Relations Between Parents’ Interactive Style in Dyadic and Triadic Play and Toddlers’ Symbolic Capacity

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Play has a major role in the evaluation and treatment of young children referred to mental health clinicians. The present study examined parental correlates of preschoolers’ symbolic play during dyadic and triadic play interactions. Boys’ play contained more aggressive themes, and girls’ contained more nurturing themes. Mothers displayed more caring themes during play with both sons and daughters, and fathers displayed more repair and construction themes. Mothers’ and fathers’ facilitative-creative interaction style in dyadic play predicted the level of the child’s symbolic play. Coparenting style marked by cooperation and autonomy predicted symbolic play during a triadic family session. Child intelligence predicted symbolic play beyond the parent’s style during triad but not dyadic interactions. The findings have implications for early intervention directed at increasing symbolic play in young children.

Play, a “naturalistic” projective technique, serves a major role in the psychiatric assessment of preschoolers and school-age children (Lewis & King, 2002). While making a diagnosis of childhood psychopathology and its underlying mechanisms, clinicians often observe the content of the child’s play as a window to his or her inner world but also note the specific characteristics of the child’s play. For example, the characteristic compulsatory pattern of play in children suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder, the lack of interest in toys seen in autistic-spectrum disorders, and the diminished amount of play activity in depressed infants and toddlers are important indicators of the child’s emotional status.

The central role of play in the psychiatric assessment of the child has been underscored by theoreticians and clinicians, regardless of their school of thinking. For instance, S. Freud (1920), M. Klein (1929), and A. Freud (1965) considered play as the child’s means to mastery of impulses, desires, and inner conflicts. Erikson (1977) focused on mastery of interpersonal conflicts through play. Winnicott (1964) added to the function of cathartics of impulses the dimension of developing the sense of self. Play has been conceptualized as a spontaneous process in which feelings, thoughts, desires, and fears can be opened up without the threat of disillusionment by reality.

Developmental researchers view the child’s symbolic play as an important tool for the development of the “social self.” Fein (1981) reviewed the relation between children’s symbolic play and their social behavior (e.g., taking responsibility, being cooperative with both peers and adults), popularity, and adjustment to social situations. Also, she reported an inverse correlation between symbolic play and aggression during social, nonplayful activities. Singer and Singer (1990) found that children who had an imaginary companion showed higher levels of spontaneity, expressed more positive feelings, and were more cooperative during social play compared with children without an imaginary companion. Fein (1981) has defined several features of play that are important for the development of creativity, socialization, and a coherent sense of self. During free play there is no need to link specific materials to specific actions or maintain a logical relation between action and result, there is room for animism, objects can change in their use across play, and the child may take roles and actions usually filled by others.
In addition to the role of "pretend" play in healthy development, emotional disturbance and cognitive difficulties have been often associated with an inability to sustain imaginative play in early and middle childhood (Singer & Singer, 1990). The capacity for play has also been shown to function as a positive prognostic factor in the treatment outcome of emotionally troubled children who underwent psychotherapy (Singer, 2002). Thus, the child's capacity for symbolic play is a strength that clinicians may want to investigate on planning intervention.

Our goal in this study is to investigate child, parent, and family factors that may be associated with the development of imaginative play, within the framework of a more general aim of defining areas for early mental health interventions. Fonagy and Target (1996) viewed the parental capacity for pretend play as a main avenue for the development of mentalization in the 3- to 4-year-old child, which supports the child's integration of inner and outer reality. This conceptualization is consistent with the finding that symbolic development is very impoverished in maltreated children (Cicchetti & Beeghly, 1987). Winnicott (1971) found a link between play and creativity and noted the absence of creativity in adults who lived in very deprived situations. Consequently, the identification of factors that may impact the parents' capacity for imaginative play is an important issue in the context of early intervention.

