

Thoughts on the Play of Young Children Imagination Surpasses Reality

by Helle Heckmann

Little Johanne, one year old, is standing, looking at a tree for about ten minutes. She raises her hand slowly. Out comes her forefinger. She touches the tree carefully – then a bit more courageously, then with her whole hand. She is caressing the tree. Karoline, also one year old, has been watching Johanne. She walks over and strokes the tree, still looking at Johanne. Together they laugh. They run away from the tree, and return to stroke it again and again and again.

Undisturbed, they spend an hour with this experience. This is what childhood is all about – an identification with the surroundings, to let the surroundings become part of oneself. The unchangeable, the safe, the ever existing. This, only living nature can give.

“Are you hungry?” The question is asked by Sarah, age three. We (twenty four children from one to six years) are out on our daily walk to the cemetery of Bispebjerg in Copenhagen. Autumn is rapidly approaching. The wind blows refreshingly. We are all dressed well, with lots of woolen clothes underneath the rain gear. Sarah is poking in some soil and mud. Skillfully, she picks up a lump and shapes it in her hand. She finds a leaf that fits exactly as a serving dish for the mud ball, a hint of pebbles and a feather complete the dish. “There you go,” she says seriously. “Would you like a drink with it?” “Yes, please,” is the answer. “Magnus, could you help me for a minute?” Magnus is busy putting leaves on a stick. “Does it have to be right now?” Sarah repeats, “Does it have to be right now?” and looks at me expectantly. “No, I can wait until I’ve finished eating,” I answer. The children carry on undisturbed with their doings.

The Wolf is Coming – Perhaps

“Helle, Helle, come and have a look.” Asbjorn, 5 1/2 years old, comes running, short of breath. “We’ve seen some tracks — I think they are from a wolf”. Immediately we run to look at the tracks. Several of the older children are on their knees studying the large tracks of some paw. They are eagerly chatting.

Knowledge is communicated among the children. In the end they are silent and turn to me. What do I have to say? I now pronounce a wolf-tale, which is no more than it claims to be, and which does not comment on the tracks on the ground at all. The children are listening, their eyes are totally clear, their ears pricked up, their mouths half open. Around us the wind is blowing, other children are climbing the trees or romping about, other adults are cutting branches in the woods, but we are far gone. When the story ends, we return to the present. I leave their circle, and the children continue their exploring of nature.

What makes it so important that Sarah and Magnus can sit in a puddle underneath a tree in which the wind is blowing, and in deep concentration cook dinner? What do they shape when they shape the mud balls?

To me, it is definitely themselves – their inner organs. Mud, soil, sand, water do not have definite shapes; they have the ability to constantly change. This is exactly what the three to four year olds need – an identification with the surrounding world. Getting dirty is a sign of health.

The four elements of earth, water, air, and fire are the basic elements that children are nourished by and grow from. No shaped and formed toys – be it wood or plastic – can compete with these materials. The seriousness with which the children play, the deep concentration speaks for itself, and shows how important this ‘playing’ is. Nobody needs to fight about anything. There is plenty of mud for everyone.

Asbjorn’s discovery shows the five to six year olds’ curiosity toward their surroundings. They wish to explore, to conquer the world, but at their own level. They discover something, investigate it, use it, leave it, transform it.

The process is the most important aspect. Imagination changes reality — reality is changed by imagination. Had I said, "It's a dog track, obviously not a wolf track," I would have spoiled the atmosphere, ruined their experience. I do not deny that it is a dog track, because I never lie. I enrich them by telling them about something that exists in the same world as they, in that of imagination, on the edge of reality. Of course, the children know that it is not a wolf track, but this is not what they asked about. They see whether I am able to grasp their world and be carried along, that I as an adult can nourish their imagination, that I can create a soul-mating with them by telling them a story, and not a long scientific explanation.

The Simple — the True

To meet the child where he or she is, on the child's conditions – that is the art of educational work. It is to understand that the child's play is most serious because through playing, the child grasps life. Through play, the child imitates the adult world. If the child does not have the possibility of imitating the basic functions of life through play, he or she will have no possibility of understanding life. If Sarah does not experience her mother cooking, one of the most important actions of life, she will have difficulty copying this situation later in life. She will have no inner images of how to approach it. If Sarah is not allowed to imitate this where she is – that is, in the puddle — she will not adapt a basic sense experience of her imitation. The important action of working the inner out through imitation of the adults, her mother or father (her very surroundings) – this is what play is all about.

Whatever is available serves as toys, the simple unprocessed materials that can do anything your imagination wishes them to. The stick that is a horse is transformed into a sword. The only limits are those of the imagination. The best toys are the tools used in the household or in crafts: the simple, the true, those that do not fool the senses. They are the materials that have the qualities that they promise the senses.

Most often, a child's toys are in total overabundance. They are purchased for their own sakes rather than the true need of the child.

The abundance of the child's roomful of toys must be every parent's or child's nightmare. "I've got nothing to play with," expresses the child, although the shelves are full to the brim. They become dust collectors, an un-useful mess. The gift that was given in love and has not drowned beneath the over-abundance is difficult to find. The child does not need the toys: the toy manufacturers need the child.