

# Qualitative Research on Children's Play

## A review of recent literature

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This article is a follow-up of an earlier overview of the research on children's play made by Schillemans & Van Gils (2001). On the one hand, it can be seen as an update, since it reviews play research published in the period 2001-2006. On the other hand its focus is narrowed down to the place play has in children's experience and giving sense to the world. The review by Schillemans & Van Gils showed that play was predominantly seen as an activity which helps children to become adult. Starting from the suggestion that playfulness can be seen as an essential characteristic of children, the need was felt to understand more on children's agency in play. While playing, children give sense to the world and to their place in this world.

Therefore this review mostly leaves aside research on the (positive or negative) effects or outcomes of play but goes more deeply into children's agency in play and thus into recent qualitative play research. It focuses on peer reviewed articles and some relevant conference papers written in English.

As an overview, this article reflects recent research trends and interests. The important place of gender will be noticed, for instance: it is an often researched theme that moreover has produced some of the best work on children's play and has much to say on more issues than gender alone.

This overview starts with looking at diverging *approaches to play*, including the instrumental approach that focuses on the benefits and negative outcomes of play. Research methods are briefly considered as well. A second chapter goes more deeply into the elusive *concept of play* itself. This concept is further refined and put in the context of children's social environments in chapter three, which goes on to elaborate on the *meaning of play* and its relation to the wider (adult) world. A fourth chapter relates play to *different categories of children*: how do children of different ages, genders and cultural backgrounds play differently, and how do children from different categories interrelate during play? In chapter five, the different *settings* children play in are reviewed, as well as how the wider social context influences where children play. A last chapter sums up some *lacunas* in recent qualitative play research.

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# 1. Approaches to play

## 1.1. Conflicting approaches

Is playing useful or inherently purposeless? Is it worth studying because play has important functions, for instance in children's development, or is it worth studying in and for itself? Do we study the effects of play – its benefits and possible harmful consequences – or do we focus on the meanings and experiences of play?

Explicit and (more often) implicit choices between such dichotomies pervade most play research. Underlying these choices are both different concepts of childhood and different concepts of play.

Ideas of childhood and children as a category have since long influenced concepts of play (Barnes & Kehily 2003: 5-6). A Romantic discourse on childhood stressed the freedom of play and the natural creativity of play and playfulness. A contrasting Puritan discourse linked playfulness to the animal origins of humankind; therefore children's play should be curtailed and/or channelled into creative forms of work or learning.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century more individual approaches emerged; educationists and developmental psychologist stressed the importance of play for the individual child. As an all-pervading site of learning during childhood, play came to be seen as an essential preparation to adulthood. Hence, as Susan Isaacs famously wrote in 1929, "play is the child's work".

Indeed, understood as rational, orderly, and rule-governed, play is a civilizing activity and its value lies in its socializing force. This implies, however, that play must be guided in the right, future-oriented directions – into those that are productive and socializing. Critical of this view, Sutton-Smith calls this a 'rhetoric of play-as-progress' and remarks that "the progress rhetoric appears to serve adult needs rather than the needs of children" (Sutton-Smith 1997: 42). Moreover, whereas "the adult public transcript is to make children progress, the adult private transcript is to deny their sexual and aggressive impulses" (Sutton-Smith 1997: 123).

In any case, play is worth studying in this 'instrumental approach', especially because it is useful in socialisation and development. Therefore, the focus is not so much on play activities themselves or on their meanings, but on the effects of such and such play. What are the benefits of play, and which types of playing have negative outcomes? And what if children can't play?

Because of its attention to the positive and negative outcomes of play, the instrumental approach is useful for play advocacy, and often tries to counter the negative impacts of social trends (violence, obesity, commercialising, reduction of recess time...).

Whereas the instrumental approach of play has been well established for quite some time, its more interpretive counterpart has only recently gained more weight. It builds on philosophical appraisals of play and its inherent creativity. If play is considered as inherently chaotic, its creativity and freedom from constraints are valued (Lindquist 2001: 15). Indeed, in this line of thought play is valued not for its 'usefulness' but for exactly the opposite: for its transcendence of instrumentality. Romanticist and critical Marxist writers meet in their appraisal of the creative functions of play. As Schiller famously wrote, "...er [der Mensch] ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt." Like art, play allows us to be more than instrumental or (in Marcuse's terms) one-dimensional beings.

Recent empirical studies on what play is or means to playing children themselves hardly refer to these ideas but rather react against concepts of play as ‘useful for the future’. They stress the importance of play in children’s everyday ‘here’ and ‘now’ instead. And indeed, Johan Huizinga, he himself a keen advocate of a play concept as civilising and rule-governed, already noted that conceptualisations of play that focus on its (external) functions (effects, outcomes) fall short of accounting for the intensity in which playing often is experienced. They tell us nothing, says Huizinga, about play’s irreducible quality of ‘fun’ (Huizinga 1951: 3).<sup>2</sup> Children themselves too, associate play with fun (Dockett 2002), which does not imply that play cannot be serious.

The contrast between concepts of play as ‘autotelic’ (its purpose lies in itself) and as ‘useful’ (it serves an external purpose, like development) is perhaps less outspoken or relevant in children’s experience of play, at least when children are allowed to choose themselves what to play. The possibly ‘useful’ character of play is sometimes actually felt by children, as in gaining skills or experimenting while playing; but it is only felt *in* the fun and ‘uselessness’ of playing itself.

In any case, contrasting views on children and on play remain important in the current research on children’s play.

## **1.2. Positive and negative outcomes of play**

Apart from being fun, play offers a context for developing motor, cognition, emotional and social skills (Hämäläinen 2004). A large body of research studies the positive or negative outcomes or effects of playing. This research is not covered in this review. However, a short overview of the benefits of play merits attention in any review, since it is crucial to play advocates and dominates almost all policy discussions on play. In addition, it will be pointed out that the methodology in these studies is focused on measuring effects, which is quite distinct from qualitative approaches and methodologies.

Rather than studying play in itself, ‘instrumental’ play research focuses on what playing brings about: the benefits or negative outcomes of play and certain types of play activities and behaviours. These effects are predominantly studied among individual playing children, but they have many potential implications of a wider scope, since these outcomes are often related to social issues and trends (the potential harmful effects of videogames or gun play, gender issues, bullying, reduction of recess time...). Therefore research on the effects of play is useful in play policy.

Most of this research comes from developmental psychology; some from educational research and from clinical psychology and paediatrics.

Especially the benefits of play are often conceptualised as the importance of play for children’s development. However, outcomes of play cannot be restricted to developmental issues only. If ‘emotional development’ through play means to “come to terms with difficult situations by going over them again and again or by taking different roles” in play (Children’s Play Council 2006), this is also true for adults, in which case we would not use the concept of ‘development’.

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<sup>2</sup> Huizinga here uses the Dutch word of *aardigheid*, which at once means ‘characteristic’ and ‘pleasurable in character’. Huizinga refers to the English word ‘fun’ as the best way to describe this quality of play.

### **1.2.1. Benefits of play**

Overall, the research focus has been on the positive effects of playing, which are widely acknowledged, although sometimes difficult to actually demonstrate. The value of play for the individual child and in socialisation and citizenship are well covered in a literature review by the New Policy Institute (2002), and the benefits of outdoor play are summed up in another important literature review by Lindstrand (2005). Below, only a short overview is given on how playing can be beneficial on several levels.

#### *Sensori-motor development and physical health*

Children learn how to use their bodies and to experience their senses through play. Physical play helps develop children's fine and gross motor skills, coordination, strength, agility. More generally and less connected to developmental issues, active playing, especially playing outdoors (Lindstrand 2005), serves as physical exercise and promotes children's health. In the context of growing concerns on children's obesity in Western societies, the physical fitness benefits of play have become important in promoting play and in orienting play policies.

#### *Emotional and psychological development*

Play helps children to understand and deal with their emotions. For instance, stressful situations are re-enacted in playful contexts, children take different roles in play to work through complex experiences...

#### *Development of sociality and the self*

In play, children interact with other children in their own terms. Play is one of children's central social arenas. For instance, recess time is a time of social interaction and co-operation; the games played then offer an important frame for this interaction, including interaction between unacquainted children. At the beginning of the school year games support new social contact: inviting someone to join a game means initiating a social relationship. Moreover, as Pellegrini and Blatchford (2002) note, "recess may be one of the few times during the school day when children can interact with peers on their own terms".

More specifically, different identities and social relationships can be tried out in role play, while especially games with rules give children a better understanding in 'right' and 'wrong' (by taking on the role of a 'generalized other').

#### *Cognitive development and learning*

During play, children informally learn. Playing often involves problem solving and trial and error, which are important ways to learn and to develop intellectually.

Play and science are related as both are a process of a growing understanding of the world. There is only a thin line between playing and experimenting, which offers possibilities for learning and teaching science through play (Stone 2004). Indeed, the link seems to be between playing and experimenting, rather than between playing and science as such. Both playing and experimenting explore possible worlds and try to control them.

Children learn much by observing and imitating others. This is enhanced greatly in mixed-age groups of children: children learn from older children, who help the younger children. Multi-age groups are a natural learning environment which is positive to younger and to older children, both on cognitive and social levels (Stone & Lozon 2004).

Not only young children benefit from the positive cognitive effects of play (Ervik 2004). In a school context, playing and learning (or literacy) reinforce each other. Reading and listening while learning provide an input for playing.

### **1.2.2. Methods and the measuring of effects**

In order to obtain valid results, research on the effects of play uses quantifiable methods to measure these effects. Bodily effects, for instance, can be measured by physical tests. Stratton & Leonard (2002) measured heart rates to compare the energy expenditure of 5 to 7 years old children playing during recess before and after a schoolground was painted with fluorescent markings. Painting these markings raised the energy expenditure, compared to children in school playgrounds where no such lines were painted. Similarly, Fjortoft (2004) used the European Test of Physical Fitness (EUROFIT), a motor fitness test, to compare children provided with a natural landscape to play in, with a control group playing in a more traditional playground. This study also made use of GPS to map play habitats. The children who played in the natural environment – in this case a small wood – had a significantly better motor fitness than their peers who played in the traditional playground. Playing in the natural environment especially enhanced skills of balance and co-ordination.

However, other possible effects of play are often difficult to measure, especially when they concern effects on social behaviour and well-being. For instance, social skills in playground games predict wider social competences, including children's adjustment to school (Pellegrini and Blatchford 2002), but it is unclear whether this is a causal relationship or not.

Studying the effects of playing overwhelmingly means: studying the effects of playing on the individual child, usually the younger child. However, effects on a more collective level are studied as well. For instance, Blatchford et al. (2003) showed that playing can have a positive influence on interethnic interaction. This is especially true for games which are initiated and organised by the children themselves (as is often the case with football).

The theme of group level effects of playing is brought up as well in the (qualitative) research on play as it is experienced by children. Gender is an important research subject in this context. How do play, certain types of play, certain settings of play... relate to gender segregation? Boys' and girls' different styles of playing seem to be related to different strategies and tactics of inclusion and exclusion (Ackerley 2003). Again, effects are often difficult to demonstrate here. It is unclear whether, for instance, growing gender segregation in play is the effect of different playing styles, or rather the cause of it.

## **1.3. Play research: approaches and methodologies**

### **1.3.1. Approaches**

In reviewing research on children's play in the field of folklore, Ackerley (2003: 11) notes a "trend away from the consideration of *what* children play, to the investigation of *why* and *how* these folklore traditions are kept alive". The comprehensive collections of children's games "have given way to greater consideration of the conditions under which such play occurs".

This is not only true for studies of 'child lore', but for research of children's play in general, and certainly when they have a qualitative approach. Recent research has started to give us a more detailed and more nuanced view of 'how' children play – the research on play and gender is a good illustration of this –, while research on children's own experiences and sense-giving complement the longer established instrumental perspective on 'why' children (should) play.

Parallel with this, more and more qualitative research takes up a more social perspective: groups of children, instead of individual children, are analysed, and studies try to understand group dynamics, such as the emergence of children's peer cultures in play. The research by ethnographers like Corsaro, Evaldsson and Goodwin reviewed below is a good example of this more social approach. At the same time, most play research observes or interviews individual children and their play activities, rather than their relations.

Most empirical studies on play are short-term and therefore do not allow for studying processes and for making comparisons over time. There are some notable exceptions though. Pellegrini et al. (2004) compared the frequency and types of games played by children during the course of a school year, and thus were able to show that especially among boys the games' complexity increased. For instance chase games gradually gave way to the more complex ball games.

