Toddlers’ Complex Communication: playfulness from a secure base

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ABSTRACT Attachment theory is presented in this article as involving embodied relational processes within complex relational systems. Two narrative-like ‘events’ are re-presented to illustrate very young children playfully relating – connecting and communicating inter- and intra-subjectively. The ethnographic-inspired research methods included the researcher as a participant observer, an outsider, an other, and a part-yet-connected to the observation. Belonging and well-being, holding-on and letting-go, trust and the distributed nature of individual minds connected amidst playfulness, are images observed and interpreted in these (and other) events. Several of Winnicott’s metaphorical concepts around transitional phenomena, transitional and potential space, holding, and the environment as a good enough mother, are employed to further extend interpretations and understandings of attachment in complex relational ways. The implications lie in understanding and applying concepts associated with attachment theory in complex ways, rather than simply viewing attachment in terms of simplistic concepts and categories.

Introduction
Psychoanalytic interpretations of attachment theory invite further exploration of the subjective, intersubjective, and embodied ways in which very young (pre-verbal) children relate (Winnicott, 1945, 1960, 1971; Fonagy and Target, 2007). When viewed as a relational process, attachment theory further illuminates the dialectical and connecting nature of the processes of attachment as complex relational activity systems: holding-on and letting-go, simply being, and the ways in which young children can relax, explore, and ‘live an experience together’ in a secure ‘holding environment’ (Winnicott, 1945, p. 141). Recent explorations of attachment phenomena have further expanded the concept of attachment by emphasizing the physicality and the cognitively embodied nature of attachment feelings (Fonagy & Target, 2007). This article explores how these overlapping interpretations of attachment theory and sociocultural activity systems theory can deepen our understandings of (pre-verbal) children’s playful communication.

Provision of care and education for children under two years old is the fastest growing early childhood education group in New Zealand-Aotearoa (Ministry of Education). Early childhood care and education teachers – caregivers – carry a huge responsibility for co-creating responsively reciprocal relational conditions that can mediate these very young children’s developing feelings of well-being and belonging, and their developing subjectivities as individuals connected to others intersubjectively. Shared subjectivity – intersubjectivity – is understood in this article as being initially semiotically mediated by rhythm and all the senses (gaze, touch, taste, sound, smell, and consciousness), and with origins in early infant–mother/caregiver attachment relationships (Stern, 1985; Trevarthen, 1998, 2009; Dissanayake, 2001). As children develop into the world, other signs, symbols, and material objects (such as words, rituals, toys) also mediate intersubjectivity. The intersubjective relationships and the enabling conditions that caregivers co-create with young
children are fundamental to the present and future well-being of these children in what might otherwise be cold, unfriendly and stultifying care and education institutions. And conversely, reciprocally connecting and caring relationships are likely to be fundamental for caregiver well-being.

This article draws on a wider study (Alcock, 2006) that explored young children’s playful communication in early childhood care and education institutions by further exploring the intersubjective, socially connecting, physically expressive and embodied nature of very young pre-verbal children’s playful relationships as exemplified in several events. Sociocultural psychology and attachment theory both view individual psychological growth and development as being socially driven; the social becomes the individual and the outer becomes the inner person (Vygotsky, 1978; Engeström 1987; Wertsch, 1991). The original sociocultural activity theory (CHAT) framed analyses of children’s playful communication are extended in this article with the addition of attachment theory as described by Winnicott (1960, 1971), and more recently by others including Trevarthen (1998, 2009), Fonagy and Target (2007), Ammaniti and Trentini (2009) and Gallese (2009a, b). These researchers all emphasize the physically felt – embodied – intersubjective and socially connecting nature of attachment.

I suggest that an appreciation of the embodied nature of attachment feelings (Siegel, 1999), and the related human desire to be intersubjectively together with an-other(s), adds depth and complexity to sociocultural understandings of young children as social selves (connected to others and in the world). This view of children as connected Beings underscores the importance of very young children in early childhood services being immersed in intersubjectively loving relationships. Responsively attuned intersubjective relationships are important not only for young children’s present well-being, but also for their future development and learning (Winnicott, 1971; Trevarthen, 2009). Evidence from neuroscience adds weight to the importance of early childhood teachers and caregivers also appreciating the embodied physically felt nature of young children’s attachments (Schore, 2000).