The question of whether symbolic play is a capacity the child develops independently of the quality of his or her play experience with a significant adult has been a topic of continuous debate. Piaget (1962) opined that symbolic play, which develops after practice play and rules games, is dependent on the development of language and object permanence. Thus, the development of symbolic play is, in his view, essentially a cognitive process. Watson and Fisher (1977) refuted Piaget's homogenous approach and found that object permanence and symbolic play were synchronously related only in 50% of their studied children, whereas the remaining half showed advanced development in one domain. Piaget's view of the child as an "independent scientist," whose development of symbolic play is mainly a maturational process, has been contradicted by several studies showing the impact of the child's environment on the development of symbolic play. Fogel and Thelen (1987) suggested that supportive and reciprocal interactions facilitate symbolic play, whereas intrusive and directive interactions have the opposite effect. Similarly, Fiese (1990) found that 15- and 20-month-old infants played at a higher level in their mother's presence compared with their play while alone, and the mother's directive style was negatively correlated with the symbolic play level. Slade (1987) supported these findings and showed that maternal availability was related to both duration and quality of the child's symbolic play, though a limitation of her study was the small sample size (16 dyads). Singer (2002) suggested that factors conducive to imaginative play include particular parental characteristics, such as secure attachment to at least one parent, parental willingness to initiate games of fantasy, tolerance for floor play, and storytelling.

With the increasing involvement of fathers in parenting (Pruett, 2002), the father's ability to encourage the development of his child's imaginative play becomes relevant. To our best knowledge, the impact of the father's symbolic play behavior on the young child's symbolic play has not been compared with the effects of the mother's interactive style on the child's play. Similarly, symbolic play in the presence of both parents has received little attention. Some studies have reported the positive link between fathers' level of engagement with their children and the parents' marital satisfaction on child social development (Belsky, Crnic, & Gable, 1995; Belsky, Gilsstrap, & Ro- vine, 1984; Goldberg & Easterbrooks, 1984), which may suggest an indirect impact of marital relationship on the quality of parental play. The issue of symbolic play in the triad has received little empirical attention. McHale and Rasmussen's (1998) study on coparenting and the effects of disengagement of one parent on the young child's ability to regulate affect and aggressive impulses may suggest that participation of both parents in play impacts the child's play. Conversely, symbolic coplaying may be different in nature from the construct of coparenting.

In addition, the impact of the child's specific characteristics, such as gender and intelligence, on the development of symbolic play has been noted and points to an interplay between sociocultural stereotypes conveyed by the parents' response to their child's play behavior and the child's biological disposition. For instance, Singer and Singer (1990), in a study of 141 three- and four-year-old children, found that boys tend to prefer themes of actions, superheroes, space, and TV figures, whereas girls prefer domestic themes, such as family life and dressing. Besides differences in content, gender differences in the style of play have been observed. Boys tend to be more aggressive and controlling, whereas girls tend to be more caring and more sensitive to others' needs (Libby & Aries, 1989). These differences are stable over time and can be observed in older children's
drawings as well (Reeves & Boyett, 1983). Garvey (1974/1991) has pointed to the impact of the parents’ sexual stereotypes on the toys they buy for their children. At 2 years old, girls are strongly reinforced by their parents to play with dolls, whereas boys face a negative parental message about it. Obviously, parents are influenced by their own perceptions of gender roles (Repetiti, 1984). Later on, at the age of 5 years, children themselves convey pressure on their peers to prefer “boy toys” or “girl toys” (Shell & Eisenberg, 1990). The impact of intelligence on the child’s symbolic play level is still in debate. On one hand, children with mental retardation show poor symbolic play (Greenspan & Wieder, 1998). Among typically developing children, Tamis-LeMonda and Bornstein (1994) did not find a strong correlation between verbal IQ and symbolic play at 20 months, whereas Feldman, Greenbaum, Yirmiya, and Mayes (1996) showed a medium-level relationship between IQ and symbolic play at 2 years.

In this study, we examine the relationship between the child’s symbolic play and the parents’ interactive style during dyadic and triadic play interaction.

Our hypotheses are as follows:
1. During dyadic parent–preschooler play, we expect the parent’s facilitative (cooperative, creative, and positive affective) play style to be associated with higher child symbolic play. We expect to find gender differences in both parents’ and children’s play themes.
2. During triadic mother–father–child play, we expect that facilitative coplaying parental style will enhance the child’s symbolic play.
3. We expect a positive link between the level of symbolic play and children’s verbal intelligence, parental education, and marital satisfaction.

Method

Subjects

The sample included 35 nonclinical 3-year-old children and their parents. Mothers’ average age was 32 years; fathers’ was 36 years. All the fathers and 77% of the mothers worked full time. Maternal education was relatively high: Fifty-one percent had college education, 39% had completed high school, and only 10% dropped out after junior high school. The sample included 19 boys and 16 girls.