Some ethnographic studies are conducted during more or less long consecutive periods and therefore are able to capture group processes which affect what and how children play. For instance, some studies illustrate how having or gaining game skills, profoundly affects gendered behaviours and interactions (Goodwin 2001; Evaldsson 2003). More in general, long term ethnographic research is able to show how a peer culture emerges through play (Evaldsson & Corsaro 1998; Aydt & Corsaro 2003; Evaldsson 2003).

### **1.3.2. Methodologies**

#### *Visual techniques*

There is a notable trend or even "an interdisciplinary turn towards the use of visual techniques in children's cultures and material contexts for learning and play" (Burke 2005: 28).

Especially photography has recently been widely adopted in research on children's play. With disposable or digital cameras, children document their play spaces, for instance by making a photo diary (Burke 2005). Afterwards the resulting photographs are discussed with the researcher. Children's photographs and the stories that are elicited by them prove to be a very fruitful qualitative research method. "This approach reveals the meaning, feelings and personal histories interwoven into children's places" (Burke 2005: 30).

Used in this way, photography serves a double goal, both as visual output and as a research tool.

As visual output, the photographs made by the children serve as research data in their own right. They can literally visualise children's perspectives and thus to give a glimpse of children's life-worlds and play spaces. For instance, they often show micro-elements in the (play) environment that might seem unimportant to – or are literally overlooked by – adults. This can be evident from the photographs themselves, as in a photograph merely featuring the texture of grass. Usually more detailed data will emerge more from the children's stories elicited by the photographs (see Burke 2005).

As a research tool, photography facilitates research with young and even very young children, from 3 years onward (Clark 2004; Kernan 2005). Moreover, alongside with other active methods, it is one way of engaging children in research (and planning) processes and thus to move from research *on* children to research *with* children (Clark 2004, 2005; Rasmussen; 2004; Burke 2005; Kernan 2005).

Another visual method is the use of drawings: children draw the environment they would like to play in and these drawings are discussed with them (Hyvönen & Juujärvi 2005). Rather than documenting *actual* play spaces, as in children's photographs, children's drawings can

be used in order to study the affordances in play spaces that are important from children's point of view.

### *Observational methods*

Observation – systematic or more informal, participatory or not – probably remains the most important methodology in research on children's play. If play is an activity, it can be observed.

An overwhelming majority of studies of children's play focuses on play in specific, delineated settings, such as public playgrounds, school playgrounds, child care centres, and commercial play spaces. These demarcated areas are very suitable for observational methods.

Depending on the research aims, observations can be systematic or not. In systematic observations, individual children (or their adult supervisors; see Thomson 2005) are followed for a short or a longer period, widely ranging from 10 (Riley & Jones 2005) or 20 seconds (Blatchford et al. 2003), to five minutes (Farver & Lee-Shin 2000) or even whole breaktime sessions (Thomson 2005). Researchers then systematically note down utterances and other fieldnotes, and more often tick pre-selected types of play, behaviour, interactions...

For mapping out play behaviours, "systematic observations are likely to provide the most reliable and detailed data, that will allow group and time comparisons" (Blatchford et al. 2003: 487).

Opposed to systematic observations are ethnographical methods of observation, used for studying the meaning and experience of playing. "By studying both the content and the context of children's interaction rather than merely counting the number of mixed- or same-sex groups in a classroom or some other such technique, it is possible to get a better feel for the complex and nuanced relationships children have in peer interactions and their own peer cultures" (Aydt & Corsaro 2003: 1312).

Ethnographic field observations are often combined with conversation analysis (e.g. Goodwin 2001; Evaldsson 2003) in order to capture the details of interactions during play. Video recordings are very helpful in this (Evaldsson 2003; Goodwin 2001, 2002a, 2002b). In his fieldnotes, Harker (2005) tries to convey the embodied, affective and intersubjective nature of play that his 'performance ethnography' aims to capture (rather than just concentrating on the visual or the verbal).

While making observations, the researcher can take on different roles, ranging between playing along and taking the role of an insider, and being hidden or otherwise uninvolved in the play setting (Darwisch et al. 2001)

In much qualitative research, the researcher is more or less involved, as a semi-participant observer (e.g. Kernan 2005; Moore 2002). The researcher then holds a special status as a non-authoritative and non-judgmental type of adult and essentially waits for the children to react to him/her rather than actively initiating (and directing) interactions. Corsaro calls this a "reactive" method or strategy (Corsaro 2005: 52; Evaldsson 2003). Children often rapidly grow accustomed to the presence of such an unobtrusive adult (Kernan 2005). As Thomson notes, "they began to take my residence in the playground for granted to such an extent that I was often used as a marker to run or hide behind. This lack of respect convinced me that I was having a minimal impact on their behaviour" (Thomson 2005: 68). This strategy works best with younger children and will, of course, not always offer access to conversations and forms of play which are confidential or secret in nature (Moore 2002).

Thomson (2005: 67-68) points out that observing children poses ethical problems, since even in overt observations of children one can hardly speak of 'informed consent'.

Participatory (and other) observation cannot only be used in children's everyday play spaces. Field trips can be made as well – a method more likely to be used within the area of children's geographies. Tapsell et al. (2001) visited London riversides with children, who were allowed to play there. The visits had a positive effect on children's perceptions of rivers as play areas. In a more participatory vein, Vanderstede (2005) used visits to public parks to assess, along with children, the play qualities of the parks.

### *Interviews and historical sources*

Individual interviews or focus groups are not often used in play research; they are carried out mostly with older children (Tucker & Matthews 2001), and retrospective interviews are held with adults (Arluke 2002; Duran & Zierkiewicz 2004). Obviously, verbal methods are often an integral part of research that primarily uses visual and observational methods.

Historical sources are used to compare what and how children played and play (Ackerley 2003 on gender; Ackerley 2002 on evolutions in children's rhymes; Rossie 2006), or how children used public space and play spaces (Wridt 2004).

## **2. What is play? Conceptualising play and playing**

### **2.1. Categories: forms and functions of play**

In order to make some distinctions in the broad reality of 'play', typologies or classifications of play have often been made. Play is categorised by its form (what children do), its content or its (developmental) function. Categorisations continue to be made, but more as an aside or an introduction to play than as an important goal in itself. Categorisations are often similar, but with some adaptations or somewhat differently phrased concepts.

Fjortuft (2004), borrowing from Piaget and Frost, identifies three types of play behaviour that constitute physical activity: *functional play* (gross motor activities and basic skills like running, jumping, throwing, rolling, climbing, sliding), *construction play* (building huts and shelters and playing with loose parts) and *symbolic play* (role-play, dramatic play and social play). Van der Kooij (2004) distinguishes *sensori-motor play* (function play or repetition play), *imitation play* (symbolic play), *construction play* (putting meaningless objects to a meaningful whole) and *world play* (grouping play: putting (toy) objects together to create an own world).

The Neighbourhood Play Toolkit (Children's Play Council 2006) sums up 15 types of play, as examples of the different types of play that children may engage in. The problem with this and many categorisations of play is that the categorisation criteria overlap or are based on different aspects of playing (form and content, for instance). Even relatively simple categorisations have this problem, and therefore their use is extremely limited. For instance, little is to be gained from Bishop & Curtis's (2001) classification of child lore as either *highly verbal* (singing games, rhymes, stories, jokes, riddles...), *highly imaginative* (role enactment) or *highly physical*.

The problem with most classifications is that they dissolve, mix or transform when children's actual play is observed (Factor 2004: 145). Therefore they do not really elucidate much on what play actually is. Lists of play categories are cited so much, however, because 'play' is so extremely diverse and because defining the concept is so problematic. Classifications bring at least some order in the chaos.

## 2.2. Conceptual problems: elusive play

When play is explicitly conceptualised or theorized, it is often remarked that play is extremely elusive (Harker 2005; Lindquist 2001; van der Kooij 2004): although “we all know what play is when where are in it” (Lindquist 2001: 13), “in its ambiguity and variability, play slips away from all theoretical tenets” (ibid.).

This has led to a multitude of different, often conflicting theoretical approaches, a problem still exacerbated by the antithesis of qualitative and quantitative approaches (van der Kooij 2004).

Two recent attempts to unravel the concept of play are the articles by Harker (2005) and Lindquist (2001).

Christopher Harker points out that “all attempts to give a definition [of play] have so far failed because they always partake of exclusions which are empirically contradicted” (Harker 2005: 59). Reviewing the work of (among others) Winnicott and Aitken, Harker admits that play can be creative and liberating (as stressed by Winnicott); but sometimes it is mainly repetitive or ritualistic or it leads to subjugation and is violent. It can be critical and a form of resistance (as Aitken maintains); but it need not be so, since “playing can more often than not be used to reinforce existing spatio-temporal relations and sediment existing power relations” (Harker 2005: 52). Playing can be said to be active, but thinking, wishing or day-dreaming can be play too.

Because of this complexity, Harker suggests modesty in theorizing playing. Ontological claims on playing are so hard to make because “playing has more to do with becoming rather than being. Playing has no identity (being) itself, except as a secondary characteristic of its conceptual differentiation (becoming) – the identity of difference” (Harker 2005: 52). Put more clearly, it is only in a specific time-space context and in a particular performance that play acquires a specific form and function and that it can be – fleetingly – defined. “If playing does have an identity (an ontological base), it is a weak and unstable one” (Harker 2005: 52).

Harker’s argument parallels ethnographical studies of play, which are firmly embedded in a particular space, time and culture. However, stating that playing is more about ‘becoming’ than about ‘being’ tells us only about the elusive or fleeting characteristics of playing, but remains ‘empty’ in substance. Harker fills in this void by focussing on some aspects of playing, such as its embodied and affective performativity, the important role of objects and the potential to create new spaces and times. These aspects are very relevant to identify and explore; but they (especially the latter two) are no less ambiguous (sometimes true/relevant, sometimes not) as the ‘ontological’ approaches Harker himself criticized. Moreover, the above-mentioned aspects could be applied with equal power to, say, ritual or tourism. Harker, eager to point out that “playing is not (just) kids stuff”, would admit this; but then, why do we speak of ‘play’ at all? While Harker shows what play is ‘not’, ‘not merely’ or ‘not necessarily’, and while he elucidates important aspects of play, it remains obscure what is distinctive for ‘play’. After all, there must be a reason why we are calling certain actions ‘play’ and refrain from labelling others in the same way.

Even while elaborating on the elusiveness of ‘play’, Galina Lindquist (2001) does try to work towards identifying play’s ontological qualities and thus to add substance to the concept. “In considering play and playfulness, two ontological qualities underlie the family resemblance between play forms. The first quality is one of variations within rules, which can be subjectively experienced in feelings of freedom and power. The second quality is that of

feigned signification which enables play to falsify experience” (Lindquist 2001: 21). It is well worth exploring these two aspects more in detail.

The first quality, dubbed ‘variation within rules’ by Lindquist, points to the agency which is central to play. “The ability to experience power, albeit in illusory ludic space, is one of the greatest attractions of play” (Lindquist 2001: 15).

Playing implies being “engaged in something other than pragmatic everyday actions” (Lindquist 2001: 16). This is also true of art or ritual. Setting play apart from other activities that serve no apparent or immediate pragmatic purpose, inherent in play and central to its meaning and lived experience, is ‘fun’, enjoyment, amusement. Play is enjoyable in itself, even when it is serious. Internally motivated, the pleasure of playing lies in the playing itself. It is fun to do. This is true for the most diverse types of play, from spontaneous fantasy play to games with rules. Even in games with fixed rules (playing with marbles or playing football), a lot of fun comes from its indeterminacy, *within* the frame of rules.

At least in a school context, children starting primary school make a clear distinction between playing and working (replicating a distinction present in English since the fourteenth century), with the assumption that play follows work (Dockett 2002). Painting can be fun; but when the teacher tells you what to paint, it is considered to be ‘work’, as opposed to painting whatever you like. The freedom in playing is crucial; thus, ‘not being allowed to play’ is considered as a very harsh punishment.

Play is something you (individually or collectively) choose to do, and you choose it because it is enjoyable to do. This is not necessarily the case for organised or institutionalised play (perhaps an oxymoron in itself); then, the assumption is that children could be imagined to choose it. “That children today can talk meaningfully about ‘taking the day off’ from a youth recreation centre or club is a striking expression of one of the paradoxes of institutionalized childhood. When ‘free time’ is spent in an institutional context, it is not experienced as quite free. That may also be one reason why children say that the institutions are boring, after their 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> birthday” (Rasmussen 2004: 169).