The two events presented in this article were purposely selected from the earlier study of young children’s playful communication (Alcock, 2006) because they include young pre-verbal children connecting and communicating playfully. I suggest that very young children can co-create this shared play when responsive teachers and caregivers co-create secure and inviting spaces (psychological and physical) to support children connecting, communicating and playing. The teacher in these two events seemed to be almost intuitively aware of her connecting, care-giving, relational role. Revisiting this data with an attachment lens has heightened my awareness of the feeling tone in teachers’ and caregivers’ relational roles.

Attachment is a physically and psychically embodied phenomenon described by Siegel (1999, p. 67) as ‘an inborn system in the brain that evolves in ways that influence and organize motivational, emotional, and memory processes with respect to significant care-giving figures. The attachment system motivates an infant to seek proximity to parents (and other primary caregivers) and to establish communication with them’. This motivation to be with others is obviously necessary for young children’s physical survival. Young pre-verbal children feel, think, speak and generally communicate with their whole bodies. Rhythm and the perceiving senses – sound, hearing, taste, touch, sight, and consciousness – seem to connect young children intersubjectively with others in the world. ‘Body-mind’ conveys this idea of thinking feeling bodies. We are our bodies.

This article emerged in response to an increasing feeling that the complexities and subtleties of attachment processes did not seem to be adequately represented by the traditional potentially reductionist categories of secure, insecure, disorganized and ambivalent attachment styles (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Rather than focusing on categories of attachment, this article is more concerned with the nature of attachment processes; these include the feelings of belonging and connectedness as played out in very young children’s relationships in early childhood institutions. Perhaps ‘intersubjectivity’ and ‘interconnectedness’ better convey the concept of attachment that this article addresses than does the word ‘attachment’ which is so loaded with historical deficit categories and associations.

In contrast to categories of attachment, several Winnicottian (1971) metaphorical image-concepts are used to help convey the fluid and embodied feelings of attachment processes that are being explored in this article. These images include ‘transitional phenomena’ and ‘transitional
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objects'; thus boundaries between young child and caregiver are interpreted as overlapping in permeable, dynamic – transitional – relational spaces that include both the visible physical environment and invisibly felt space. Imagination and reality co-exist in this transitional space as the child actively and gradually develops a subjective sense of Self as a separate, yet connected person. Another metaphor, the ‘good enough mother’ (Winnicott, 1971, p. 11) facilitates this transitional process by co-creating a secure holding environment – space where the child can safely and authentically feel free to just Be as he or she develops towards becoming this separate subjective Self. The good enough mother includes the environment and caregivers generally. Transitional space is the space of mediation and experience; it is a ‘play’ space, a space of change between reality and fantasy where signs, symbols, objects and other artifacts can be transformed. I am playing in a transitional space while working at understanding these transitional concepts in relation to the events I describe and the feelings I experience in creating this article. Referring to the concept of transitional phenomena, Winnicott (p. 62) writes that ‘in playing, and perhaps only in playing, the child or adult is free to be creative’.

These images and metaphors of transition provide glimpses of the intersubjectively mediated ways in which very young children develop their subjectivity socially (culturally and historically), by connecting with others, and as if in a mirror coming to recognise the Self reflected in the Other (Gallese, 2009b), paradoxically apart, yet connected and attached.

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

As mentioned CHAT framed the original research as both methodology and paradigm (Alcock, 2006). Chaiklin (2001) has defined CHAT as ‘the study of the development of psychological functions through social participation in societally-organised practices’ (p. 21). The use of events as the unit of analysis added authenticity to the research process by ensuring that the parts of the event remained connected to the whole; activity was not reduced to an assemblage of static separate elements that could misrepresent the dialectical nature and dynamism of the activity system. ‘Events’ may also be understood as complex activity systems.

