

Characteristics of Role Play in Preschool Children with Difficulties in Communication

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Play of preschool children with a low sociometric status is studied in the context of the development of psychological boundaries of "I" ("J" as self). Phenomenology of "I" psychological boundaries is investigated as well as the violation of those boundaries in preschoolers in the process of the play. Data are provided about specific features of play of children who are not accepted by peers, and the differences from peer-accepted child play are described (violation of the role and subject matter boundaries, inadequacy of the play space area, transition from play relationships into real one, etc.) as well as characteristics of the psychological boundaries of "I" in these children. The study involved 140 children of preschool age; the main group comprised 70 children who were not accepted by their peers. The study also involved mothers of those children (40 from control group and 40 from the study group). The results were processed with SPSS statistics software package; the significance of variation was checked by X^2 and Mann-Whitney criteria; correlation, factorial, and cluster analyses were also performed. All variations between groups are statistically significant at $p < 0.01$. The experimental data proved that there is a correlation between unformed psychological boundaries of «I», specific features of play, and peer relationship at preschool age. A correlation was also found between the violation of psychological boundaries of «I», disrupted interaction with the mother and a child's personality features.

Keywords: psychological boundaries of «I», peer-unaccepted children, play, subject matter, play space, play content.

The significance of the play for the mental development and formation of personality hardly needs any special arguments today. Whatever psychology school researchers be-

long to, they all unanimously agree that play is necessary for a child's full-fledged mental development, the formation of a personality, for finding his/her place in the world.

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In "The Psychology of Play", D.B. Elkonin emphasizes the significance of play and indicates the aspects of mental development where the influence of play is decisive; the development of these aspects "prepares a transition to a new, higher level of mental development, a transition to a new development period" [8, p. 288]. A child develops motivation and needs, overcomes cognitive egocentrism, and develops inner actions and voluntary behavior.

It is precisely preschoolers' play that provides major preconditions for mastering learning activity and, consequently, full-fledged play may determine the successful learning at school. Voluntary behavior, the ability to follow the standards, to act by example, handle symbols and patterns, master social standards – these are extremely important new characteristics of the preschool age that are formed primarily in play.

The research done over 20 years ago under D.B. Elkonin's guidance studied the transition to starting schooling at the age of 6; the results showed that the children who "have not played enough" at the preschool age lagged behind their 7-year old classmates both in cognitive and personality development. They demonstrated higher anxiety and less developed ability of symbolization [5]. Later research confirmed these findings.

The study presented here was, to a large extent, initiated by discussions on the current status of child play. Observations over child life and specialized research show that, unfortunately, children today play less and less, while social life of adults faded out of the play content [6]. However, a question arises: even if the children play, can play always and for all the children fully perform its socializing function? Can all children use play's developmental potential? These questions arose when we observed play of older preschoolers. The play of non-popular children has caught our eye and their play became the aim of the first part of our research.

The research was done in Moscow kindergarten № 1134. Sociometric data was used to select children with a low socio-metric status. This group included children who were rejected

by their peers, i. e. those who received a large number of negative selections while there were no joint selections; as well as ignored children who were not selected by anybody.

The study involved 140 kindergarten-age children, 70 of them were children with a low socio-metric status (non-accepted children, NC). This group comprised two subgroups: ignored children (IC) and rejected children (RC). Control group included 70 children with a high sociometric status (peer-accepted children, AC). The study also involved 80 mothers: 40 mothers of children in the control group and 40 mothers of children in the study group. Data were collected in the course of 4.5 years.

The results were processed with SPSS statistical application; the significance of variation was checked with χ^2 and Mann-Whitney criteria; correlation, factorial and cluster analyses were also performed.

Observation over free play of children (collective and individual) at a preschool facility was the main method of investigation. The following parameters were recorded: subject matters; roles; organization of the play space; the type of toys a child selected; the type of play, individual or collective, a child preferred. Apart from that, we also tried to identify the main conflict and relationship reproduced by a child in play, i. e. content of play [7].