The second quality Lindquist identifies is ‘feigned signification which enables players to falsify experience’. It gives play its potentiality of offering alternatives for social realities outside the play frame. In order to accomplish this, players have to make clear that they are playing, that they are acting in a distinct social frame (this also explains why subversive play can be tolerated, because its message can be read as not serious). This quality of play thus points to the fact that players know that they are playing, and communicate their actions as such. For instance, the fighting you see is not really fighting. Because play and reality are not always clearly divided, it is not always clear ‘whether this is (still) play or not’.

Play thus entails the creation of a distinct intersubjective space. Huizinga refers to this space as ‘a magic circle of play’, a temporary space, voluntary and contractual. It is magic because a new reality is created. Many authors point to the ‘autotelic’ character of play or its inherent ‘purposelessness’. In play – ranging from solitary fantasy play to games with rules – the player is “engaged in something other than pragmatic everyday actions” (Lindquist 2001: 16), even though this in itself is no exclusive characteristic of play. In a way, play could be understood as “a self-referential map” (Lindquist 2001: 16); in Gadamer’s words, it is “self-presentational”: play does not point to any purposive context. Put more precisely, it has no purpose outside *its own context*. From the player’s perspective, play can be purposeful, and thus a serious activity: piling a tower, building a dam, making a house... Play is not inherently idle or without purpose. But the purpose lies in the intersubjective space of play itself.

That play happens in or 'is' a more or less distinct intersubjective space, is being communicated by the players: 'this is play'. The mental and physical play space is defined as such by the players: it is a space within a space. The players' actions do not mean what they would mean outside of the intersubjective space of play. This is clear for mock fighting, for instance ('I fight with you, but I am not angry or hostile towards you'). However, I would argue that Lindquist's wording of play as 'feigned signification' is too specific to be empirically valid for many actual play activities, like hopscotch, most board games, or playing football. 'Feigned signification' is too strongly put in those cases, even if they offer some room for this, as when a child 'believes' to be Ronaldinho while playing football. This is because the strongly rule-governed game of football still leaves room for 'playfulness'. Sutton-Smith (1997) distinguishes play from playfulness and proposes to use the term play only for clearly framed activities. Playfulness by contrast is not an activity but an attitude towards (almost all kinds of) activities in which routines or expectations are manipulated, disrupted, played with.

Playfulness is usually part of the play activities, either built in its 'design' (role playing or elements of luck, for instance) or because play leaves plenty of openness for being playful (imagining yourself to be Ronaldinho). In a way, filling in crossword or sudoku puzzles could be regarded as examples of 'not-playful play'.

Regarded as an activity, play can be identified and recognized, even if it can be very ephemeral; children too can consciously step in or out of their play. Playfulness, by contrast, is an attitude taken during an activity; nearly all human action can be done playful. Whereas "one can imagine societies and cultural contexts where such framed play has no place, (...) playfulness can appear wherever agency and intentionality open space" (Lindquist 2001: 21). What I would suggest is that Lindquist's two ontological qualities, especially the quality of 'feigned signification', are qualities to their full extension of *playfulness*.

In a more loose interpretation, however, Lindquist's second ontological quality of play remains valid: all play is a distinct intersubjective space, fleeting as it can be, that implies this message of 'this is play'. This remains true for simple games like hopscotch, which carry no 'meaning' but which are nevertheless 'meaningful' only within a play context (otherwise hopscotch would be a rather ridiculous act). Even if the rules of a game are set, and even if the playing does not entail 'pretending to do X while doing Y', all play will still be recognizable as such.

It will be more fun, however, when it is playful: when it opens up alternative possibilities through role playing, playing with the rules, teasing each other...

That play occurs in a distinct context is not to say that play has no influence on the world outside play, or that this outside world has no influence on play. Even though it is a distinct interactive space, play cannot be regarded as separate from everyday life (and thus as 'innocent'). Indeed, as Aitken has it, "play is the active exploration of individual and social imaginaries, built up in the spaces of everyday life" (Aitken 2001: 176). This is all the more true when play is complex and thick with meaning. But even seemingly simple, closed-off games like jump-rope can carry messages of power and exclusion (see below).

## 3. Meanings and experiences of play

### 3.1. Refining the play concept: play, children's peer cultures and fun

To elucidate more on the meaning of play for children, I want to drift somewhat apart from the literature overview as such and elaborate further on the reflections on the concept of play mentioned above. However, in order not to stick to discussions on 'definitions' as such but stay closer to the actual (empirical) research on children's play, it is useful here to embed the concept of 'play' in the everyday cultures and actual play activities of children. This is one way to remain modest in theorizing play – a suggestion rightly made by Harker (2005: 59) in his review of the concept.

#### 3.1.1. Play as an intersubjective space

Here I turn to the sociologist William Corsaro and his extended and elaborated work on children's everyday (peer) cultures.

A peer culture is defined by Corsaro as “a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers” (2005: 110). Important symbolic and material aspects of this culture are initially heavily indebted to parent-child (and sibling) relations in the family. Children's media (television programmes etc), literature (such as fairy tales) and myths and legends (like Santa Claus or the tooth fairy) engage with children's beliefs, concerns and values. Toys and other forms of children's material culture (books, clothes, tools to draw,...) provide children with cultural objects and their meanings already within the family context. “However, children actively enter and become participants in and contributors to local peer cultures for the first time as they move outside the family into the surrounding community” (2005: 134). Organised child care and educational settings are, in western societies, hubs in an interlocking network of peer settings. “It is through intensive, everyday interaction in this hub that the first local peer culture develops and flourishes” (ibid.).

Corsaro (2005: 134) identifies two core themes in young children's peer cultures, which (albeit in changing forms) continue to prevail in preadolescence. One theme is that children make persistent attempts to gain *control* over their lives; the other is that they always attempt to *share* this control with each other.

In play routines aiming at autonomy and control, adult authority – a common experience for children – is challenged, mocked and evaded. The theme of control also is prominent in fantasy play, in which confusions, fears and conflicts are confronted. But even seemingly purposeless play (young children's Sisyphus-like play of shovelling sand into a wheelbarrow, pouring it out and putting it in again) is meaningful and fun because of the simple pleasure of exerting control over one's environment.

In peer cultures the interactive space of play is shared: having common play routines ensures excitement and emotional security. This shared space has to be created and protected against outsiders (Corsaro 2005: 140). Inclusion in the interactive play space implies exclusion of others. Gender, age or ethnic and cultural identity can be markers that are used in this in- and exclusions, as will be illustrated in chapter four.

An additional comment should be made here. While 'sharing' is an essential concept to understand children's peer cultures, the concept needs to be understood in a somewhat wider

sense in order to be applicable to play in general: it is less obvious to speak of ‘sharing’ in solitary (fantasy) play. Still, relating to the surroundings is crucial there as well: the play is only engaging because miniature cars become imaginary real-life vehicles of robbers and policemen and the end of the table becomes a cliff to fall from and crash. Like in social play, in solitary play too this play space is protected against disturbances and intrusions from all who is not involved in the play activity. Relating to toys, places or features in the landscape or the environment, and attributing meaning to them *within* the frame of play, are as important in solitary play (and indeed in all play!) as relating to the other players is in social play. Play not only entails meaningful human interaction, but also meaningful interaction between people and material and immaterial elements in the players’ environment or life-world. In other words, while most place spaces are interactive, all play spaces are profoundly intersubjective.

### 3.1.2. The fun of playing

Further adjusting the scope from children’s peer cultures to children’s play, another thought comes up. Any concept of play should include something of the fun or attraction that is so central in the experience of play. Playing is only really experienced as play when it is absorbing.

Play could be regarded as an intersubjective space in which fun is central; this relation to fun distinguishes play from other distinct intersubjective spaces which have much in common with play, like performing a ritual or playing music together.

This intersubjective space of play is social, material, and/or imaginary. It consists of relations (of inclusion and exclusion) with other people; with places and objects such as toys, play equipment or the play environment itself; and with the imaginary, such as in fantasy play and play that relates to future roles or hopes. All of these elements are thoroughly constitutive of how play activities are done and experienced.

The value of play lies, in the first place, *in* this intersubjective space. Asking ‘what is the use of this’ (outside of this playing context) misses the point.

In short, I would argue that the fun in play comes from the intersubjectivity experienced within this space itself and that it has three main and interrelated sources: it comes from the feeling of control or challenge, from sharing with or (more generally) being part of the social, material and imaginary environment, and/or from bodily sensations.

The feeling of agency or control that play can offer is perhaps its most fundamental appeal. “It is this personal power that makes define play as having fun, choosing freely, not working, fantasizing” (Lindquist 2001: 20). This power can be felt individually, but also as the power of a group. It can be felt towards oneself (the body, skills, also cognitive skills), towards others (winning a game over others, playing tricks on them, mocking adults...), or towards the world (building a den or making an imaginary world).

The ways in which to experience this agency are extremely diverse; it is felt in all kinds of skills, even as basic as climbing or jumping, in the meeting of challenges, competing in verbal discussions, the joys of winning a game or coming away with taking risks,... In more elaborated forms, the fun of play lies in making whole material or imaginary worlds. It is important to note that the power experienced in play can be completely imaginary, such as in toddlers’ ‘superheroes’ play, or in dealing with anxieties by miniaturizing them in play.

Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, elements of uncertainty can make the element of control in play even more attractive, especially for older children. How far does one’s own control go? What is still predictable? Taking risks, experimenting, trying to predict one’s future or

fortunes, and allowing creativity and improvising in play are all ways to explore the meaning and the limits of agency in play. As Lindquist (2001: 20) points out, play is so often associated with creativity because a certain degree of unpredictability is crucial to its fun.

The sharing of the intersubjective space of play – being engaged together in the same activity – is a hugely important element of the fun of playing. This is true for play activities as diverse as hopscotch, playing football, building a hut, chase-and-kiss, board games, drop the handkerchief...

Sometimes the fun in playing comes nearly exclusively from the aspect of ‘sharing’, as in singing songs together that everybody knows, or as in playing board games one already knows well and where luck is more important than tactics. Such games hold no challenges (anymore) in exploring or in controlling, and even winning the game depends more on luck than on capacities. Still, they are definitely play, and fun to do.

This *enjoying doing things together* is often facilitated by *sharing routines* which provide scripts for (common) excitement or emotional security. It should be noted that these routines are important frames in solitary play as well, facilitating the enjoyment of being absorbed in the play environment. For instance, even highly improvised (social or solitary) play is often indirectly guided by underlying themes that build up and release tension (death – rebirth, danger – rescue), which children enact by becoming monsters, animals, fairies... and manipulating certain objects. The pretend activities in sociodramatic role play revolve around institutions like the family or the school; sometimes a context like the family is enriched by substituting human for animal family members. Games with rules offer still more clearly defined play routines; rules have to be learned first but provide a handy frame for shared playing (see Evaldsson & Corsaro 1998 on play routines).

Safeguarding the enjoyment of doing things together also implies the *protection of the intersubjective space* occupied in play.

The ‘as-if’ quality of much play is so appealing and typical of playfulness because it interweaves aspects of control and sharing: its fun lies in the combination of (sometimes literally) making the ‘as if’ world, and thus taking fully control of it, and sharing the interaction in this world (the complicity of acting in a special intersubjective space). Often, the ‘as if’ character of play is more or less implicit. For instance, chase games have no elaborated script which attaches meanings to the roles of ‘chasing and being chased’, but the play only works by assuming that ‘being caught’ is dangerous and the chasers are threatening – even though everyone knows this is not the case (‘after all, it’s just a game’).

The somewhat ambiguous ‘as if’ character of play often comes in handy when even in the play world things don’t work like they should: when superhero fails to climb in the tree, it is no disaster, since ‘it’s just a game’. The sometimes vague border zone between play and real life offers many similar possibilities. In adolescence recess time in schools can be the ideal opportunity to explore heterosexual relations with other children through play (Pellegrini & Blatchford 2002). Boys and girls “would push, play hit, and tease opposite sex peers as a relatively safe way in which to initiate cross-sex interaction”. Even when these “poke and push courtships” are rebuffed, the initiator saves face with his/her peers, because the interaction was obviously ‘playful’, not serious.

Apart from feelings of control and from sharing with others or relating to the play environment, the bodily experiences during play form a third main source of fun in play. This aspect has been largely neglected in conventional play research. This is an important lacuna: while many forms of play do not involve important bodily sensations, the embodied character of countless other play activities is too important to ignore. As Harker notes, “playing

involves sights, sounds, smells, touch and tastes to varying degrees” (2005: 54). Much physical play is thoroughly embodied. It tests limits of one’s own body against others or the world, leading to bodily pleasure or pain (as in (mock) fighting and often in sports). Emotions and the heightened affect typical of the feeling of having ‘a good game’ are again intensely embodied and crucial to much play (Harker 2005). Many games are built around emotions: the joys of winning the football game, the fear of being caught by the attacking monsters, the tension in anticipating the opponent’s next step in the board game, the mixed feelings of seeing the sand castle melt into the sea,...