Method

The design of this study was inspired by the naturalistic fieldwork methods of ethnographic research (Chambers, 2000). The research was interpretive, reflecting understandings of playfulness as a qualitative state rather than a statistical concept. Three early childhood centres were involved in the wider study (Alcock, 2006). These centres were purposely selected to reflect a range of early childhood centre types. They were also self-selected in that the staff were keen to participate in a project about playfulness. Over 16 months I spent 110 hours observing children being playful in the three centres. This article presents data from one centre: Eastbridge, which I visited on 13 occasions, for a total of 30 hours, spread over 6 months. Eastbridge was an inner city full-day childcare centre licensed for 25 children from birth to school age with five teachers and a cook.

Ethical consent for carrying out the research was obtained from a university human ethics committee. The hierarchy of gatekeeping involved initial meetings with centre supervisors to explain the research proposal. The approved procedures involved parents and staff receiving written information sheets. Teachers helped to ensure that all parents received the information forms, and collected the signed consent and assent forms on my behalf. I met and talked with teachers at staff meetings and parents as they arrived and left the centres. In this layered and official way, signed consent and assent for all data gathering was obtained from all staff and from parents on behalf of their children. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the early childhood centres, as well as children and teachers.

The process of gaining access to staff, parents, and finally children was uncomplicated, mainly because the research focus on playfulness and humour was perceived as positive and non-threatening for children by both teachers and parents. It is also likely that my background as an early childhood teacher assisted in my being accepted by the centre staff; I could speak their language. I was careful not to interrupt play, either by watching, by videoing, by my physical
positioning, body language, or by talking with children, and where appropriate I asked children and adults before using the video camera.

In these ways I was sensitive to the children’s right to play, to be children, and to not be interrupted by my researcher gaze and tools. I have always found young children interesting and enthralling; I enjoy being near and with young children and felt at ease in these early childhood centres, however, I was aware that, as well as becoming a ‘friend’ to the children and teachers, I was also an outsider, an Other with my observer–researcher identity, a-part, yet connected.

Children are always Othered by adults as Lahman (2008) points out. Thus we Other and objectify children in various degrees with our memories of childhood, our blatant differences in size, age, experience, and by confusingly positioning children as vulnerable and competent. As a researcher, I worked with this positioning from initially feeling like a stranger passively observing (and thereby Othering) children being playful. With the increased familiarity that accompanied my regular visits, the relationships between teachers, children, and myself developed varying degrees of intersubjectivity and shared understandings. For example, at times I was requested by children to participate in their play. Generally however, the children treated me as another adult, somewhere between a teacher and a parent, and I tried to maintain a passive responsive role using ‘reactive strategies’ (Corsaro, 1985). These included being responsive to child- and teacher-initiated communication, and relating to children and teachers authentically, intersubjectively, rather than as an outsider, a stranger, an objectifying and objectified Other.

The tools used for gathering and generating data consisted of myself as a participant observer with the additional aid of a small video camera, a laptop computer, and occasionally an audio-cassette recorder. The children were familiar with staff video-taping them, so were relaxed in the presence of this equipment. Teachers agreed to my videoing them understanding that the research focus on children’s playful interactions might also include teacher interactions. I usually asked before videoing (unless asking interrupted play) and held the camera at waist height; this felt less intimidating than having a third eye on my head. The video-footage added depth and breadth to the observational data enabling me to replay and further explore the playfulness in the sometimes frenzied activity of groups of children having fun together. I did not seek permission to use the video for any other purpose than for data generation.

The initial descriptive observation-based analysis accompanied the construction of a data record; the process included dating, filing, and re-filing observation notes, transcripts and tapes. Inductive data analysis occurred as data were generated and continues with the interpretations presented in this article.

Theoretical analysis developed out of descriptive analyses including repeated viewings of the video footage, multiple re-readings of observation and video transcripts, reflecting and ruminating over memos (writing more), and looking for paradoxes, gaps, and contrasts in the data (Delamont, 2002). It was at the level of theoretical analysis that the CHAT framework developed for interpreting events was most useful. Thus the analyses involved identifying the motivating aim of the playful event, and exploring how that aim changed during the play. This process also led to further exploring the nature of the mediated interactions between the elements of the activity systems, and to identifying contradictions in these interactions. It is the complexity of interactions within, between, and across activity systems that continues to fascinate me and that seems most applicable for understanding attachment concepts as fluid states of being and feeling, located within interconnecting systems of ‘activity’.