Observation of play revealed some specific features demonstrated by children with a low sociometric status that made their play different from that of peer-accepted children. The differences are given below in greater detail.

Subject-matter. A subject-matter means, following D.B. Elkonin's definition, an area of social situation that is reproduced in play [8]. It was found that NC seldom (16% only) played subject of socially significant "adult" activity such as "At doctor's", "On the train", "School", etc. Family narratives ("Mother-daughter" or household play, "Family dinner", etc.) occurred in both groups but NC played personally significant, affectively tainted aspects of family relationships, e.g. family conflicts, rather than standard role relations. Variations between the groups are statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

In the control group, AC played the plots of classic fairy tales and popular TV series much

more often (73% of children) as compared to NC group who played these plots much less often (25.7% of children). In NC play, the plots of fairy tales and shows deviated from the traditional ones: they were predominantly related to fighting (40% of children) or to caregiving and helplessness (50% of children). Battle narratives were also encountered in AC play but only as a part of a broader context, while with NC fighting represented the essence of play, the narrative did not go further than that. It turned out that non-accepted children cannot stay long within the selected subject and thus destroy the play.

Roles. Per our observation, NC, unlike the AC group, have almost never assumed professional roles such as ‘doctor’, ‘construction worker’, ‘sales person’, etc. (84.2% of NC never assumed such roles at $p < 0.01$). In ‘household’ play they seldom have the role of parents (31.5% of children) but rather play young children; in case they do play the roles of adults, the roles acquire a negative affective aspect. NC group showed a prevalence of roles related to the ‘strength-weakness’ theme: rejected children usually play aggressive fighters, ignored children become weak characters in need of care, e.g. a younger child (80% of ignored children). Interestingly, in collective play the ignored children, as a rule, play only secondary roles (80% of children); even the main roles they play get transformed into secondary ones. For instance, Cinderella never becomes a princess, in the course of play everybody ill-treats her and the prince never finds her, etc. Non-accepted children cannot stay long within the role, disrupt the role action and exit into real relationship ($p < 0.01$).

Organization of play space. Differences between the groups become even more pronounced in the organization of the play space. NC, as a rule, try to fence off their space from the space of others: they would crawl into a toy house, build a border wall, place weapons at the border or dig a ditch, mark-up the border of play (64% of NC). They occupy an inappropriately sized space for their play: rejected children take up a huge space, carry as many toys there as they can; ignored children, on the contrary, take up a small corner and almost

never leave it (the difference between NC and AC is significant at $p < 0.01$).

Toys they select. NC more often than not (76%) select multifunctional objects, e.g. parts of a construction set not used for intended purposes, non-structured play materials – sand, play dough; very often they select aggressive toys (particularly, rejected children). Control group children more often select substantive toys – copies of household objects, toy cars, Barbie dolls ($p < 0.01$).

Observation over the children in play with rules showed that NC significantly more often than AC violate the rules ($p < 0.01$).

The results of the first stage of our study, namely, the detected violations of role boundaries, the subjects and play rules, exit beyond their limits, inappropriate play space – all these characteristics of NC gave ground to assume that the children non-accepted by their peers have unformed or distorted psychological boundaries of «I» (or the boundaries of the «I» psychological space). In this paper ‘I’ stands for integrated whole personality.

Psychological space is understood as the space of «I» that is expressed in physical phenomenology (bodily or territorial), in social interaction or preferred values. Psychological space is inseparably connected with the concept of boundaries; psychological boundaries of «I» represent a border line, a dividing line between «I» and non-«I», between the things that a child identifies with him/herself and his/her belongings and those things he/she does not identify with him/herself. The boundary of «I» has a dual function: isolation of «I» from the Other and from the outer world, and unification with them, which ensures a contact and interaction between «I» and the Other, «I» and the world. We identify the following types of psychological boundaries: bodily, territorial and social («I» – the Other, ‘mine – not mine’, ‘«I» – society’) as well as value-based boundaries («I» – the Other «I», ‘«I» real – «I» ideal’, ‘good-bad’, ‘kind-evil’).

