working conditions that allow families to perceive a certain stability in their lives with their children. We must create an increased concern for these matters among politicians and planners. In several countries, most notably in Scandinavia, high-rise building is questioned and even abandoned in the case of housing developments for families, and planning interventions in the urban context try to recreate a safer and more neighbourhood-like environment. Examples of such interventions include strongly-regulated and slowed-down car traffic in several European cities (Ader & Jouve, 1991).

In sum, such interventions aim at creating the conditions which allow the child to gradually extend the boundaries of awareness of his immediate environment, and confidence in it. The environment in this case is to be understood as one that is part of our urban world rather than some "shelter from threats, a children's paradise." To my way of thinking, it is precisely these conditions that will nourish the feeling, crucial for today's child of being able to become an actor in his environment. Children can obviously also imitate situations or events that they have only heard about or seen on television, but I believe that this neither develops similar concern for one's own surroundings nor consciousness for becoming actively involved. Narrated stories and television shows take place "in far away places" although their content might even be of major interest to the child. Playing with reference to such events might also be important for the development of the child, but it does not relate to his growing confidence in his immediate surroundings. Play as it has been defined here—imitating events that the child has witnessed—is viewed as important for the development of children into inhabitants who are concerned with their social and physical environment.

PLAYING WITH FRIENDS

Let us add that this gradual appropriation or assimilation of the adult world by children in their neighbourhood takes place collectively, among friends. This includes the feeling, for the child, of bringing the adult world closer but at the same time of affirming her own specific nature, her own way of understanding things. Besides, when the child goes off to school, her friends, in general, become her special partners in discovering and learning about the environment near to where she lives. Therefore, what the child absorbs from her environment, through her parents, is supplemented by what happens in the company of her peers. These two apprenticeships follow their own rhythms and paths, each one affording its own occasions and great moments.

Therefore, the child constructs and works out her immediate environment by setting up a relation between these two individual networks of apprenticeship, both separating and joining them. If we were to describe these two networks as collections of knots and strings, they would overlap only in part, forming two distinct nets. "The neighbour-friends of my parents," "the grocery lady to whom my mother sends me on errands"—these are knots where the paths between them and the child's home would be examples of strings or threads. "The grumbling maintenance man" (because children cross the parking lot which is off-limits to them), and "the haunted house" (where one plays at being ghosts against the parents' will), are knots in the children's peer group network, and the strings between these knots are made up of secret paths through the fences. The first network is official and secure, but at the same time expresses the child's dependence on her relations with "grown-ups," while the other is unofficial, even a little frightening, but is linked to independence and autonomy.

In this manner the apprenticeship of neighbourhood space reflects the gradual construction of the child's identity, achieved also between the two polarities of dependence versus autonomy, and closeness versus distance. Play and, for our discussion, imitation are related to this bipolarity with the particular aim of increasingly affirming the child against the adults she is most dependent on. In other words she will imitate adults but on her own terms in order to affirm her difference with respect to her own parents or caretakers.

PLAYGROUND

The neighbourhood playground is a place specially devoted to children. Historically—early this century—playgrounds were a way of isolating children from the dangerous city, but also the city from dangerous children (Goodman, 1979). If we look at playgrounds today, the child sometimes plays in ways foreseen by existing set-ups, and sometimes in ways that transcend the intentions of the set-ups. One plays with sand in a sandbox, one balances on a see-saw, etc. That is one reason for the existence of playgrounds. They are places in which the equip-

ment and layout tell children: "Here is where you do this, where this will be your theme." Thus, the child will do things with others and will have the chance to encounter other children. This meeting with his peers is important for building the feeling of belonging to a group, a team, of sharing in a destiny, of collective feeling. Yet, alone or together with his friends the child can also use a see-saw for climbing or sitting and discussing, a sand-box for jumping or sliding; that is, for purposes not originally foreseen for the setups. The playground becomes, then, the juncture at which the conflicts between the two networks of apprenticeship—the official and the unofficial—make their appearance, but also the point at which they can be led to meet each other, where the child can work out a synthesis. In other words there is an expected behaviour and then another series of gestures and movements that will grow from the interaction between children, from what they have seen or learned elsewhere and that they want to experiment with or affirm among the setups of the playground. By imitating each other and adults they also construct their own approach to the adult world. Adventure playgrounds, called "Jardins Robinson" (Robinson Gardens) in French, explicitly offer children the freedom to build their own world with construction material and other supplies at their disposal. Yet, this definition seems to stress that the playground is an island—like for Robinson Crusoe—and that is contrary to what I am advocating here. In order to be an intersection between the world of children and adults, the playground should not isolate children from the neighbourhood, but only be a privileged place for playing and imitating activities observed elsewhere in the neighbourhood.