This analytical process was simultaneously informed by ongoing and extensive reading of related literature. Together, the data and the literature provided substance for theoretical reflection, ensuring that data was interpreted reflectively and holistically, rather than simply categorically and technically (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Prominent themes in the data were collated as a series of ‘playful events’ that illuminated the themes and became the unit of analysis as mentioned. As with frame play (described by Bateson, 1972; Goffman, 1974), these events had observable beginnings and ends, though they were sometimes not apparent until the whole event was analysed.

The ideas presented in this article emerged from further inductive and theoretical reading of and ruminating on the original data. The attachment themes addressed here further explore very young children’s subjective and intersubjective attachment experiences in their playful
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communication. Analyses are further influenced by my attachment feelings of grappling with grief and loss while re-reading Winnicott (1971).

The following events re-present young pre-verbal children experiencing playful communication in an early childhood care and education setting.

**Background**

A series of playful events involving Em (14 months) and Kate (15 months) occurred in an afternoon over a one-hour period. The full-day mixed-age childcare centre in Eastbridge is located on the first floor of an apartment building. The outside rooftop space is partitioned from the inside by a wall of bifolding glass doors, which are open, allowing the children freedom to wander between inside and outside. The weather is fine, though slightly chilly, on an early spring day. Teacher Mo, standing and watching in the space between in and outside, is also Em’s mother.

**Event: Toddling and falling**

Kate comes toddling inside from outside; she hesitates at the door boundary between in and outside before toddling, waddling, straight towards Em who’s lying sprawled out on carpeted floor surrounded and seemingly connected by four pillows having intentionally fallen down there. Kate laughs, a joyful staccato cackle that matches her enthusiasm. Teacher Mo stands at one side of the inside–outside boundary, between the two children, openly watching them both, she welcomes and further encourages Kate inside, by bending low and smiling at her. Several older children are playing in the vicinity.

Teacher Mo (to Em who’s playing with feelings of falling): Ohhh!, oh up up again, up again, here she comes again.

Em makes squealing sounds of fun while falling. She falls away from Kate, as though Kate has pushed her (Kate hasn’t).

Teacher Mo: Go get Kate, Em.

Kate begins falling too, imitating Em, alongside Em.

Teacher Mo: Oh, she’s gone crash, Kate’s gone crash, crash.

Kate lies face and chest on the floor bottom up in the air. Em continues falling, laughing, squealing excitedly.

Max (3 years), comes over, says something to Kate, gently puts his head on the ground near Kate’s head and takes a stick from Kate’s hand. He then gets up and wanders off.

Em, watching Kate, lies down imitating Kate, placing her head near Kate’s.

Teacher Mo: Go, go, go, Kate, go. [Kate watches Em]

Kate rolls over onto her back, relaxing happily.

Em watches Kate and also tries to roll over, ending up lying on her side, on carpeted floor.

Teacher Mo: Oh are you going to have a lie down?

Teacher Mo comes over and kneels beside them.

Teacher Mo: Okay night night. You want a pillow?

Teacher Mo places a pillow beside Em who puts her head on it, side on, for a few seconds. Em sits up and Kate puts her head and half her body on the same pillow.

Teacher Mo: Kate’s got your pillow.

Em puts her head on another pillow. Kate, watching, moves her head and body to another pillow.

Teacher Mo: Oh, Kate’s got a red pillow.

Both children lie, cheeks on pillows, a metre apart from each other, bottoms in the air, half on sides, watching each other, having fun, pretend sleeping.

Em watches as Kate moves to yet another pillow.
Teacher Mo: Now Kate’s got the blue pillow.

Teacher Mo (clapping her hands together as she chants to Kate): Go, go, go, go.

Kate half stands and lets her body fall forward purposefully, onto the carpet.

She laughs, then rolls onto her back, (repeating the actions from the start of this event).

Analysis and Discussion

_Transitional Spaces: falling bodies imitating, repeating and anticipating._ Teacher Mo was initially positioned at the edge of the entrance between inside and outside spaces. With encouraging calling words and gestures, she supported Kate to gently toddle-walk past her across the inside–outside boundary to be together with Em in a shared inside space.