In preschool age it is in play, through assuming a role, that «I» is differentiated, a basis for decentration is formed; in play a preschooler learns how to identify oneself with Other, to differentiate and coordinate positions. It is

not surprising therefore, that it is in play that the disruption of boundaries was so clearly observed.

The second stage of our study investigated to what extent the «I» psychological boundaries were formed in children non-accepted by their peers.

The concept of boundaries was first introduced and studied in psychoanalysis and was further developed in the object relations theory where shaping of psychological boundaries is viewed in terms of a child's separation from the mother in early childhood (Z. Freud, P. Federn, M. Klein, D. Winnicott, M. Mahler, W. Bion, R. Fairbairn, J. Lacan). If interaction between a child and the mother plays the main role in separating «I» – not «I» in early childhood, later the father becomes a no less significant figure in this process: he destroys the symbiotic connection between mother and child and introduces new forms of interaction.

The concept of boundaries is a central feature of gestalt-therapy, in ethological and existential/phenomenological approaches.

It is only in recent decades that psychological boundaries have come into the focus of research by Russian psychologists (A. Sh. Thostov, Ye. T. Sokolova, V. V. Nikolayeva, G. A. Arina, V. A. Petrovsky, M. A. Ishkova, S. K. Nartova-Bochaver, Yu. M. Plyusnin, B. D. Elkonin and others). The limit of the article space precludes a full analysis of how the problem of psychological boundaries is approached by authors cited above.

The term "boundary" had not previously been used by *Russian classics of psychology* though their works implicitly contain this concept. The process of child mental development (neonatal crisis, isolation of «I» from «Proto-we» three-year-old's crisis, emergence of voluntary action and personal conscious, differentiation between the external and internal life, decentration, peer interaction) is, in its essence, the process of building boundaries between «I» and the Other. Per D. B. Elkonin, «I» always contains the Other-«I», i. e. there is always an interaction between «I» and the Other «I» where «the Other» is always an example to follow. Decentration, a child's attitude towards him/herself through the Other and towards the

Other as if to «I», develops, primarily, in the process of a narrative role play through assuming a role, developing role-based and real relationships with play partners [9].

Despite the fundamental differences between cultural-historical and psychoanalytical approaches, they correlate in the understanding of how the boundaries and psychological space of «I» are developing: from the initial feeling of inseparable «I» and non-«I» and mother-child symbiosis, towards a gradual separation of «I» from non-«I» and further individualization and differentiation of «I».

Since play characteristics in unaccepted children gave us ground to assume that they do not have well-formed psychological boundaries of «I», it is worth looking into the role of play in their formation.

Eric Erikson views play as an important element in the formation of early childhood identity, which is, in essence, building of «I» boundaries. D. Winnicott sees play as a kind of a creative process that takes place in a safe, potential space between «I» and non-«I», between a child and the Other where «I» boundaries are formed [3]. The proponents of client-centered approach (V. Exline and G. Landreth) believe that play content represents structuring of the inner world and experience of a child per se. In play a child experiences a feeling of getting the situation under control, i. e. streamlines the process and status, i. e. builds boundaries, structuring them in time and space.

Psychological borders are explicitly present in the concepts of play developed in the cultural-historical paradigm (L. S. Vygotsky, D. B. Elkonin, A. N. Leontyev and others). Speaking about boundaries, it is of utmost importance that not only the players exceed boundaries of reality (play necessarily contains an imaginary situation, [1]) but a child exists simultaneously in two affective spaces: "a child cries as a patient and rejoices as a player" [2, p. 290], i. e. constantly resides at a boundary of two worlds: imaginary and real. Boundaries in play, as D. B. Elkonin stressed, lie not only between role-based and real space but also between roles (between role spaces) and between real positions of players, i. e. boundaries in play define, we can say, three spaces [9].

Here we should mention a study by L. I. Elkoni-nova: her concept of play is based on Yuri Lot-man's idea further developed by B. D. Elkonin that a boundary is a borderline between semantic spaces; by crossing this borderline a person acquires his/her own essence [10].