The ‘richer’ play is (e.g. also including the body, emotions...) and the more ‘playful’ it is (opening up possibilities by its ‘as if’ character and by variations within rules), the better chances are that the play will be intensely experienced. Fun in playing or ‘a good game’ is present when the joys of control, sharing and/or bodily sensations create a feeling of being absorbed in the game – or a sense of ‘flow’, referring to Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) concept. For instance, this can be very apparent in the playing of video games: it is through a good control of the game (skills) that one can immerse oneself in the game, which this can be quite outspoken (forgetting time...). Whereas (stereo)typical ‘male’ games focus on (fine motor) skills to create this flow, more ‘feminine’ computer games, like the Sims, are more focused on sharing and world-making. Controlling the game then has more to do with imagination and relationships.

### **3.1.3. Children and play**

Obviously, when studying ‘play’ the theme of ‘playfulness’ will pop up constantly. This is especially true for children’s worlds, in which playing and being playful are spontaneously linked. Rich, ‘playful play’ fully produces Lindquist’s two ontological qualities of ‘variation within rules’ and ‘feigned signification’ (see above, 2.2).

Playfulness often entails playing with the possibilities – and exploring the limits – of control, sharing, and bodily experiences in play. This is done through exploring, trying things out and experimenting, pushing limits, understanding what is (still) fun and what not, what friends can tolerate and what not, whether this is still a game...

It is remarkable how much all of this is an integral part of children’s everyday worlds and peer cultures. More in need of discovering the world and more unrestrained by internalised norms and habits, children are more free to explore than adults, and play therefore takes up such a huge and everyday place in their acts of giving meaning and exploring alternative possibilities. “In its own way, play functions for children as the arts do for adults: the flux and chaos of life is temporarily ordered, given form and pattern and meaning” (Factor 2004: 150). In most art, however, the product of the artistic activity is central; in play, it is not, and it is ‘fun’ which is somehow the central point of reference in play not art. At the same time, because of its embedded character in children life-worlds, much play does have an important aspect of ‘world-making’. During play, children built whole worlds using their own materials, space, time and imagination.

The more ‘play’ is becoming marginal in one’s everyday life, the more games (with rules) tend to be the framework or intersubjective space in which to do something internally motivated (like playing football). Much adult play is framed as a rule-governed game, and this limits the world-making and explorative possibilities; rather, competition, skills or the joy of playing together are usually central in these games.

As such, ‘playfulness’ has hardly been a research subject in its own right in studies on children’s play, which have always been strongly focused on play *activities*. This is perhaps

one of the reasons why there are so few studies which explicitly deal with the meanings and the experience of playing from children's perspectives. However, while 'playfulness' is a more rewarding theme to study in philosophical perspective than 'play' as a distinct activity, it can be argued that empirical research with children will usually benefit more from studying play (activities) than from studying playfulness. One disadvantage of stressing 'playfulness', creativity and freedom in children's play is that social dynamics such as exclusions, which can sometimes be very important in play, would risk to be largely out of sight.

### 3.2. Playing in context

Remarkably little research focuses explicitly on what play actually means to children; usually this is 'hidden', or integrated, in research on 'gender' in play, play as set in school playgrounds etc. Doubtlessly this has to do with the fact that play is so strongly interwoven with children's everyday lives *an sich*. Turning to the questions of why and how children play, rather than mapping out what they play, implies a growing attention to the context in which children play: not only its physical setting, but also its social environment, on both micro and macro scales. This also implies an awareness of what June Factor, in the context of child lore, calls "the double helix of children's play: one strand representing the universal, ubiquitous features of child lore, the other the particular manifestations of children's play lives which result from particular circumstances" (Factor 2004: 143).

As an alternative to 'socialization', Corsaro's notion of 'interpretive reproduction' tries to escape the focus on the individual child and its adaptation to society. "The term *interpretive* captures the *innovative* and *creative* aspects of children's participation in society. (...) Children create and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns" (Corsaro 2005: 18-19; emphasis in original). In other words, in creating and developing their own peer cultures, children are doing more than merely imitating the adult world. "The term *reproduction* captures the idea that children are not simply internalizing society and culture, but are actively *contributing to cultural production and change*. The term also implies that children are, by their very participation in society, *constrained by the existing social structure and by societal reproduction*" (Corsaro 2005: 19; emphasis in original).

An important contribution to the developing study of the meaning of play and of how this interpretive reproduction happens in children's play, could be provided by folklore studies on children's play, which have recently been integrated somewhat more in the mainstream childhood studies. Child lore studies have often been criticized for focusing too much on children's cultures as separate from adult culture and for neglecting relationships with adults. The "trend away from the consideration of *what* children play, to the investigation of *why* and *how* these folklore traditions are kept alive", noted by Ackerley (2003: 11), implies that the conditions and contexts of children's play are taken into consideration to a greater extent than in the older child lore studies. Child lore itself can be considered as a relatively closed peer-to-peer space: it is "owned and controlled by children themselves and is unrelated to adult directed and organised games that may occur in the playground" (Ackerley 2003: 3).

Despite of this, its themes very much reflect children's relations to the adult world. The influence of (adult) social norms is present, but much more important, child lore is the domain par excellence in which children are actively shaping these relations.

Although playground rhymes have a firm grounding in history and some of them have changed remarkably little over the generations, they also adapt very easily to the changing

world. Elements from popular culture, especially movies and television serials, popular music, and commercial brands and advertising are incorporated easily in 'traditional' rhymes and songs (see Ackerley 2002). The Simpsons, the Spice Girls or McDonalds are part of a wide popular culture shared by most children and this is reflected in their verbal play. But as Janice Ackerley shows (2002: 5) even news items like the food and mouth scare in Britain are reflected in new versions of old songs ("Mary had a little lamb // Its feet were covered in blisters// Now its burning in the paddock // With all its brothers and sisters").

Indeed, children constantly appropriate elements from adult life in their play, and as Corsaro's term 'interpretive reproduction' has it, this entails not merely 'internalising' adult content but reshaping it to be meaningful in children's own life-worlds. As in the adult world, power differences foster types of dramatic role play, helping children to cope with the power differences and the anxieties and fears accompanying them (see Corsaro 2005: 72-73, reviewing studies on slave children in North America). For instance, role play simulated slave sales or the brutal treatment of adult slaves. Black children's play with white children re-enacted the actual power differences (whites playing masters, blacks playing slaves), but slave children took great pride in outwitting the white children in verbal and physical contests.

The detailed descriptions typical of folklore studies can enrich our understanding of how children intertwine children's and adults' worlds in their play, especially in verbal play, and how they deal with the anxieties and complexities of this world and their prospects of growing up.

Rhymes, stories, jokes and riddles are often subversive, scatological or sexual in content and shared by children ('we, children') as opposed to the ignorant adults (Ackerley 2003). However, children's appropriation of adult culture is not always oppositional or subversive. It deals, for instance, with fate or luck in numerous ways. A fixed and shared form of the decisions of fate is present in many games, like in counting out rhymes or other rituals for deciding who 'it' is (a role in a game, but also who may choose the players in his team first). More elaborated, and connected with children's growing up and their status as future adults, are fortune-telling games. These games are mostly, although not exclusively, played by girls (Duran & Zierkiewicz 2004; also see Corsaro 2005: 209-211). Through combinations of letters or numbers (initials of names, numbers of license plates or birthday dates...), the games predict future events, especially in (romantic) relations. The pulling of flower petals ('he loves me, he loves me not') is a less elaborated and more solitary version of this kind of game. Such games are part of children's spontaneous culture and are transmitted from one generation to the next. They stand in opposition to adults' 'serious' culture but also imply inclusions of those with whom secrets are shared, and exclusions of children who are not involved.

Duran and Zierkiewicz speculate that socialisation of girls and boys as more dependent and more competitive respectively, could explain that these games are more often played by girls. In the games, one's future is dependent on external factors (fate, luck, the stars) and not of one's own characteristics or accomplishments.

### **3.3. The not-so-innocent character of children's play**

In studying play's wider context, quite some research shows that children's play is not always as innocent as it may seem. Two main potential 'negative' or 'undesired' aspects of play can be discerned in this respect: play can contribute to social exclusion and inequalities, and its contents can be less innocent than many adults might want.

Play cannot only liberate; as the flipside of 'sharing', exclusion is inherent to creating interactive play spaces. Besides, no less than other cultural activities, play is influenced by larger social and cultural norms and inequalities. Here the no-so-innocent character of play has to do with its social character.

Even though it is rarely stressed in itself, exclusion in play is a recurrent theme in ethnographical studies of play which focus on children's interactions and the development of peer cultures. When play is a social activity, inclusion of co-players implies exclusion of other children: before or outside of play (refusal to enter the play), and sometimes in the course of the play itself. In order to play, one must be included in play groups, so developing playing skills in order to avoid being seen as an outsider or as different are extremely important.

The dynamics of inclusion and exclusion during play are almost totally neglected in studies which focus on the effects of play and/or which start from the individual child. As we will see below, however, it is an important issue in qualitative play research which focuses on identity markers that are used in inclusion and exclusion, like ethnic origin (Moore 2002) and especially gender. For instance, boys can claim a territory as a 'boy's zone' or label contact with girls as polluting. But even within same-sex play groups, detailed ethnographic research has revealed many forms of hierarchy and status and tactics for inclusion and exclusion (Aydin & Corsaro 2003; Evaldsson & Corsaro 1998; Goodwin 2001, 2002a, 2002b). Whereas exclusion in children's games often goes unnoticed for adults, bullying, an explicit and aggressive form of exclusion, is a topic of major concern in schools.

As we will see below, inclusion and exclusion in children's play sometimes reflects wider social and cultural norms and ideas. This is clear for instance in gender norms and stereotypes which are emerging rapidly in children's play and which can be made explicit (or played upon) in verbal play. As New Zealand girls sing, "Girls go to the gym, to get more slim // Boys to go rugby, to get more ugly" (Ackerley 2002: 7).

Alongside with exclusions among children, children as a category must cope with a weak position vis-à-vis adults, even in play: adults impose rules (Thomson 2005) or supervise playing children (Blackford 2004). Children's active role here rather lies in acts of resistance against these rules. For instance, the stable part dirty talk has in the repertoire of boys' groups (and schoolchildren's groups in general) defines children as outside the reach of school discipline (Ackerley 2003: 8).

Play itself can imply less desired behaviour and can have less desired outcomes. Two adult fears reign: that children are taking 'too much' control of the game, often going against adult norms; and that certain games offered to children are morally corrupt or otherwise harmful and thus take control of children's lives too much. Here, the not-so-innocent character of play has to do with its contents (as defined by children or, for instance, by the entertainment industry).

While much concern exists about videogames, in which the game content is not invented by but offered to children by game producers, mainstream qualitative research on children's play hardly touches upon this topic.

Some more attention goes to the not-so-innocent contents of play which is shaped by children themselves. When children determine the contents of the games they play, often these games refer to the wider social world in which children live and will grow up.

Dirty talk which opposes or parodies adults and their culture has already been mentioned; but play can be more actively 'dirty' as well. As a form of violently taking 'control' of the (play) world, it can be attractive because it breaches everyday habits. Bullying can be an example of this, but here I will go more deeply into Arnold Arluke's article on animal abuse as 'dirty play' (2002). Even though it must rely on retrospective interviews with adults, this article

offers a fascinating account of the thick, multiple meanings and experiences of playing, such as appropriating adult culture, experimenting, exerting control, taking risks, sharing secrets, and exploring boundaries between categories (adults vs children, animals vs humans).

Arluke (2002) considers animal abuse as a kind of 'dirty play' that is part of adolescent socialisation. No less than ordinary play, dirty play (which adults might find offensive) is connected to children's social development. Dirty play helps children to interpret "where they stand in the social scheme of things and mastering what adults ordinarily deny to them through having more power" (Arluke 2002: 407). It is marked off from everyday play because it has a seriousness that makes it cool. To Arluke's interviewees, it went with intense (positive or negative) emotions, because it had exciting consequences (the animals responded unpredictably when harmed), and because the interactions with the animals had a pseudohuman quality.

Both the concealment of forbidden activities and the breaking of rules in those activities itself give a sense of control. The risk of getting caught is a prime motivation then, rather than abusing animals.

Apart from drawing a boundary between 'humans' and 'animals', the sharing of abusive acts (and the secret of it) with friends was also very important, drawing a boundary between 'us' (who know) and 'the others'.