Procedure

Children were observed and videotaped at home in two parent–child free play sessions, one with each of their parents, each for a period of 15 min. The parent and child were given the following toys: a girl doll; a baby doll; a doll bottle; a mirror and comb; a piece of tissue; a tea set consisting of two cups, two plates, sugar and milk pots, and a boiler pan; a wallet; a colored necklace; a pair of plastic sunglasses; a sponge; three work tools; a small jeep; a van; a telephone; a soft-tissue dog pet; a finger doll; and two pet stuffed animals and two wild ones (McCune, 1995). Parent and child were asked to interact freely. The order of parents was counterbalanced. Following the two parent–child sessions, a triadic mother–father–child session was conducted. In the triadic session, families played with a furnished dollhouse with small figures of mother, father, two children, a dog, and a car. Again, they were asked to interact freely.

Measures

Marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was assessed by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976), a 32-item measure coded on a 6-point scale. The highest score reflects the highest level of marital satisfaction. The items are divided into four subcategories: agreement around issues of values and views of conjugality, expression of affection and warmth, satisfaction about the relationship and willingness to continue it, and sharing of interests. The Hebrew version of the DAS has been validated (M. M. Klein & Shulman, 1980). Internal consistency was .74.

Verbal intelligence. Verbal intelligence was tested with the Stanford–Binet Intelligence Test (4th ed., rev., Termann & Merrill, 1960). For children of this age, verbal IQ consists of three subscales: vocabulary and comprehension of logical and absurd questions.

Coding of Dyadic Play Interaction

Coding was conducted separately for the parent and the child. Child symbolic play was evaluated with a scale developed for this study and was analyzed twice, once for content and once for quality.

Play content. Play content was analyzed on a 5-point scale, according to its prevalence in the child’s play. Each of the following 12 play themes were scored from 1 (did not appear) to 5 (appeared frequently): feeding, bathing, dressing, bedtime activity, doctor play, mirror play, building and repairing tools, telephone, toilet, going out for a walk, aggression, and cleaning up. In addition, play content was coded for initiator and response. Each of the 12 themes received a score concerning who initiated this content into play and what the partner’s response was.

Child play quality. Child play quality was similarly coded on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high) according to scales from the Coding Interactive Behavior (CIB) manual (Feldman, 1998), a coding scheme validated in several studies of healthy and at-risk samples (Feldman, 2000; Feldman & Keren, 2004; Feldman & Klein, 2003; Feldman, Weller, Sirota, & Eidelman, 2003). The following codes were used in this study: positive affect, negative affect, liability of affect, enlargement of themes, decontextualization, level of
organization, and verbal output. The variable of decontextualization was defined as the extent to which the child related the themes of play to actual events he or she knew about or had experienced. For example, playing the theme of “going out,” a child with a high level of decontextualization might say, “Now they are driving to the sea in a jeep. It is a big jeep like the one Tom has, and they also have blankets, chairs, and a dog like Tom had.”

**Parental play quality.** Parental play quality was coded on a scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high) for the following nine scales: didactical style, enlargement of themes, criticism, intrusiveness, creativity, positive affect, negative affect, quantity of vocalization, and quantity of physical contact.

**Coding of Triadic Play Interaction**

Coding of the triadic play was similarly conducted twice, for content and quality. Play content was coded with the same scale used for the dyadic play. Quality of the family play was coded with the family codes of the CIB (Fieldman, 1998), which has been previously validated (Fieldman, Massalha, & Nadam, 2001). Family interactions were coded for the family as a unit, and codes reflected determinants of the family’s interactive style. Codes were scored globally on a range of 1 to 5, addressing the degree to which each described the family interactive style. Thirteen codes were used. Ten codes described opposite types of family styles, and each opposite was coded separately on a scale from 1 to 5. These included avoidance–involvement, autonomy–intrusiveness, cooperation–competition, activity–passivity, and parent-oriented interaction–infant-oriented interaction. In addition to these 10 measures, three codes addressed the global atmosphere: level of positive affect, mutual gaze, and use of toys. A principal-components factor analysis on all family codes on a sample of 162 families yielded two factors with eigenvalues of 2.00 and above (Fieldman et al., 2001). The first factor included the following items: positive affect, level of mutual gaze, avoidance (negative), autonomy, and cooperation. These items were averaged into the Cooperative Family Style factor (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .72 \)), which was used as an index of the family’s cohesive and harmonious style. The second factor included family intrusiveness, parent-oriented interaction, and competition, and these were averaged into the Intrusive Family Style factor (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .70 \)). Reliability testing was conducted for 10 families. Reliability on all scales exceeded 85%, and mean reliability was 89%.