Thus, a conclusion can be made that role play facilitates decentration, the differentiation between «I» and non-«I» and, consequently, the formation of «I»-Other and «I»-Other «I» boundaries; besides, play is the space where boundaries related to the ability of obeying the rule and boundaries of child self-limitation are built, i.e. boundaries between a child and the society. Crossing a boundary between the real and play space is a precondition of acquiring the meanings of human voluntary actions.

The second stage of our study tested the assumption that children not accepted by their peers do not have well-formed «I» boundaries. A battery of techniques was developed to study the characteristics of psychological boundaries of «I», personal characteristics and peer relationships of children not accepted by peers. The battery comprised the following techniques: "Kingdom-state" (T. Gromova), "Geometric shapes test" (A.Sh. Tkhostov and D.A. Beskova), "Homunculus" (A.V. Semenovich), modified "Metamorphoses", "Family picture", talks "About myself" and "My peer", "Self-evaluation staircase" scale by Dembo-Rubinstein, "Picture of a non-existent animal", anxiety test by D. Amen, and Rosensveig test. Additionally, real mother-child interaction was investigated in 80 mother-child pairs (joint action and joint drawing tests).

The results of studies of psychological boundaries obtained with different techniques are briefly described below.

Geometric shapes test showed that in the majority of non-accepted children the psychological boundaries are unformed, unstable, their integrity is compromised. Differences between groups were also found in how they build their contacts with the world. Non-accepted children exhibit a one-way strategy of building contact with the world; among them, the ignored children mostly avoid contact, and rejected children predominantly show self-presentation and aggressive-defensive form of contact.

"Kingdom-state" results confirmed the data obtained through play observation. Non-accepted children did not recognize the boundaries of other children more often but were very sensitive to violation of their own borders and tirelessly strengthened them. Children either draw passive defenses on borders (ditches, flying bridges, fences) or placed aggressive defenses there (mine fields, armies of soldiers with cannons) at $p < 0.01$.

Metamorphoses technique was used to evaluate the level of barrier presented by and permeability of boundaries of «I», and to analyze the self-image and children's attitudes to themselves. In play environment, a child is asked what animal or plant he/she looks like, wants to look like and does not want to look like. To evaluate the quality of child «I» boundaries (level of barrier strength and permeability), S. Fischer's pattern was used. It was found that NC rejected animals and plants which feature high permeability of boundaries (49, 66%); moreover, they preferred those with a high boundary function, e.g. a turtle or a cactus (51, 28%). These findings substantiate the assumption that NC put a clear emphasis on the functions of permeability and barrier strength of «I» boundaries ($p < 0.01$).

Mother-and-child joint action test ("Joint drawing" and "Joint play") evaluated the number of initiatives, responses to initiatives and conflicts. It showed a disrupted interaction with mother in 42.5% of children ($p < 0.01$).

Observation of children's behavior and attitude towards norms and rules during classes and in a group revealed frequent violations by NC of adult-set boundaries – regulations, requirements, general rules.

Other techniques mentioned above also identified significant differences between accepted and non-accepted children in how well the boundaries were formed. Personality characteristics of non-accepted children were also identified: increased anxiety, aggression, no skills of positive behavior in conflict situations, low self-esteem, non-acceptance of oneself. It was also found that the majority of these children have a negative peer image. These children feel emotional discomfort in their families; the boundaries between family members are

disrupted; interaction with the mother is disrupted too. (In all characteristics mentioned above NC significantly differ from the AC group, $p < 0.01$.)

Factor analysis of these data revealed three significant factors that cover 65% of the entire sample: F1 – “non-normative play”; F2 – disruption of «I» boundaries; F3 – aggressive violation of rules (limitations). Non-normative play is, in our terms, play where mastering of adult social relationships does not happen. Differences between NC and AC in factors F_1 and F_2 are significant (at $p < 0.01$).