Animal abuse provided different ways of appropriating adult culture: keeping adultlike secrets, drawing adultlike boundaries, doing adultlike activities and gathering and confirming adultlike knowledge.

'Hunting' animals, and the planning and skills it required construed animal abuse as an adultlike activity. Sometimes the abuse was construed as a punishment for animals overstepping their limits, thus children took on the role of parental control. This resonates with some motivations for abusing dolls, who would have misbehaved in some way (see Corsaro 2005: 128). The abusive behaviour then reflects children's powerlessness facing adults. "Their response to this powerlessness through animal abuse, as a form of dirty play, differs in important ways from psychological displacement models of the same act. By seeing abuse as simple displacement, its significance becomes limited to a coping technique to improve a child's mood state. As dirty play, however, the child's casting of abuse as similar to the expression of power and control by adults permits to understand it instrumentally, rather than impulsively, as part of a larger social process of appropriating adult culture" (Arluke 2002: 421).

Abuse was also used to gather information that was otherwise unavailable or to check and 'see for themselves' whether information was true (will a cat survive when it falls from great heights?). It is 'experimenting', driven by curiosity – with the fun coming from inventing ingenious methods for the experiment, and from anticipating its unpredictable outcomes.

The appropriation of adult culture is an important aspect in much play. Formanek-Brunnell's study of dolls and doll play in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States (1992; see Corsaro 2005: 126-128) shows how adult norms and models are not passively internalized but actively appropriated. From the Civil War onwards, girls were encouraged to imbue their dolls with affect and to play rituals like tea parties with them, or (in order to prepare themselves for the all too frequent encounters with death) to play funerals. However, girls did not only use these dolls for practicing the skills of motherhood or of comforting: destroying tea parties and especially physical treatment and even torturing of dolls were not rare; the doll funerals were held, but often after executing or otherwise violently killing the doll.

A recent study found that 7 to 11 year old children tortured their Barbie dolls in numerous ways (Griffin et al. 2006). The Barbie doll was focused on so much, it seems, because children have numerous Barbies of all kinds, so she is a symbol of excess and does not have a

singular personality one can relate to anymore. For children, torturing (maiming, decapitating, microwaving...) Barbie dolls was a legitimate play activity. The age of the children should be noted: they considered Barbies as babyish and thus apt to destroy, as a kind of rite of passage.<sup>3</sup>

## 4. Who's playing there? Play and categories of children

### 4.1. Age

As a marker of identity and of developmental status, age is an ever-present factor in studies on children's play (and on children in general). Obviously, children of different ages have different play repertoires and play styles. For instance, spontaneous fantasy or imaginative play is typical of three to four years old children but it remains important in the next years. Games with rules are more common among somewhat older children, from 5 years onwards (Evaldsson & Corsaro 1998). Verbal play and child lore seem to be typical play for children in middle childhood (see Ackerley 2003; Bishop & Curtis 2001). Often, child lore appropriates pieces of adult culture and anticipates adult roles. For instance, fortune-telling games focusing on relationships are typical of 10 to 15 years old girls (Duran & Zierkiewicz 2004).

Few studies however exist that explicitly compare play in different age groups or that study cross-age playing (including intergenerational play).

#### 4.1.1. Play, peer culture and friendship

A Corsaro (2005) points out, much playing occurs in the context of a developing peer culture and of a changing meaning of friendship.

For instance, among toddlers play routines are fragile, and as a consequence much attention goes to the protection of the interactive play space (inclusion and exclusion). Excitement and emotional security are found in language, sharing routines and rituals.

Also, adult autonomy is challenged, mocked and evaded. In fantasy play, confusions, fears and conflicts are confronted, like in the probably universal approach-avoidance play, in which a threatening agent or monster is identified, approached and avoided (often those chased have a safe home base).

Among preadolescent children, friendships are usually more stable, but children also strive to comply with conceptions of what friends ought to do or to be; 'best friends' are very important. This also leads to an increasing social differentiation – and conflicts – in peer cultures (as seen in hierarchies, cliques etc). This is most visible in gender separation, which is often very outspoken at this age. "Children 7 to 10 years of age easily generate and sustain peer activities, but they now collectively produce a set of stratified groups, and issues of acceptance, popularity, and the group solidarity become very important" (Corsaro 2005: 192) There are more verbal play activities that involve planning and reflective evaluation.

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<sup>3</sup> This study received quite some attention in the UK press, which predictably focused on the 'barbarian' aspects of the story. See Alexandra Frean, 'Barbarism begins with Barbie, the doll children love to hate', *The Times* 19 December 2005; Sarah Womack, 'Children turn to torture as Barbie loses her sparkle', *The Daily Telegraph* 19 December 2005.

In preadolescence, “peer cultures provide both a sense of autonomy from adults and an arena for dealing with uncertainties of an increasingly complex world” (Corsaro 2005: 223). “A crucial factor in preadolescent peer culture is children’s ability to reflect on and evaluate the meaning of their changing worlds in talk with each other and with adults.” (ibid.)

#### **4.1.2. Multi-age play**

In school classes, children usually have the same age, which limits some possibilities for peer interaction and learning in play. In multi-age school systems, children have the same teacher for several years, staying in a heterogeneous group where children can naturally learn from older children by observing and imitating. It offers more possibilities for prosocial behaviour (helping, caring, sharing) and for leadership (older children, even those with less leadership qualities, can act as leaders of younger children). Playing in these mixed-aged groups is supportive for learning (Stone & Lozon 2004).

When children play collectively and outdoors, play groups are important forms of social organisation (see Rossie 2005). A strong social cohesion is promoted because children tend to be related or to live in the same neighbourhood. In these groups, older children are crucial in the informal learning that occurs during play.

Even though playing in larger multi-aged groups has doubtlessly diminished during the last decades in western societies, it remains an important way of social and informal learning which is still not studied sufficiently.

#### **4.1.3. Intergenerational play: children and adults**

Because play is predominantly studied in children’s environments and children’s peer cultures, and very seldom in a family or other child-adult contexts, research on adult-child interaction in play is very scarce. Some studies rather deal with adults’ control of children’s play.

Children’s (freedom in) playing is often restricted by the presence of supervising adults, especially when these adults are placed in an explicitly supervising role or position, such as the teachers in a school or the mothers on the benches around the playground. Supervision not only happens through the Foucauldian gaze (Blackford 2004), as the many rules and territorial borders in school playgrounds attest (Thomson 2005). Often, adults legitimise their territorial control by referring to safety reasons and thus to ‘the best interest of the child’.

As Thomson (2005) shows for the school playground and Blackford (2004) for the public playground, children’s freedom is severely restricted in what could be regarded as ‘places for children’ par excellence.

The removal of supervising parents from children’s play settings, such in commercial playgrounds, can give children more freedom in their play and can stimulate interaction between children of different ages (Blackford 2004).

## **4.2. Gender**

Do boys and girls play differently? And how do children deal with boy-girl differences and cross-sex interactions?

### **4.2.1. Play repertoires, playing styles and gendered settings**

*Repertoires and preferences*

Research in school playgrounds has shown that, at least in that particular setting, boys and girls have quite different play repertoires (Blatchford et al. 2003; Pellegrini et al. 2004). Ball games, and rough and tumble play are typical boys' games, whereas girls are involved more in sedentary play, jump skipping and verbal play.

Blatchford et al. (2003) made detailed observations of activities on school playgrounds in the UK. They found that boys spent more time than girls playing rule-governed games, and that their involvement in games (again, especially ball games) grew during the school year. For girls, the trend was reversed. Very similar findings were produced by Pellegrini et al. (2004). This study showed that boys' chase games decreased over the course of the school year, as they are rather simple and thus grow boring after a while, whereas boys played more and more ball games, which are more complex and demand more co-operation. Moreover, outdoor play space in schools offers more affordances for boys' preferred (more vigorous, physical) types of games. Girls found the playground less pleasant and consequently participated in fewer games through time, whereas game play increased among boys.

These different repertoires are not as 'natural' and fixed as they seem. Many traditional games were originally played mainly by boys. For instance, rope skipping was often done by boys, who focused especially on skills and tricks, but the game was largely abandoned by them when team sports became popular. It were the girls who preserved the game, changing its nature and expanding it to a rhyme-based game.

The roles of boys and girls have reversed here, since now girls are the chief preservers and initiators of folklore. This could be because "girls acquire a consciousness of their future roles earlier than do boys" (Sutton-Smith, quoted in Ackerley 2003: 4). For instance, preadolescent girls are more than boys involved in playing fortune-telling games, in which fate predicts features of the future life, especially regarding romantic relationships (Duran & Zierkiewicz 2004; Corsaro 2005: 209-211).

Some play activities are not specifically gendered, for instance playing tag, building a hut, cycling, roller-skating (see Karsten 2003: 469), counting-our rhymes (Ackerley 2003), water games (Baylina Ferré et al. 2006), chasing, catching and seeking, and racing (Blatchford et al. 2003: 491).

Both girls and boys are involved in rhymes that challenge adult standards, explore taboo subjects and adult themes; such rhymes sometimes mock the opposite gender as well.

The assumption that boys or working-class children would excel in rude or obscene rhymes, rather than girls or middle- or higher-class children, is disputed by several researchers (see Ackerley 2003: 8).

Girls' games are often portrayed as having less complex rules (like in hopscotch or jump rope), as less competitive and occurring in smaller groups, as compared to boys' games. However, ethnographic research and research outside the 'classic' middle-class white population has shown a much more nuanced reality (see below: 4.2.2).

In a Swedish after-school centre, Evaldsson (Evaldsson & Corsaro 1998) found that girls aged 6 to 10 routinely played marble games, often together with boys. No less than boys, the girls negotiated complex rules, argued about the outcome of games, collaborated in large groups and displayed competitive skills – all of these are characteristics usually associated with boys' play. Moreover, boys also participated in a 'girls' game' like jump rope, even though this was mostly initiated by girls.

### *Playing styles*

Boys and girls have different styles of playing, with boys being more physical, active, competitive and involved in rough and tumble game, and girls participating more in sedentary games and in socialising activities, and being more cooperative. However, some authors question the lack of competition in girls' games (see below: 4.2.2).

An interesting finding of the detailed observations by Blatchford et al. (2003) was that the observed boys, aged 7 to 8, engaged in more fantasy play than girls did. However, for boys fantasy play was often a site for rough and tumble play and physical activity, inspired as it was by action computer games, films and TV cartoons. Especially the boys who were not keen on athletic activities like ball and racing games, still found a physical activity by frequently engaging in this fantasy play. Among girls fantasy play was more sedentary and involving themes of family or animals.

Another interesting finding was that “for boys, the activity was the primary focus that brought them together, whereas girls seem more likely to come together to socialize, independent of a game that might support their interaction” (Blatchford et al. 2003: 500). For instance, when allowed to play football, almost all boys would join the game, brought together by this mutual interest. When not allowed to play football, boys would tend to split into smaller groups to play a variety of games. Girls, on the other hand, would not play one single game for the duration of the breaktime, would rarely play as a whole group, and would frequently interrupt their play for conversation. This finding resonates other observations that see girls as having a larger variety of play activities than boys, but usually playing for shorter periods of time (Karsten 2003), and territorialising play spaces in less formal ways and on a more fleeting, ad hoc basis (Thomson 2005).

In Amsterdam public playgrounds, girls across lines of social class and ethnicity were observed to engage in ‘girl’ play activities with much daily variation (gymnastics, hopscotch, swinging) and to use play objects more than boys (Karsten 2003).

As we will see below, playing styles often depend on characteristics of the other participants: their gender as such, but no less their skills.

### *Settings and their gendered opportunities for play: school playgrounds, public playgrounds*

In school playgrounds, boys often dominate most of the (play) space and use large areas for games like football, whereas girls tend to occupy walled areas and seating areas which give them a sense of privacy (Thomson 2005: 74). As already noted, school playgrounds seem to be appealing more to boys than to girls. Blatchford et al. (2003) found that during recess times, “boys engaged in more social, and girls in more parallel and solitary, behaviour, showing that playgrounds are social settings particularly for boys” (2003: 498).

In each of the eight public playgrounds in Amsterdam studied by Lia Karsten (2003), boys outnumbered girls, who made up 15 to 40% of the population. With increasing age, girls' participation decreased even further, especially among Moroccan and Turkish girls. Interestingly, “the physical quality of the playground greatly influences the gender composition of users. Playgrounds with very few play objects or playgrounds in bad condition are not considered attractive by girls. Girls are critical of the supply. For many of them, good quality and challenging play objects (high climbing frames, big swings) are a precondition to come out to play” (Karsten 2003: 465). Sometimes, bleak playgrounds are visited by many

girls because the place is close to home and they are not allowed to go to better places that are further away.