Bodies mediated and connected these toddlers in this space. Together the toddlers used their whole bodies and all senses to communicate and relate. They had fun free-falling, letting their bodies drop, lying down, rolling over, physically flopping and feeling, seemingly connected to each other and the physical environment which included the mat, the pillows, and the space around them. Teacher Mo used few words, sounds, and body signs to intersubjectively mediate their developing individual subjectivity in relation to each other and to her. With her words and actions she reminded them of each other, of their separateness, and their togetherness. The toddlers laughed after each fall, seemingly at the playful, gravitational sensation of letting themselves go and falling, safely. Laughter connected them further.

Their bodies sang joyfully as they watched and copied each other and felt themselves and each other fall rhythmically, while also testing gravity. These very young friends showed considerable social awareness by sharing and taking turns to repetitively let go and fall; they shared the anticipation of falling while simultaneously seeming to experimentally use their bodies as objects. Em had initiated the event by free-falling onto the pillow-surrounded carpet, and as if in a choreographed natural conclusion to this first sequence, Kate completed the free-falling phase of what had become a larger play.

Teacher Mo also behaved repetitively and imitatively, though instead of letting her body fall she used words elaborating, enveloping and anticipating the toddlers’ actions with verbal echoes of their actions, such as ‘go, go, go ... Kate’s got your pillow’. In this sense words (and thought) followed actions. This linking of thought, language and action is described by Vygotsky (1986, p. 255):

_The connection between thought and word, however, is neither preformed nor constant. It emerges in the course of development and itself evolves. To the biblical ‘In the beginning was the word’, Goethe makes Faust reply, ‘In the beginning was the deed’. The intent here is to detract from the value of the word, but we can accept this version if we emphasize it differently: In the beginning was the deed. The word was not the beginning – action was there first; it is the end of development, crowning the deed._

While Teacher Mo modeled the use of words as actions and thoughts, the toddlers played with the actions, possibly learning about words and thoughts in the process of playfully communicating and co-creating this connecting activity.

The event continues.

_Em, watching Kate, who’s lying on her back on the carpet, gets up, toddles over to the nearby music area, picks up a string of small bells, toddles back and gives them to Kate. Kate, now sitting, takes the bells and proceeds to first shake, then finger, exploring them. Em toddles off towards the outside doors where she meets Teacher Mo._

Teacher Mo: What’s happened to Kate, Em, where’s Kate?

_Em turns and looks towards Kate who’s sitting on the floor absorbed in the bells._

Teacher Mo: There she is, She’s got the bells.

_Kate hearing this looks up, towards them._

_Em turns and toddles back towards Kate._
Kate gets half up, crawls a few metres, then standing she begins toddling arms outstretched towards Em who now stands waiting, watching Kate approaching. Kate puts her outstretched arms around Em hugging her. Both squeal happily, playfully.

Teacher Mo: Ooh that’s nice, are you going to have a kiss and a cuddle? [commenting rather than questioning]

Em reciprocates by hugging Kate and both unsteady toddlers fall down softly, Em first.

Em makes a gently protesting cry.

Kate pats Em’s head soothingly.

Em gets up and toddles away while Kate lies relaxed on her back, on the floor (She seems to enjoy this position). (Eastbridge, September 22, 2009)

**Analysis and Discussion**

Environment: the ‘good-enough’ teacher. The physical environment, the complexity of connections between and across subjects (teacher and children) and things, and the central mediating position of Teacher Mo as a good-enough teacher (who happens to also be Em’s mother), stand out in this event. The good-enough mother in Winnicott’s (1971, p. 11) description encompasses caregiver plus environment; boundaries are permeable extending beyond skin. Thus Teacher Mo co-created the environmental conditions that enabled Em and Kate to connect with each other, with herself, and with the wider environment. This then enabled the emergence of a shared holding environment for both Em and Kate. The transitional space became a play space where the toddlers felt sufficiently securely connected that they could playfully relax, let go of their bodies, and feel themselves fall without fear. Mo further created these conditions by encouraging the children to use softening objects such as the pillows, the carpet, and the entire space. Her playful words and actions supported their intra- and intersubjective actions.