The following variables were extracted from the coded interactions.

**Child symbolic play.** Two theoretically derived factors were identified for the child’s play with acceptable levels of internal consistency:

1. The first factor, Child-Elaborated Imaginative Play, included the following items: elaboration and widening of the themes, level of organization, amount of verbal output, positive affect, and decontextualization (\( \alpha = .86 \)).

2. The second factor, Child Labile Affect, included the two items of negative and labile affect during play (\( \alpha = .72 \)).

**Parents’ symbolic play.** Two theoretically derived factors were identified for the parents:

1. Facilitating and Creative Parental Play, including elaboration and decontextualization, verbalization, positive affect, and creativity (\( \alpha = .68 \)); and

2. Restrictive Parental Play, including intrusiveness, criticism, directiveness, and negative affect (\( \alpha = .58 \)).

**Triadic symbolic play.** Two theoretically derived factors were identified:

1. Cooperative Triadic Play, including items of creativity, cooperation, absence of intrusiveness, and harmony (\( \alpha = .71 \)); and

2. Instrumental Triadic Play, which was mainly based on the item of doing (\( \alpha = .70 \)).

**Results**

**Content of Dyadic Play**

Table 1 shows means and \( F \) values for the frequencies of content items of the dyadic play as a function of parent’s and child’s gender. As seen in Table 1, the most frequent play theme was feeding, followed in decreasing frequency by clothing, aggression, construction, repair, and telephone communication. Significant child gender effects were found for aggressive and care themes (including clothing and feeding): Aggressive themes were more frequent in boys’ play and care themes in girls’. A marginally significant finding emerged for repair themes, which were slightly more frequent in boys than in girls. In parallel, mothers’ play contained more caring themes, and fathers’ play contained more building and repairing themes.

**Bivariate Correlations Between Parent’s and Child’s Symbolic Play**

Relations between parent’s and child’s play quality are reported in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, the child’s symbolic play was positively related to the parent’s facilitating play, negatively related to the parent’s restrictive play during the dyadic session, and positively related to the parents’ cooperative play during the triadic session. Child labile affect during dyadic play was related to restrictive parental dyadic play and intrusive parental triadic play.

**Predicting Child Symbolic Play in Dyadic and Triadic Interactions**

Multiple regressions were computed to predict child symbolic play during dyadic and triadic ses-
Table 1

Frequencies of Play Content as a Function of Parent and Child Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items of play content</th>
<th>M</th>
<th></th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Parent gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Global</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeding</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>3.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing, caring</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>2.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction, repair</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>1.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirror</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washing</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting to bed</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting in order</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toilet training</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.  **p < .01.  ***p < .001.

sions. Predictors were entered in four blocks in a theoretically guided order. In the first block, the child’s gender and parent’s gender were entered to partial out variance related to gender effects and social norms. Second, the parent’s facilitatory style during dyadic or triadic interactions was entered, as a contributor to child symbolization. Finally, child IQ was entered to assess whether intelligence contributes to child symbolic play beyond the parent’s facilitatory style. Results for the dyadic session are presented in Table 3. As seen in Table 3, the child’s symbolic level was predicted by parental creative/facilitating play in the dyadic context. In combination, these variables explained 28% of the variability in the child’s symbolic play.

Table 4 presents a similar regression model, predicting child symbolic level in the triad from parental style and child IQ. As seen in Table 4, the parents’ cooperative style during the triadic play predicted the child’s symbolic level. Also, children’s IQ had an independent significant contribution to the prediction of their symbolic play. In combination, the predictor factors explained 20% of the variability in the child’s symbolic play in the triad.