Moreover, girls spent less time in playground than boys (Karsten 2003: 466). In playgrounds that provided a larger variation of play equipment, they stayed longer.

Whereas most studies have school playgrounds as their setting, studies in public playgrounds come closer to playing in public space. This can bring up new questions: going to a public playground is more a matter of choice than playing in a school playground. Karsten's research in Amsterdam public playgrounds (2003) therefore looks at how children come to be 'residents' in the playground: no longer 'just a visitor', residents frequently come to 'their place', indulge in 'backstage language' which is difficult for outsiders to understand, and assert proprietary rights to the setting, thus privatising the public space.

Karsten shows how the access, activities and micro-geographies in these playgrounds are structured by gender. Because boys visit playgrounds more often and stay there longer than girls do, and because they use larger spaces (because they play in larger groups, while playing football for instance), they obtain a more intimate knowledge of the playground. Thus, "boys' more frequent presence, duration and visibility mean that they more often acquire the status of a resident" (Karsten 2003: 467). Boys use football terms as their own backstage language. Girls' ways of playing (less frequent, for shorter periods, less visible, in small groups...) reinforced their status as a minority group.

There were, of course, girls who acquired the status of resident, and these girls especially were able to challenge 'traditional' gender divisions and roles. This status allowed them to control parts of the play space, invite other children to join in games and organise play activities.

Even though the overall picture confirms the traditional boys-girls trends, Karsten points out that detailed observations provide a nuanced picture. "When one first notices these gender 'deviations' one is inclined to treat them as 'exceptional'; it was only after more extensive observation at the playground that we came to acknowledge this gender-blending as an essential part of children's play" (Karsten 2003: 470).

#### **4.2.2. Gender play: gender segregation, power and borderwork**

How do boys and girls relate during play? Somehow resonating the quote by Karsten just mentioned, Ackerley points out: "If observers concentrate their observations on distinct gender groupings, then results will be different to observations with a focus on interaction between the two groups" (2003: 11).

##### *Gender segregation*

Boys and girls are often observed to play in distinct same-sex groups. Most gender segregation becomes apparent around the age of 5 and reaches its peak in elementary school. This segregation could have to do with more compatible interests among same-sex peers (Aydt & Corsaro 2003). The segregation leads to different play styles for boys and for girls.

However, adult caregivers can play an important role in the diverging of play styles. They are more likely to respond to assertive behaviours by boys than to the same behaviours by girls, whereas girls got more response to their positive (prosocial talking) actions than boys did. Children quickly learn which behaviours are valued, and as a consequence boys and girls develop diverging play styles. These differences are reinforced in interactions with other children, as children find less rewards in cross-sex interactions. If a child wants to play with a child of the opposite sex, its initiative must be accepted, and chances to be rejected by an opposite-sex group are much higher than by a same-sex group.

When given the choice, children tend to choose same-sex play groupings, a trend that increases with age (see Ackerley 2003; Corsaro 2005: 172-174). Boys seem to prefer larger groups for play, whereas girls opt for dyads or triads (also see Blatchford et al. 2003). In over 80% of the scan observations made by Blatchford et al. (2003) in British school playgrounds, the observed children played in a predominantly same-sex play group. No type of game was more likely to be a mixed-sex than single-sex activity.

A surprisingly large amount of gender-related play research is conducted in school playgrounds (Thomson 2005; Pellegrini et al. 2004; Goodwin 2001; Evaldsson 2003; Blatchford et al. 2003; Riley & Jones 2005; Ackerley 2003). This should be noticed, since school playgrounds are very specifically gendered settings: gender segregation appears to be much sharper there than in other contexts. As Ackerley (2003: 5) notes, this was certainly true when there was a strict gender segregation in schools and schoolyards, which was not necessarily reproduced in other daily (play) environments like the home and the neighbourhood. Neighbourhood play lacked the rigid sexual and age constraints of that in the schoolyard (ibid.). This distinction is still valid today. Gender integration is more likely to occur without adult intervention, and thus in (rarely studied) settings like the street and the neighbourhood (Ackerley 2005: 6).

#### *Power and skills*

In her extensive conversation analysis research among girls in a multicultural school setting, Majorie Harness Goodwin (2002a, 2002b) shows how power relations, based on forms of exclusion, opposition and bullying are very much present in girls' same-sex talk and play. In analyzing jump rope games promoted within a school, Goodwin (2001) found that over time boys acquired more and more skills in this game previously predominantly played by girls, and in doing so, became equal partners in taking decisions and initiating the game. "The ability to use actions that tell others what to do in a very direct fashion in cross-sex interaction changes over time, as members of a same-sex playgroup become more skilled in the performance of the activity. Both girls and boys in positions of power use direct forms to organize the activity and exclude children" (Goodwin 2001: 77). Rather than gender, the relative skill level of participants turned out to be important in determining who has the power to control the game and its rules. First, the girls were experts in jump rope, thus explaining the rules to the boys, controlling the action and displaying their power by refusing boys to join a game (Exclusion is important in jump rope: the more children participate, the longer you have to wait before it is your turn to jump again). Boys gradually gained access to power by gaining skills in the game.

Within the girls' group of jump rope, no clear leader emerged; contrary to the same-sex boys' group, jumping skills did not determine status or roles in the game. However, forms of exclusion did occur, even more frequently than in the boys' group. "Thus, although some features of the girl's group showed less hierarchical social organization than the boys', girls' practices of exclusion towards out-group members were more pronounced" (Goodwin 2001: 84).

Like Goodwin, Ann-Carita Evaldsson (2003) shows how different group configurations and relations profoundly influence play interactions. Whereas the study of Goodwin showed that (changing) game skills influenced (cross-sex) power relations, Evaldsson's study shows how the display of skills varies according to the skills of the other participants. In the multi-ethnic school in Sweden Evaldsson studied, the game of foursquare was gender-neutral and therefore

provided an interesting context to analyse how gender, skills and group interactions influence each other. In foursquare games among girls, some girls used slams to throw the ball, a technique requiring force and muscular strength. Their physicality is unrestrained and the game is competitive, even though these girls were not focused on exclusion (in contrast to Goodwin 2001). When playing with less skilled girls, however, the same girls altered their throwing and language styles to downplay the importance of physical skill and strength. Other rules were set ('we do not use slams') and throwing became slower and more gentle. Accordingly, the language, involving more talk and laughter, frames the game as non-serious and non-competitive. 'Throwing like a girl', in other words, does not necessarily indicate a lack of power.

Then again, when playing in cross-sex groups the girls reorganised their play once again, this time playing with gender stereotypes. Much more negotiations of game rules were taking place in this case. Skilled girls were mocking less skilled boys during cross-sex foursquare, challenging the image of boys as physical athletes. A duel between a girl and a boy with similar skills was especially engrossing the audience, since they both represented their total social (i.e. gender) category, which is not the case for weaker boys, for instance.

Helped by a school context in which gender equality and cross-sex games were encouraged, the girls in Evaldsson's study had the opportunity "to comment on and playfully challenge gender behaviours such as boys' spatial, physical and evaluative dominance over girls. Through rearrangement of behaviours, players invoked, played with, challenged and even inverted gender behaviours such as boys' domination vs girls' subordination, thereby invoking 'new' meanings" (Evaldsson 2003: 495).

It is interesting to note that both Goodwin and Evaldsson are able to challenge essentialistic notions of femininity because they do not (only) conduct research among middle-class white children, but among children from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds (African-Americans, Syrian, Kurdish and Chilean immigrant children in Sweden). These girls' assertiveness in talk and physicality calls for a higher awareness of variation in girls' play and interaction styles (also see Aydt & Corsaro 2003 on African-American and Italian girls as more assertive and independent in their relations with each other, than upper-middle-class White American girls). More in general, mixed-sex play is not always or everywhere a rare occurrence. This is, for instance, apparent in Corsaro's work among Italian children (Evaldsson & Corsaro 1998).

As Aydt and Corsaro observe (2003: 1309), most studies have only looked at middle-class white children, and their results cannot be generalised to all children.

### *Borderwork - and gender segregation again*

Much ethnographic work on gender is inspired by Barrie Thorne's research in this field (Thorne 1993). She criticises the "two worlds" idea for studying gender segregation, that considers boys and girls as living in separate worlds. The concept of 'borderwork', borrowed from Frederick Barth and his work on ethnic boundaries, refers to cross-sex play that affirms gender boundaries, such as 'girls against boys' play. There are different kinds of borderwork. In *contests*, the game or play activities include a 'boys against girls' element. In a school context, these games are sometimes initiated by teachers. *Chases* are no less competitive but they are more explicitly symbolic in their affirmation of gender borders. Usually, boys threaten girls in aggressive ways, while girls threaten boys in affective ways such as kissing. In *rituals of pollution*, one gender is believed to be polluted and thus should be avoided. One example of this is the widespread North-American belief in 'cooties', an imaginary contagious disease, and the playful activities and teasing revolving around this belief. Usually boys label contact with girls as polluting, more often than the other way around. Often boys

are thought to be immune to catching cooties from another boy, and likewise for girls; cooties can only be spread by contact between the sexes. Once infected with the cooties of the opposite sex, those cooties can be spread among members of the same sex. There are several rituals for curing or preventing cootie contamination. In short, ritual pollution tends to discourage cross-sex contact (Aydt & Corsaro 2003: 1311). *Invasions* or intrusions imply the intrusion of space and the disrupting of a game. For instance, boys disrupt a game played by girls. Conversely, a typical form of borderwork is to occupy a certain space, declare it ‘a boys’ place’, ‘the girls’ clubhouse’..., and defend it against invaders from the opposite sex (ibid.: 1314).

However, it could be argued that borderwork entails more than strengthening gender identities and boundaries. In any case, in between borderwork that affirms gender segregation and relaxed cross-sex play, many examples exist of ‘playing with gender’ in less stereotypical ways. Aydt and Corsaro (2003) provide detailed examples of the complex construction of gender in American and Italian preschools.

For instance, there were observations of girls’ ritual avoidance of boys (older girls running from boys in mock fear during ‘wild time’ in which children freely run, jump and roughhouse with one another); and reversals of the boys-chase-girls routine (boys running away from girls chasing them with mud on a stick) and of the boys-invade-girls’-play. Also, a significant amount of non-stereotypical play among boys and girls was observed, such as domestic household role play by boys, or assertive verbal play among (especially African-American and Italian) girls.

Boys seem to participate in ‘girls’ games’ like skipping or hand-clapping games only when they can assure their own identities of ‘men’: by invading the space during such a game played by girls, by mocking the playing girls (overacting etc.), making the game more masculine (bringing in more competition, toughness...) – or by hiding their participation from other boys. It is widely observed that it is more easy and attractive for girls to participate in boys’ games than the other way around. Being (called) a ‘tomboy’ is more acceptable than being (called) a ‘sissy’. These labels can change the meaning of acts of exclusion from ‘don’t play with me’ to ‘don’t play with girls’: gender categories as a tool for exclusion, even if the reason for exclusion might have nothing much to do with gender as such (Aydt & Corsaro 2003: 1317).

Overall, Aydt and Corsaro’s ethnographic observations reveal gender segregation as something that is negotiated in children’s peer cultures rather than a phenomenon that is strictly based on universal biological or cognitive developmental features. This peer culture was unique for each preschool setting studied. In one American preschool, for instance, children were very much aware of gender frameworks and tended to view cross-sex and same-sex interactions as fundamentally different, and to define cross-sex relations as romantic in nature. Sustained play between boys and girls, by consequence, was very infrequent there. In other preschools, especially the Italian ones, gender was often not a salient issue. Where children have more flexible play interests and a richer play culture, gender becomes just one issue among many others and thus is less prominent in defining play or play groups. Related to this, the more children are familiar with each other, the less gender will be the main reason for inclusion or exclusion, and the more individual characteristics will be relevant (Aydt & Corsaro 2003: 1321).

### **4.3. Culture and ethnicity**

Like for gender, the research on culture and ethnicity (or 'race' in American studies) covers two complementary questions: how are children from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds playing differently?; and how do children from different cultures or ethnicities interrelate during play?

Contrary to gender, however, the research on this topics remains limited. Interestingly, much of it again focuses on gender issues.

#### **4.3.1. Cultural variations in play**

In western societies, the increased sensibility for risks, especially in outdoor environments, is now a major impediment for access to play areas (Lindstrand 2005: 40-46) and to freedom in outdoor play in general. I will return to this issue in part 5.4.