Both Em and Kate used gestures, gaze and whole body movements to actively and purposively communicate playful thoughts and feelings. Their playfulness seemed to combine spontaneity and purpose as they imitated each other repetitively, took turns, and shared the multiple meanings associated with objects like cushions that signified lying down and sleep, as well as colour and the quality of softness. As they moved and squealed joyfully their active bodily communication contrasted starkly with the teacher’s use of words, as well as actions to calmly mediate and interpret the toddlers’ pre-verbal gestures and body signals. Teacher Mo’s presence, as well as her unobtrusive actions, contributed to creating the emotional, physical and cognitive security that further mediated the toddlers’ playful communication.

All three players seemed to be connected with invisible threads. Em and Kate used their bodies to joke with each other and to purposively communicate ideas about sleeping (heads on pillows), gift giving, receiving (bells), showing affection (hugging, kissing and head patting), and the thrill of falling (forwards onto carpet). Teacher Mo continually reinforced their social awareness, by reminding them of each other’s separateness and connectedness. As well as mediating social awareness, intersubjectivity, anticipation and connectedness, Teacher Mo also mediated the development of empathy; she verbally and physically supported the toddlers’ cuddling, kissing and patting actions.

The toddlers also watched and imitated each other repetitively, possibly playing out their mirror neuron systems (MNS). As Gallese (2009b, p. 520), one of the original scientists investigating mirror neurons explains, ‘Mirror neurons are premotor neurons that fire both when an action is executed and when it is observed being performed by someone else’. More recently he and others have emphasized the corporeal nature of mirror neurons and the resultant implications for understanding empathy and intersubjectivity as bodily felt phenomena. ‘The discovery of mirror neurons provides a new empirically based notion of intersubjectivity, viewed first and foremost as intercorporeity – the mutual resonance of intentionally meaningful sensory-motor behaviours – as the main source of knowledge we directly gather about others’ (Gallese, 2009b, p. 523). These pre-verbal children expressed kindness and potentially empathetic caring in their actions. The good-
enough teacher’s words as actions reinforced these behaviours and united them as a unit, together with her and the physical environment.

Event: Toddling, sliding and hiding

The same day, 20 minutes later, but the event is toddling, sliding and hiding. The slide is Teacher Mo’s play focus for Em and Kate. It is next to a flexible canvas tunnel-tube. The tunnel, the slide and the large boxes, which form steps up the slide, mediate playful communication. These objects also signify adult conceptions of children’s play.

Jo (4 years, 10 months) is hiding in one end of the canvas tunnel. He is dressed in a leopard suit. The tunnel moves with his movements and this attracts the attention of Em. Teacher Mo stands beside the slide, one arm outstretched, supporting Kate, who readies herself at the top of the slide. Em, standing a metre from the tunnel, points to it, looks at the teacher (her mother), and looks again at the tunnel, thereby initiating the teacher’s talk.

Teacher Mo: Who’s in there Em? Is that Jo, is that Jo? Go and have a look, go and have a look Em.

Kate slides down the slide, she toddles towards the tunnel end. Em stands beside Kate, watching Kate.

Teacher Mo: Em, I mean Kate, go and see who’s in the tunnel. Who’s in the tunnel? Who is it?

Kate bends over, and holding the tunnel edge, she kneels and positions herself half inside one end of the tunnel.

Teacher Mo: Oh Kate who is it? Who is it? Say boo to whoever’s in the tunnel, say boo.

Jo: Brrrr ... [growling]

Teacher Mo: That was a funny sound that came out.

Jo: Urrh urrh ... [at other end of tunnel from Kate]

Em watches Kate and the tunnel, Em toddles over and sees Jo at the other end of the tunnel. She makes no reaction but toddles over towards the teacher for a turn on the slide.

Jo runs out and away.

Kate looks out from the tunnel too slow to see Jo disappear.

Teacher Mo: Oh, who was it Kate? Who was it?

Kate: Daar.

Teacher Mo: Jo, was it?

Teacher Mo (rehearing Kate, daar/dark): Is it dark in there is it? It is dark; are you going to go in?