In a general sort of way, space supports activity. In the same way as the playground does it for children, other spatial settings imply a collection of behaviours, postures and gestures for other users. I myself have tried, with respect to neighbourhoods, to define and to describe such locations, which I have called "high points" (Noschis, 1984). These are or can be the squares, the bars or cafés, the stores, apartment house entries, schoolhouse doors, bus stops, etc. These are generally places where we only spend occasional moments, but which are nevertheless important for the construction and affirmation of our identity. Identity affirms itself in confrontation with others, sometimes by way of experiencing closeness and complicity or membership, sometimes distance, differentiation or even strangerhood. These confrontations take place when there is occasion to observe, compare and express o self, all the while doing something with others (h ing a drink, waiting to be served, waiting for a b sitting or strolling). These inner confrontations between myself and my perception of the othe are components in the construction and affirmati of our identity. Thus spatially delimited high poi have in common the power to relate each person a story linked to the folkways of the neighbourho or, often and more generally, to the customs o culture. Its spatial characteristics are thus ve important although users may only be there f short periods or instants at a time. However tl story of a place and the way it is used over tin become a "set of instructions" for such places: wh ever uses or acquires it knows the appropriate ge tures, attitudes and behaviours (as the "behavi setting" studies have amply illustrated, e.g., Bark 1978; Wicker, 1986). Everyone can write his ow "variation on the theme," but the theme is give And that is important because in such a place it giv equal assurance, or face, to everyone. It is only whe the feeling of mastering a place reaches a certai threshold that it lends support to identity in th sense I have just mentioned. If this threshold is n reached, if the person has no clue to the "signs" the place, he will be overrun by impression Finding no signposts, he will not be able to buil either memory or identity.

By living in a neighbourhood and exploring its di ferent high points the child has the chance to acqui what the world shows him. He can then play thes events be it at home, in front of his house or on playground, the aim being in all circumstances make his own with his friends what he must assin ilate. Sometimes it is "doing what the gang does affirming the difference with the adult world, an sometimes "building one's identity just as grow ups do it." Seen in this way, the playground is itself a high point for the child, on the condition, course, that it furnishes a "set of instructions" an lets these instructions be carried out in practice. this manner the playground might be viewed lik other high points in the neighbourhood. When th child is at ease, he "knows what he should be doin here", because he sees or has already seen other chi dren doing it, or because the configuration of th place itself calls to mind other places in which " knows what to do," and then he too mingles wit his peers and confronts them. At this point he ca then also decide to go beyond the intended use the place.

Yet, as we know, the playground does not always work. It "functions," I would argue, if it is a high point in the sense I have described which presupposes that it is one of the places accessible to the child in the neighbourhood. By having access to his whole neighbourhood the child can experience a variety of adult activities as part of everyday living. In this manner these events can easily become a part of his playing and their "domestication" is spontaneously part of his struggle to become an adult. The playground is thus a place where the child might play out events that he has witnessed in the neighbourhood—alone or with his friends—and at the same time the playground confronts the child with the same apprenticeship and emotional experience of a high point that adults face elsewhere (square, café, shop-front, etc.).

CONCLUSION

I shall try to summarize my argument and state why I think it is necessary for the child to have access to her whole neighbourhood. I have suggested that play has two functions: (a) bringing the child closer to the adult world which she will one day have to enter anyhow and (b) helping the child to construct her own identity as opposed to that of her parents or caretakers. I believe that playgrounds actually work only if they fulfill these two functions: allowing children to do things with their peers and having the opportunity to witness and then imitate the activities of grown-ups. The playground is a place set aside by the adult for the child so that she may play—and also so that she will play certain kinds of games. Yet the child can just as well go beyond the prescribed games. When this is the case, going beyond the intended use of playground setups affirms her membership in a group of children with an autonomous identity separate from that of adults. For such a place to function as a high point, the child needs to feel that her play area corresponds to the café and the neighbourhood square as they are used by adults, so that what happens for her in her area of play parallels what goes on for adults at their own high points.

At this point, one could invert the parallel by saying that what happens at an adult high point is play, approximating what is practiced by children in spaces for play. All in all, by playing in this space, the child encounters other children socially, but at the same time advances in the direction of the adult world through confrontations linked to the encounter with others in a place that is rich in signs and possesses a history. Here again the playground is not a place set aside from others in the neighbourhood; on the contrary, it should be a place integrated into the neighbourhood so as to be able to fulfill its double function. It has its special characteristics, as do stores, squares, apartment house entries, etc. If it has the feature of being set aside for children, at the same time it is, insofar as it supports identity, a place in which encounters unfold which link children with adults. The accessibility of other high points in the neighbourhood is necessary for telling the child the events and stories she may use in his subsequent attempts at assimilation. Among these there is the general fact of encounter with others in a place which offers support for such encounters.

In conclusion, it seems to me difficult to isolate a discussion of playgrounds from the larger analysis of what the child does or might be able to do in her immediate environment. Henceforth, the opportune integration of the playground into the make-up of the neighbourhood seems to me essential.

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