Playing and its organisation reflects social and cultural norms. For instance, among the Tunisian and Moroccan children studied by Rossie (2005), gender is reflected in pretend games and the objects that are used therein. Sexual differentiation is reproduced since older girls are taking care of younger children. Once they are about six years old, boys leave the girls' group, thus reinforcing a clear segregation between boys' and girls' play groups. Boys enjoy more freedom and can roam in the neighbourhood more freely than girls, who are restricted by the care for young children and by domestic chores.

In her research in Amsterdam public playgrounds, Karsten (2003) found that especially Moroccan and Turkish girls were underrepresented in the playgrounds; this was mainly the case for the older girls (from 10 or 12 years onwards).

Play is valued differently among different cultures. Sometimes the adult attitude towards playing children can be one of indifference (see Rossie 2005); in western societies, playing with children is seen as an important part of education and of being a (good) parent in general. Farver and Lee-Sin (2000) studied how Korean-American mothers support their children's playing behaviours. They found that more acculturated mothers encourage creativity and play among their children and spend more time playing with their children. Their children engage more in fantasy play and are described by their teachers as more 'difficult' (or less docile). The Korean tradition of Confucianism does not encourage playing together, as rules of hierarchy and formality dominate relationships, also within the family (also see Bai 2005). Farver and Lee-Shin's study shows how acculturation is a difficult process, because it causes much educational uncertainties among the parents, and their children are seen as difficult to handle. It is hard to combine Korean and American values.

Research on children in non-western and (western) non-modern societies indicate a clear role for children in some public celebrations, festivals and rituals (see Corsaro 2005: 69-70; Rossie 2006; Bai 2005). Often this implies a temporary reversal of roles, fitting into a larger body of world-turned-topsy-turvy events. Modernisation processes often marginalise the role of children in these events. Rossie (2006) describes the Moroccan Ashûra feast, in which children could permit themselves a lot of liberties while spraying water on other children and on adults. The attacked adults would not react angrily and other adults would not reprimand the children for their behaviour. Today, this would be impossible; children are not allowed these liberties anymore. Children are often given (imported) water-pistols for Ashûra, but sometimes playing with water is now forbidden because adults complain about the nuisance.

The trend described by Rossie shows how children's play is embedded in a broader cultural context, so that cultural changes can have a big impact on children's games (much more profound than the replacement of self-made by imported toys). In this case, it seems that children have less access to the adult world – they are not allowed anymore to treat adults disrespectfully during the feast – perhaps not so much because of a marginalisation of children as such, but because of the decreased relevance of the Ashûra feast in general. Children are victims of this trend, because the role-reversal associated with the feast is becoming less prominent.

#### **4.3.2. Cultural relations**

Like gender (see Ayt & Corsaro 2003), ethnic identity becomes a less prominent marker of identity and hence of exclusion and inclusion when it is but one of the many identities children ascribe to other children (Moore 2002). In a multi-ethnic summer camp, more flexible and instable conceptions of 'race' (or ethnic identity) emerge than in a dominantly 'white' summer camp, in which (an other) race is a clear marker to identify in- and out-groups. Overall, 'being white' was invisible as a racial category, and there was the presupposition that children of the same colour would share the same culture (Moore 2002).

Blatchford et al. 2003 found no evidence for strong ethnic segregation in school playground games among 7- to 8-year old British children: in games, the degree of ethnic mixing seems to be comparable to the proportions of children from different ethnic groups. Girls were more likely to be in networks of children with the same ethnic background, but this had to do with the larger play groups of boys. There was a tendency for same ethnic-group play to decrease over the year and mixed-ethnic game groups to increase (2003: 497). Games like football turn out to be spontaneous and effective facilitators for intercultural contact among children, especially boys (Blatchford et al. 2003: 502). "It is possible that informal child-organized activities, like football, may do more than externally and adult-imposed schemes to facilitate real integration" (ibid.), a suggestion which deserves further examination.

## **5. Setting**

Play does not occur in a vacuum. It always happens 'somewhere', in a physical and social context. Children play on every possible spot: "Whatever the advantages of well-thought-out and well-designed playgrounds and play-equipment, one cannot argue that they are essential for children to play. Children will play, whatever adults do – or don't do" (Factor 2004: 150). Nevertheless, children play mostly in the streets and in their neighbourhoods, in parks, in private gardens, or in dedicated play spaces like public playgrounds, school playgrounds, childcare centres and commercial play settings. All of these settings have characteristics of their own which can influence play activities.

On the one hand, there is research on where children play and like to play, and on how this play setting matters; on the other hand, there is research on how the wider social context influences where children play and are allowed or stimulated to play.

## **5.1. Where do children like to play?**

Children like to play close to home, if possible in the street (when traffic is limited and slow). They like to see and be seen, and to meet people: playing close to shops, for instance, is preferred over playing in public playgrounds (Whewey 2004).

Burke (2005) asked children aged 6 to 11 to document their play spaces by photographing them each day. Almost three in four photographs were of outdoor spaces, even though the research took place in an urban setting (Leeds). Moreover, photographs of outdoor play spaces were chosen more frequently when asked to explain a bit more about a photo. Especially open places were important to children: to play, to run, and to meet friends. Enclosed spaces of gardens, bedrooms and (remarkably) cars were documented a lot as well. Natural environments and natural materials (like grass, trees, leaves, stones...) were photographed a lot and in much detail. Formal play spaces featured on only 3% of the photographs.

Play in informal and natural spaces remains very important to children. Several studies by children's geographers and others (see Valentine 2004: 74-76) have shown that children's preferred play spaces, which allow for flexible ways of playing, are open spaces, waste lands, and all spaces that lend themselves to be appropriated by children. Despite all barriers imposed by the adult-centered built environment, children's (outdoor) play resembles the play of past generations. 'Messy' environments with trees, bushes and waste ground might frighten adults if they think about them as play spaces, but they offer huge possibilities and are very attractive to children.

Play in the streets and in the public domain takes up more time and is more important to children than adults usually think. Time and again, research has shown that children prefer to play in their neighbourhoods. They will play everywhere, if only it is close to home. Yet, they are expected to play in public playgrounds, which usually lack flexibility – being fenced off, promoting uniformity in use, lacking natural elements and constructing materials... Children, especially older children, often go elsewhere to play, and when they go to public playgrounds they don't tend to stay long. As Armitage (2004) observes, in spite of this a disproportionate large amount of attention and financial means is invested in these public playgrounds, while play opportunities in children's most important and most preferred play space, their own neighbourhood, are neglected.

Rather disturbingly, this trend seems to be reflected in play research as well. Play in the full public space remains largely unstudied, and this is one of the major lacunae in play research. The importance of this geographical and social context is a theme in research on children's geographies (Rasmussen 2004; Valentine 2004) rather than in 'common' play research.

## **5.2. Places for children's play**

Rasmussen (2004) refers to the 'institutionalized triangle' that structures children's everyday life in the modern welfare state. Private homes, schools and recreational institutions are the corners of this triangle, and they are or include 'places for children' made by adults. These places are intended by architects and planners to be 'special' places for children; children spend an increasing amount of time in them; places for children put children in contact with 'professional' adults (pedagogues, teachers, social workers...).

'Places for children' can be contrasted with 'children's places'. A children's place is a place where children come together physically (use of place); where children have had special experiences (embedded as knowledge of place); a place to which special meaning is attributed ('the best tree for climbing'); and a place that arouses certain feelings (feeling of place) (Rasmussen 2004: 161). Thus, the use and knowledge, meaning and feeling of a place all are important in defining a children's place. "A key difference between 'children's places' and 'places for children' is that while adults can point out and identify 'places for children', to begin with only children can show and tell about 'children's places' (Rasmussen 2004: 165). Sometimes children's places and places for children overlap, sometimes they don't. In the latter case, the less conspicuous children's places are often regarded by adults as "examples of disorder, mess, destruction and prohibited behaviour" (Rasmussen 2004: 162).

### **5.2.1. The school playground**

The school playground has a profoundly ambiguous status as a setting for children's play. Perhaps it is the principal social arena where games are passed on (Factor 2004) and perhaps the only school setting in which children interact in their own terms (Ackerley 2003); as such it is an important setting for the development of particular peer cultures and for keeping alive child lore. School playgrounds are settings par excellence for developing and transmitted peer cultures, often with very local, particular features. A "school playground is not an empty slate – it has been written on in enormous detail by generations of children" (Factor 2004: 149). Moreover, the best thing about school in general, children say, is that you can play with your friends (Dockett 2002). At the same time, apart from being a rather dull environment most of the time, the school playground is an adult-controlled setting (Thomson 2005), and this particular institutionalised status has profound effects on children's interaction, especially in terms of gender segregation.

A school playground is, of course, a setting controlled by adult caretakers. It is a formal space with restrictions on access, boundaries in time and space and rules and norms on appropriate (play) behaviour. Thomson (2005) studies how these playgrounds are territorialized by adults, by classifying areas, marking boundaries and controlling access and the resources to be found in the area. Often safety is used as the motivation for restrictions. Some valued areas can only be accessed as a reward; it is no right. Conversely, access to play spaces can be denied as a sanction.

Children are relatively powerless against adult control. In the first place, they try to (re)territorialize the playground by claiming certain spaces as their own (though their own bodies, objects like clothes...) and making them inaccessible to other children. This can result in conflicts and will usually be at the expense of girls, who tend to territorialize spaces in less permanent and more informal ways.

In resisting adult restrictions, children also find challenges: hiding, walking with one foot over the borderline, kicking the ball on the 'forbidden' grass area...

As Factor (2004) notes, even on a bare school playground without playground equipment children will make use of any material at hand and of the available space, and a great variety of games and play activities will exist. "Features of the playground never intended for play may be selected and stubbornly retained for a particular game, despite teachers' disapproval" (Factor 2004: 147).

### **5.2.2. Public and commercial playgrounds**

The typical playground, in which the play space is surrounded by benches for parents to sit on and watch (and monitor) their children, can be seen as a panoptic space (Blackford 2004). Children know that they can be constantly seen; the parents' gaze is a monitoring force. The traditional playground leaves little room for place to be on your own; safety reasons cause the whole playground to be visible. "It does not seem a great leap to suggest that suburban, equipment-oriented playgrounds have more ideological and symbolic, communal power to adults than actual play value to children" (Blackford 2004: 232).

Blackford focuses on the way this setting affects the monitoring mothers, maintaining that "the panoptic force of the mothers around the suburban playground becomes a community that gazes at the children only to ultimately gaze at one another, seeing reflected in the children the parenting abilities of one another" (Blackford 2004: 228). The traditional playground setting contrasts with commercial playgrounds, where mothers socialise with each other instead of watching and talking about their children. These children are less inspected by their parents there, so they can play more freely, inventing their own rules and conducting interactions with other children on their own terms. Children's freedom is greater in these commercial play zones, and children help each other rather than relying on their parents.

Blackford, rejoicing the 'consumer power' children have in commercial playgrounds, compares play in these settings to street play in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (2004: 241-244); however she overlooks that then both children and their play were more embedded in the general social life, not only implying informal surveillance from (also unrelated) adults, but also more general and daily interactions with adults, which are totally absent in the commercial play zones. Moreover, commercial play spaces are situated indoors, whereas playing on the streets is a crucial way for children of getting acquainted (cognitively and socially) with their environment.

### **5.3. Inclusive play spaces**

Linking up with important questions for designers, some research wonders how play settings, especially public playgrounds, can be made relevant to all children: to children of different ages, to girls as well as boys, and most specifically also to disabled children. How can public playgrounds be physically accessible and socially inclusive?

Public playgrounds are traditionally made for specific age groups or organized in several age zones. Very often, they appeal to children aged 3 to 10; older children lose interest in the play equipment, which is no longer geared to their play needs and activities.

A gendered world (Karsten 2003) providing less opportunities to girls than to boys, the public playground could be designed in ways which encourage girls to play outside (and thus to encourage the full participation of women in the public domain). Karsten suggests that public playgrounds should be big enough to facilitate play by both girls and boys; that the terrain for play equipment should take up as much territory as the area for ball games; that high standards of maintenance and renovation of play equipment are crucial for keeping girls interested; and that some play activities (cycling, skating, playing with sand and water, climbing...) are appealing to both boys and girls and encouraging these forms of play stimulates cross-sex interaction.

The fairly extended literature on outdoor play for children with disabilities and special needs is reviewed by Lindstrand (2005: 49-58).

Some work exists on the importance of accessible play spaces for all children, including those children that are physically, intellectually or sensory impaired. This accessibility is necessary to support their social inclusion. 'Accessibility' could be seen as a spatial issue, whereas inclusion is its social counterpart (Dunn & Moore 2005). Because disabled children often attend their own schools, public spaces and playgrounds are perhaps the most important settings for playing and establishing friendships with children from their own neighbourhoods (Dunn & Moore 2005).