Analysis and Discussion

Transitional space: holding environment. Again Teacher Mo used words and presence to actively mediate the continuity over time of an enabling holding environment, a transitional space where imagination and reality can co-exist as in this event. She used words, gaze and actions to intersubjectively mediate the toddlers’ active thinking and physical and psychologically felt awareness of each other, thereby providing them with the continuity of a secure holding environment in this transitional play space. Both Em and Kate used gestures and gaze to actively communicate their motivating intentions and feelings.

These toddlers and Jo used their bodies as the primary means of communication (Jo as a leopard did growl, as well as run). Teacher Mo used words that the toddlers understood. When she suggested that they look to see who was hiding, they did so, peeping into the tunnel. Kate made a half intelligible comment, possibly explaining why she could not see who was in the tunnel. She said ‘daar’, which the teacher interpreted as ‘dark’. Teacher Mo also interpreted Em’s bodily expression of her desire for a turn on the slide. The children’s body movements were directed towards purposeful action (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Teacher Mo continued to use words instead of
physical actions by providing a running commentary for the toddlers’ physical actions. Teacher Mo was as repetitive with her words as they were in their actions.

The playful hiding and finding activity united these children and teacher, creating a transitional play space in which Jo, hiding inside the tunnel, yet at the center of the play-drama, imaginatively became a growling leopard. Jo and the teacher understood the incongruity that made pretending not to know who was in the tunnel humorous for them. Jo, being almost five years old, could understand and play the joking ‘hide and seek’ role. The toddlers, however, seemed to be more focused on the separate physical elements in the play; they were preoccupied with immediate aims that required mastering physical skills, such as sliding, climbing, walking, and bending (without falling over) to look in the ‘dark’ tunnel.

From a CHAT systems perspective the contradictions in people’s actions within activity systems provide the group goal and the motivating force that propels continued activity (Engeström, 1987; Alcock, 2010). The group goal seemed to be ‘togetherness’ in these events; togetherness evolved and revolved around the children’s relationships with objects such as the slide and the tunnel, mediating both Teacher Mo’s words and imagination. Thus Teacher Mo also connected the group activity with words and actions as she persisted in responsively trying to clarify and interpret the toddlers’ understandings of abstract hiding and finding concepts, while also assisting them with physical skills; creating a holding environment freeing up the transitional space of being for all the players.

The event continues.

Kate comes out of the tunnel edge and starts pushing a nearby toy pram to and fro. Em is still toddling towards Teacher Mo, both arms outstretched effectively communicating the message to be helped onto the first box-step up the slide.

Teacher Mo: You’d like to have your turn on the slide now would you Em?

Em starts climbing up the graduated boxes towards the top of the slide. Kate, meanwhile, starts climbing up the slide itself.

Teacher Mo: Oh hullo, are you coming up the slide Kate? You’re coming up the slide.

She laughs at the incongruity of Kate going up, rather than down, the slide.

Kate gets to the top of the slide before Em. Teacher Mo helps her turn around and slide down. As Em starts to slide down, Kate starts to climb up again. They meet at the bottom, gently. (Eastbridge, September 22, 2009)

Analysis and Discussion

Inviting affording environment. From a sociocultural perspective the objects in the environment mediated these intersubjective connections inviting and connecting the children in sliding and hiding play in concretely visible ways. The slide, the box-steps, and the tunnel all mediated and contributed towards creating a shifting transitional space where feelings of hiding, sliding, being lost, and feeling found could be safely played with. At times the physical environment seemed to merge with the children’s bodies as they moved and the objects in turn were sometimes moved. In this materially interactive way, the physical environment and Teacher Mo together seemed to be the good enough mother as described by Winnicott (1971, p. 11). Human relational qualities, such as gaze, body language, sounds and other communicative signs, seemed to mediate and connect the children intersubjectively and more intimately with each other.