**Discussion**

Play is central in development because it simultaneously promotes growth and reflects the specific capacities available to children at any given point in time (e.g., the need to balance id, ego, and super ego requirements; reality testing and fantasying; object relationships; language, symbolization, and communication; and mechanisms of defense and adaptation). Play is therefore one of the childhood activities that has been a central focus of theoretical and clinical investigation (Marans, Mayes, & Colonna, 1993). The definition of play as one of the unique communicative modes of childhood implies a link between capacity for play and parenthood (Mahon, 1993). Thus, elucidating parental factors that may facilitate the development of play in the young child is important for any intervention that targets the child’s symbolic capacity.

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations Between Child and Parent Symbolic Play Characteristics and Between Parental Education and Parental Play Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental play</th>
<th>Facilitating dyadic play</th>
<th>Restrictive dyadic play</th>
<th>Cooperative triadic play</th>
<th>Instrumental triadic play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elaborated imaginative play</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>-.32**</td>
<td>.39***</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labile affectivity during play</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.35**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental education</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.47***</td>
<td>.57***</td>
<td>-.26*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.  **p < .01.  ***p < .001.
Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>ΔR²</th>
<th>ΔF</th>
<th>df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child gender</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent gender</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>2, 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent creativity–facilitation</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>15.68***</td>
<td>3, 65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family cooperation</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>5.20*</td>
<td>4, 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child IQ (Stanford–Binet)</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>5, 63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Total \( R^2 = .28; F(6, 62) = 4.95, p < .001. \)

* \( p < .05. \) ** \( p < .01. \) *** \( p < .001. \)

In this study, we assessed the relations between the level of preschoolers' symbolic play and the parents' play patterns during dyadic and triadic play interactions. In addition, we looked at the relation between parental and child determinants, including IQ, marital satisfaction, and parental education, on the child's play. Our first hypothesis, that in the dyadic parent–preschooler play, the parent's facilitative style would elicit more symbolic play, was supported by our findings. Indeed, both mother's and father's level of creativity and facilitation displayed during play with the child predicted the child's level of symbolic play—that is, the child's capacity for elaboration of play themes, decontextualization, level of organization, and amount of verbal expressiveness. As early as the 1960s, Bion (1962a, 1962b) considered the mother–child relationship as being at the root of the child's symbolic capacity. Still, he did not define which specific elements of the dyadic relationship affect that capacity. Our findings put the emphasis on the specific role of the parent's capacity for pretend play in the process of the child's integration of inner and outer reality. Fonagy and Target (1996) linked the parent's ability for pretend play to the parental reflective functioning capacity—that is, the parent's capacity to accurately perceive intentionality in the child's behavior. Others have pointed to the relations between the infant's secure attachment to at least one parent and the later emergence of imaginative play in the child (Singer, 2002). Our own findings, together with the observed links among security of attachment, creativity, parent's reflective functioning, and pretend play capacity (Fonagy, Steele, Moran, Steele, & Higgit, 1991), strengthen the theoretical continuity between play in childhood and playfulness in adulthood (Solnit, 1993).

Our hypothesis related to the impact of socialization on the relative frequency of various play themes among girls and boys, as well as among mothers and fathers, is also supported by the findings. Themes of aggression were more frequent in boys, themes of nurturing in girls, themes of repair and construction in fathers, and themes of washing, dressing, nurturing, and feeding in mothers. It is interesting to note the relative persistence of the stereotypes linked to masculinity and femininity, in spite of the change in women's status in our society. Also, repair and construction in fathers may reflect the sublimation process by which aggression in boys is worked through in normative development, and this should be further examined in clinical populations. For instance, we may find that in aggressive/violent families, the father's play themes center more around aggression than repair and construction.

Regarding fathers' play, the level of the father's facilitative play was comparable to that of the mother's. This finding emphasizes the importance of conducting studies that include fathers, as they are still underrepresented in most research on child normal and abnormal development (Pruett, 2002).