Bishop (2003) points out the importance of sensory information (like colour, texture, sound, smell...), placement and scaling of activities (often posing problems for disabled children that need assistance to access play provisions), and graded challenges which encourage children to move to a next skill level.

A recurring question is how to dismantle barriers that create segregation and exclusion, rather than focusing on the different kinds of impairments themselves (Dunn & Moore 2005). Being impaired does not imply a smaller longing for challenges or sense of adventure. Segregated play provisions lead to segregated playing: most valuable are those play provisions on which disabled and other children can play together. On the other hand, parking space close by, and room for more accompanying adults is important (Dunn & Moore 2005).

#### **5.4. A (discouraging?) social context for free (outdoor) play**

Modern western societies provide a wealth of play provisions and 'places for children'. Still, this play occurs in a social, cultural and geographical context which also poses major problems to children's play, especially free outdoor play.

##### **5.4.1. Play between risk and challenge**

Concerns about social and traffic safety reduce children's play opportunities especially in public space (Valentine 2004). Regarding public playgrounds and play equipment in general, safety concerns are especially important as well. Moreover, moral panics affect adult regulation of children's play when it is seen as offending, morally corrupt or harmful. Gun play and even playing cops and robbers have been banned from some schools (Factor 2004: 149). Because playing children can harm other children, especially in a school context games deemed too 'wild' can be banned as well, often to the frustration of the children themselves (ibid.). Very recently, some US schools even banned dodge ball, chasing games and unsupervised free play because of safety reasons and fears to be held responsible for possible accidents.

Such concerns are significantly less outspoken in Mediterranean countries, where public playgrounds and public space in general carry less negative connotations than in, especially, the Anglo-American world (Baylina Ferré et al. 2006: 173-174).

In schools, time to play during recess and lunch breaks is often threatened, at least in the United States and Britain (Pellegrini and Blatchford 2002) and Australia (Evans 2003). Two main reasons seem to underlie this evolution: an increased academic pressure (and the parallel undervaluation of play), and the fear of antisocial behaviour (bullying) during recess. Pellegrini and Blatchford (2002) argue, however, that playtime is a time of cooperative interaction and that aggressive behaviour is only rarely observed. Besides, the imposed rules and supervision typical of school playgrounds make children less physically active; they play less and keep sitting more (Evans 2003). Moreover, playing is important in developing peer

relationships, and it enhances academic achievements. Therefore, it is ironic that children's play in general is restricted to a large amount because of pressures on children, parents and schools for academic achievement and the over-scheduling this trend brings about (Ginsburg et al. 2006).

Some advocates of children's play (Blinkert 2004) go radically against this trend and propose wild, adventurous environments in which children are free to play as they want. This also goes against policy's disproportional attention to organised play and formal play spaces, whereas children prefer to play in the public domain (Armitage 2004). Even in public playgrounds, Baylina Ferré et al. (2006: 179) note, children ask for more space to play, rather than for more play equipment. Thus, in playgrounds too empty spaces are important.

### **5.4.2. Historical trends**

There is a widespread concern that children don't play anymore like in former generations, or that traditional games fade away. It is difficult however to quantify such evolutions in valid and reliable ways. Detailed studies show that children still play in ways that their parents did, and that they incorporate new content in their games while at the same time transmitting these games from one generation to the next (Barnes & Kehily 2003: 17-26). On the other hand, there is no doubt that play has become more institutionalised and diversified in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, contributing to a relative reduction of street play and free play (cf. Ginsburg et al. 2006). Apart from academic pressures, reasons for the increase in organised (leisure) activities for children may have to do with the rise in parental concerns regarding children's safety, the child care that these organised activities are offering to parents, and the decreasing family size (less siblings to play with) (Corsaro 2005: 38-40). Whereas the institutionalising of children's lives impedes the aspect of 'control' in children's play, the privatising of children's leisure time and the decreasing family size (and indeed the decreasing number of children in general in the western world) makes 'sharing' more difficult.

Wridt (2004) charts the historical evolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century towards children's restricted access to and use of public (play) space. Underlying this evolution are the disinvestment in public space and a parallel investment in the commercialization and privatisation of play activities, and a middle-class discourse about the meaning of play (based on safety concerns and promotion of play's beneficial effects). Based on childhood biographies in New York City, the overall evolution sketched by Wridt resonates throughout the western world.

In the beginning of the century, the street was the major play space for children (indoor playing was rare); for younger and older children, the street was an area for adventure and independence; neighbours provided for an informal supervision.

The street was a dangerous place as well, however. The growing concerns for traffic-related deaths and views of the street as a breeding ground for immorality and delinquency prompted the creation of distinct playgrounds for children. Safe areas were thus created, but the presence of adult play leaders was necessary to convince parents to allow their children to play there.

Public provisions suffered from the economic crisis of the seventies; public disinvestments in parks and playgrounds created an opportunity for gangs, drug addicts... to take over 'play spaces'. The current commercialisation and privatisation of play space, accompanied by an increase in structured play activities, further removes children from street life and thus from community life in general.

### 5.4.3. Outdoor play and its multiple affordances

Despite the historical trends outlined above, there is a widely accepted acknowledgement of the benefits of outdoor play.

Outdoor and indoor play are different and often complementary. Being more public, outdoor play provides many opportunities for social learning. Outdoor space is usually larger than indoor play space, so outdoor play can include larger movements and play with more people. As children's geographers argue, outdoor play "is crucial because it is the primary mechanism through which children become acquainted with their environment" (Valentine 2004: 74).

One obvious difference between indoor and outdoor play is that outdoors, especially in the full public space, the weather and the changing seasons are an important factor and an extra affordance (Fjortoft 2004: 33).

Natural elements in the landscape are very appealing to children. They appropriate these elements in their play and give them names which are often related to their play activities. A multitude of play forms are encouraged by these elements, including the construction play very much appreciated by children but very much neglected in traditional playgrounds. Trees and rocks to climb; bushes to hide or to change into a house; a pine forest as a place to have a 'cone war' (throwing cones at each other); a rock which functions as a space ship in fantasy play; a steep cliff used for sliding and climbing: these are examples of favourite play places and activities (Fjortoft 2004).

An important review of the literature on outdoor play, focussing on playgrounds, has been made by Peg Lindstrand (2005). Covering the literature between 1980 and 2003, it deals with diverse aspects of outdoor play, such as self and group identity on the playground, social and cultural influences, inclusion of disabled children, playing and development, planning processes, roles of adults, gender aspects, bullying, and pedagogical processes.

Outdoors, children are more likely to engage in more complex forms of peer play, like interactive dramatic play (Lindstrand 2005: 95). Outdoor environments offer great possibilities for informal learning and physical development and fitness, through experiments, constructing, and physical play (Lindstrand 2005: 94-102). 'Wilder' play – free play in open spaces – has positive effects on imaginative play, motor skills, and later environmental awareness (Lindstrand 2005: 59-68).

In outdoor play, age and gender are crucial for play opportunities, as the 'home range' of children develops through time and often is heavily influenced by gender.

Lindstrand's review shows that much of the literature on the subject is aimed at discovering the positive or negative outcomes of outdoor play, rather than to uncover how children experience and give sense to playing outdoors.

As mentioned before, this outdoor playing has become threatened in modern western societies. Ferrying children around by car robs children of developing the understanding of the environment outdoor play brings about; the same is true for an overload of playing in the house, home garden or commercial (indoor) play spaces.

Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, children from middle class backgrounds, often perceived to have the best play opportunities, are in fact heavily chaperoned and play more in institutionalised play settings, whereas play among children from working class backgrounds and children with lone parents is more independent and public (Valentine 2004: 80).

"This retreat of children from the street is facilitating the appearance that public space is 'naturally' or 'normally' an adult space" (Valentine 2004: 80) where unaccompanied children are 'out of place'. When public space becomes more difficult to access for children, the

concept of 'public space' is eroded (Haider & Haenen 2004). Commercial play spaces cannot be a real alternative since they artificially separate adults and children and don't offer the wide variety of stimuli typical of the public space.

In her study of two city quarters in Vienna, Daschütz (2006) shows that the social abilities of children are more encouraged when children play in full public space in the inner-city area, as compared to children who play in a public park. In the inner city, children are more often unaccompanied by adults, they use more space and play with other children; in the park, children play more on their own or with adults, and stay there for shorter periods than children in the inner city.

As both Daschütz (2006) and Gilliland et al. (2006) argue, to promote play opportunities and physical activity among urban children, it should be considered how existing recreational opportunities are geographically distributed and how they are accessible from children's homes. Special attention could perhaps go to rural areas, which might seem a play idyll for children at first sight, but which suffers from inaccessible domains and roads which could be ideal spaces for free play, and from an increasing commodification and institutionalisation of the play environment (Smith & Barker 2001).

Research in Freiburg has shown that in an environment that is suited for children, children were four times longer outside without parental supervision than children who live in an environment which is not suited for them (Blinkert 2004). Indeed, child-friendliness of public space in general is crucial to children's outdoor play. It is not sufficient to create places which are safe in terms of traffic. It is also necessary to create places which are attractive to children. Returning to 'places for children', Blinkert (2004: 106) holds a plea for places that are 'functionally unspecific': a place that does not offer ready-made ideas for its use but forces children to invent, produce, improvise. This would produce a rather empty space, looking somewhat neglected and unkempt but providing an interesting surface, water, building materials, small vegetation, and no supervision. As 'narrative places', such playgrounds invite children to be creative, make experiences of their own, construct something, organise themselves. Inexpensive and popular with children, these kinds of places have been provided in the city of Freiburg. This type of 'playground' contrasts with traditional playgrounds, which are very expensive but often are used much less by children than could be expected.

## **6. Lacunas in play research**

Recent trends in children's playing are not evenly researched. Whereas some research exists on the commercialising of children's play and play spaces, the trend towards more playing in the private environments of the home and the private garden remains largely uncovered (although children's own photographs can serve as an access to this area).

Recently emerging socially relevant themes such as the social tolerance towards playing children or the positive effects of play opportunities on a neighbourhood community are not well researched. Another question is how the feminisation of professional carers and teachers affects the (e)valuation of play in children's institutions. Are 'masculine' types and styles of play (more competitive, physical, seemingly aggressive) valued more negatively?

Playing is very often a thoroughly embodied activity, and this aspect deserves much more attention. Harker (2005) also points to the (related) affective aspect of playing, another lacuna

in research. Overall, why play is often such an intensive and absorbing activity remains a difficult subject to study.

The role of toys and other objects in playing is less well researched than one could expect. For instance, in research on outdoor play the influence of play material and equipment on peer interactions and physical involvement with the play space remains largely unstudied (Lindstrand 2005: 106). How do children, in interaction with other children, come to give sense to their material environment and to actively integrate objects in their play?

As mentioned already, playing is studied mostly in distinct contexts like public playgrounds, school playgrounds, day care centres... Surprisingly, no research seems to exist that maps out the differences in use and design between kindergarten outdoor playgrounds, school playgrounds and public playgrounds (Lindstrand 2005: 105).

The main lacuna, however, is that 'street play' remains disturbingly out of sight in most research. There is not much information on how and what children play in their neighbourhoods, or on how and why they move from one place to another while playing together. Research on children's geographies (Rasmussen 2004; Valentine 2004) is an exception here, and it could be an enormous enrichment to the study of play, pulling 'play' out of its secluded 'children's' settings.

Cross-age play and intergenerational play remain largely uncovered themes. This is related to the focus of research on play in institutionalized settings and peer cultures and the lack of research in neighbourhoods and families. Therefore, for instance, little is known about how exactly games are transmitted from older to younger children.

Play research often focuses on young children. This again runs parallel with the settings in which research is conducted: child care centres, schools, playgrounds – rather than the street and the neighbourhood. Children from, say, eight years onward are more and more moving around on their own and the neighbourhood becomes an important stage of play.

There is not yet an integration of research on play and the research on video games and play associated with new media. It seems to be video game researchers rather than other play researchers who are closing this gap (e.g. the work of Jesper Juul and the *Game Studies* journal); approaches such as Caillois' theory of play could offer possibilities for such an integration. On the other hand, the focus in video game research on *games* will perhaps neglect less rule- or competition-oriented forms of play.

Whereas there is a lot of attention for play spaces, the temporal aspects of play remain unstudied (cf. Schillemans & Van Gils 2001). Ginsburg et al. (2006) point out factors which reduce the time children can spend to play, especially free play, and stress the possible negative role of increased efficiency and time-scheduling in both parents' and children's lives, and the pressure to academic achievements. How time is experienced and dealt with in by children themselves during play, remains one more area to uncover in qualitative play research.

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