Correlation analysis per r-Spearman revealed a significant positive correlation between “unfavorable psychological climate in the family” and “violation of role boundaries in play” ($r = 0.456^{**}$); between low self-esteem and “disruption of «I» psychological boundaries” ($r = 0.406^{**}$); and between “disruption of «I» psychological boundaries” and “unfavorable psychological climate in the family” ($r = 0.543^{**}$).

Observation of play revealed disruption of psychological boundaries in NC play. It is shown in subject matters, roles, in the organization of the play space, and in play content. Non-accepted children often trespass real boundaries of peers (take away toys, intrude into play, destroy structures built by others), do not maintain role boundaries mixing play and reality. For instance, a boy in the role of a “Gingerbread Boy” resists to being eaten, in accordance with the play narrative, by a fox, fights the “fox” and offends the girl who is playing the role of a fox. The non-accepted children cannot play for a long time within the subject, destroy play by their transition from play to reality relationships. They take up too small or too big a space, do not share toys. NC play plots often deal with trespassing boundaries, with the topic of fight or helplessness. The significance of a boundary is often stressed by fencing it with walls and ditches and by hiding oneself in the fenced space.

Practically all NC have a conflict between their needs and requirements of the environment as well as an unsatisfied need for emotional closeness and support. These conflicts and needs come to the forefront in play shut-

ting off the social relationships of the adult world. These children need most of all to work through these inner conflicts and this may consume a part of developmental and cognitive “resource” of play. As a result, normative, “adult” relationships, which constitute the content of the role play of preschoolers in the norm, remain untapped. A gap between «I» and the real social world remains open and these children always have to “catch up” with peers; on the other hand, play fails to fulfill its “therapeutic” function either because the children get stuck up in their conflict.

L.S. Vygotsky and then D.B. Elkonin demonstrated that play’s constitutive element lies in the transition from the existing space into a different one, from real to imaginary space and in maintaining this dual plane of existence. It is a simultaneous existence in two spaces, on their borderline that constitutes play [1; 2]. It did not happen with the children in the study group. They either exit play (start to take offence or squabble, or simply leave) or turn the play situation and play relationships into reality. They demonstrate “naturalistic” attitude towards play; strictly speaking their play is not a play, they continue to be in the real world all the time. Their play does not cross the border from reality into a different space, they stay on one side of the borderline, the transition does not happen.

In L.S. Vygotsky’s words, “play ... tries to leap into the sophisticated world of higher forms of human activity contained in the environment as a source of development” [2, p. 290], i.e. play is a movement towards the ideal form. If this “leap” into the world of human activity does not take place, then the present state of things cannot be surmounted and there is no development. This is what we see in our children’s play – they remain within the sphere of their affect.

The correlation per se between the specific features of play and failure to shape psychological boundaries in non-accepted children does not indicate what the cause is and what the consequence is. We believe there are two possible ways. In the first one, due to the disrupted interaction with mother, and then in a triad, a child fails to develop the boundaries

of «I» in early childhood. As a consequence, a child is not capable of a full-fledged play which precludes the compensatory development of boundaries in play. Those unformed boundaries could be one of reasons for non-acceptance of the child by peers. There is also a possibility of the second way: non-acceptance of a child by peers (though the reason for this non-acceptance is not clear) precludes a full-fledged play which leads to the failure to develop boundaries and leaves a child stuck at the phase of working through the conflict.

The results of our study show a correlation between the unshaped psychological boundaries of «I», specific features of play and non-acceptance a child by peers in preschool age. Unshaped psychological boundaries of «I» (bodily, territorial, social) are unstable, highly permeable and show violated integrity, in-

creased defense barrier function, and violation of rules and norms that are externally set by the society and other people. In preschool age, psychological boundaries of «I» are mostly formed in play activity – in the process of role interaction, in dual transition of role and real position of a child, in real relationships of the players.

Thus, the analysis of experimental data confirm that the children whose psychological boundaries are not well-formed or are distorted, and this is the case with communication-challenged children, require additional, customized play activity which will bridge the gap between the rapentical function of “acting out” and the developmental function of play. Only then play will acquire for them a proper content: mastering of relationships, norms and rules of the adult world.

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