From this attached and connecting perspective, the physical environment is understood as alive; Indra’s Net, from the Buddhist Avatamsaka Sutra, provides a vivid visual metaphor of the universe that situates these people connecting concepts of transitional phenomena and holding environment spaces within a wider context, while also conveying the interconnectedness and interdependence of all phenomena, (material, non-material, living and dead). Indra’s Net extends infinitely in all directions. A vast network of precious jewels is attached to each of the intersecting knots of the net. Each jewel contains and reflects the image of all the other jewels so that, if you look at one, you see all the others reflected in it. Similarly each object in the world is not merely itself, but involves every other object in itself (Cleary, 1993).
Body-minds Together: from ‘ego to we-go’

A feature that stood out in these playful events was the synchronous mirroring quality of children’s intertwining movements; their bodies spoke, moved and sang together. Movement, gaze, facial expression, voice tone, and other bodily-based ways of relating and connecting, thinking and feeling, mediated these pre-verbal children communicating and connecting intersubjectively and multi-subjectively together with the environment. They seemed to be attached to each Other, the environment and the teacher or mother. Embodied attachment feelings seemed to become distributed across these children in these transitional spaces supporting their togetherness.

This view of individuals as attached and connected to others is supported by findings from the field of neuro-science (Fonagy & Target, 2007; Gallese, 2009b, c; Trevarthen, 2009). Research increasingly endorses such ‘togetherness’ as a species goal. As Emde (2009, p. 556), commenting on articles written by Ammaniti & Trentini (2009), Gallese (2009a, b), and Trevarthen (2009) points out, ‘The self is a social self to begin with. The research reviewed indicates that from infancy innately given brain processes support social reciprocity and the development of “we-ness”’. In attempting to shift the excessive focus on separate individuals to a more relational awareness of individuals as connected social selves, Emde has used the catchy phrase ‘from ego to we-ego’. In a similar vein, the philosopher Nancy (referred to by Reis, 2009) points out that for the individual to be an ‘I’ is already to be in an ontological condition of we-ness, with others. This resonates with Galleses’ (2009c, p. 38) explanation of the socially connecting role of mirror neurons:

Our ontological desire to be as the other, the model, stems from our ontological openness to the Other, which in turn is determined by the fact that the Other is already a constitutive part of the Self. From that follows that we should abandon the Cartesian view on the primacy of the Ego and adopt a perspective according to which the Other is co-originally given as the Self. Both Self and Other seem to be intimately intertwined because of the intercorporeity linking them.

Conclusion

The events and analyses presented in this article add to research that emphasizes the Self as fundamentally social, attached and connected to others and the environment. This article used several events to explore how the complexly embodied, subjective, and intersubjective qualities of very young children’s attachment relationships can be usefully positioned alongside Winnicott’s (1971) metaphorical image-concepts of transitional phenomena, holding spaces and the environmental good enough mother. These concepts can illuminate the invisible dimensions of attachment feelings.

The intersubjectively responsive reciprocal relationships that teachers initiate and mediate with young children can assist children’s feelings of secure attachment, enabling them to let-go and relax into playing together. Thus the young children in these events seemed to be attached not only to mother or teacher or caregiver, but also to each Other, in the transitional spaces, where the teacher mediated their connection by supporting their playful letting-go and free-falling as they played together.

Most importantly these children’s bodies seemed to show their feeling–thoughts as connected body–minds attached and connected in playful activity together. The teacher used words; the children used their bodies to communicate and connect. The ethical implications of this socially connected and attached view of children, and ourselves, for early childhood teachers and caregivers, and others who dwell with very young children, are challenging. How do we create good-enough spaces so children will feel securely connected and able to relax and transition into and out of creative play?

Attachment systems are complex. For reasons of space and complexity, this article has not explored children’s attachment to objects, nor has it explored attachment as an activity system in the CHAT tradition (Alcock, 2010). Though attachment viewed as connection and interconnectedness does seem to fit with a CHAT view of activity as complex interconnected systems (Alcock, 2010). Winnicott’s (1971) treatment of transitional objects which sits within his theories of transitional phenomena is an area that invites further discussion, particularly around the nature of ‘change’ and the realisation that everything is paradoxically, permanently changing. This combination of transition (change) with attachment (connection) seems to be a useful way of
conceptualising the complexities in attachment processes at both the micro-individual and macro-societal levels as interconnected systems, exemplified by the metaphor of Indra’s net.

References


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