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>ΔR²</th>
<th>ΔF</th>
<th>df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child gender</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>1, 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent creativity–facilitation</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>3.91*</td>
<td>2, 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family cooperation</td>
<td>.27*</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>3.82*</td>
<td>3, 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child IQ (Stanford–Binet)</td>
<td>.26*</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>3.97*</td>
<td>4, 30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Total \( R^2 = .20; F(4, 33) = 3.98, p < .05. \)

* \( p < .05. \)
During the triadic play interaction, we expected that the parents’ facilitative coplaying would enhance the child’s symbolic play. The parents’ style was found to be only marginally predictive of the child’s play, and we were interested to find that the child’s intelligence had an independent contribution to the prediction of symbolic play only during the triadic session. This may suggest that triadic play interactions evoke different interactive skills than does dyadic parent–child interaction. McHale and Fivaz-Depeursinge (1999) suggested that a triad is not a combination of two dyads but a different entity defined by its own rules. It is possible that during triadic play a higher level of intelligence is required from the child to be able to follow the lead of both parents. The same explanation would hold for our finding regarding the correlation of parental education and the quality of symbolic play, which was significant only in the triadic play. Still, triadic play may foster other important developmental processes besides symbolism. Flexibility of thinking, for example, may be found to be related to the child’s exposure, through the triadic play, to a “threesome” (Fivaz-Depeursinge & Corboz-Warnery, 1999) that facilitates the expression of different thoughts and meanings. We may then hypothesize that dyadic as well as triadic intersubjectivity promotes in the child different but equally important developmental and emotional processes.

Finally, no associations were found between the level of the child’s symbolic play and marital satisfaction. This finding is surprising in light of previous research (Belsky, 1990; Levy-Shiff & Israelshvili, 1988). One possible interpretation is related to the difference between coparenting and conjugality: Coparenting is a triadic interaction in which mother and father support or undermine each other’s position regarding their child, as opposed to marital relationship, which is dyadic and does not necessarily involve the child (Cowan & McHale, 1996; Gable, Belsky, & Crnic, 1995). The Lausanne Triadic Play paradigm (Fivaz-Depeursinge & Corboz-Warnery, 1999) has elegantly shown through microanalysis of triadic interactions how parents can be good at coparenting in spite of poor marital communication.

Finally, the main limitation of this study is the sample size, and the findings should thus be considered as preliminary. The present results may open a window for further studies on parental factors that support children’s symbolic and mental capacities and may serve as a comparison for future research on children’s symbolic play in various types of child psychopathology.

**Conclusion**

Play has many adaptive meanings: It expresses the child’s experiences and communicates them to others, weaves together the child’s past and present potentials, has affective qualities (pleasure as well as seriousness), and helps the child to learn about and to cope with unhappiness, conflict, and trauma (Solnit, Cohen, & Neubauer, 1993). Children’s ability for symbolic play is related to a range of developmental factors, such as general positive emotionality, enhanced language skill, persistence, the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy, empathy, cooperation, leadership, tolerance of play, imagery practicing, divergent thinking, taking turns, trying out different roles, ordering and sequence, and anticipating consequences (Singer, 2002). Hence, normative development as well as psychopathology are reflected in pretend play.

The present findings demonstrate that preschoolers’ capacity for symbolic play is shaped by the parents’ capacity to play. Fathers have an equally important role in enhancing the child’s capacity for symbolic play, and triadic play evokes different processes than do dyadic play interactions.

Winnicott (1971) equaled the child’s ability for pretend play to the adult’s level of creativity and linked creativity to mental health. Playing is a creative experience and takes place in a transitional space (meaning neither inside nor outside the subject). Play in childhood can turn into playfulness in adulthood (Solnit, 1993). Adults usually give up play, partly because of its regressive aspects and also because playfulness—that is, playing with thoughts, fantasies, and imaginings—is more adapted to adult life. Art and creativity can be viewed as special forms of play in adulthood. Entry into parenthood is an occasion to retrieve the relatively repressed ability to play (Mahon, 1993). Indeed, play, after feeding, presents parents with an opportunity to enter their child’s inner world and share affects. In reality, parents tend to be more playful during infancy, while their baby is still very dependent, than during the preschool years and early latency, when the child is perceived as not needing the adult for play. In our clinical populations, we encounter quite often parents who had a deprived childhood and who show very little ability for play. They usually had no experience of playing with their own parents, and, while becoming parents themselves, they do not think of play as part of their parenting skills. Consequently, we view the enhancing of joint play between parents and child as an important component in dyadic and triadic
psychotherapy with young children diagnosed with a variety of primary and/or relational disturbances. The therapist’s goal is to facilitate the creation of a transitional space where parents can meet their child and elaborate his or her inner world. As Winnicott wrote (1971), “If the patient cannot play, then something needs to be done to enable the patient to become able to play” (p. 63).

References


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