

# Chapter 11

## Mothers' Attitudes Toward Peer Play



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### 11.1 Introduction

After many years of researching children's play: exploring its developmental potential for children and adults, creating tools for measuring the levels of play and self-regulation (Hakkarainen and Bredikyte 2018; Hakkarainen et al. 2013; Hakkarainen and Vuorinen 2018) and as a result developing narrative play and learning approach (Bredikyte et al. 2017), recently we started a new line of inquiry. Until now, the focus of our research projects was on children, their play and development, adult support strategies and interventions. In our new project, we turned our attention to the adults' attitudes toward children's play. More specifically, we wanted to hear why some parents value children's play. The reason to do so came from our research activities on play and teaching activities with the students and professionals. During last 15 years in the research laboratory of play we have always met parents, who consider children's play as valuable activity. On the contrary, practitioners from the field are constantly telling us, that parents, bringing their children to ECEC institutions are more concerned about children's learning and school readiness than play. This situation made us to think, that we should examine more carefully opinions and arguments of different groups of parents concerning their children's play.

There is not much research in Lithuania related to children's peer play in general. Evaluation of children's play level and self-regulation (Hakkarainen et al. 2015), anthropological studies of children's play (Dambrauskas 2006), historical studies of toys (Blaževičius 2008), few studies evaluating children's play in kindergartens (Keruliene 2017; Skeryte-Kazlauskiene et al. 2017). Not a single research exploring

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peer play, parent's attitudes on children's play or learning. This is why we choose to explore parents' attitudes toward children's peer play.

### ***11.1.1 Why Explore Parental Attitudes?***

Psychological discussions have generally pointed to the importance of parental beliefs in shaping child development, but the research literature covering parents' attitudes and beliefs about play and play-based learning is scarce and of exploratory nature.

More than two decades exploring the cultural basis of children's play Roopnarine (2012) stated, that parental beliefs about the value of play and parent-child play are shaped by the culture, this idea is also supported by other researchers (Fisher et al. 2008). Respectfully, parents' beliefs about the value of play for child development and the rates at which children engage in different modes of play vary considerably across cultures (Fisher et al. 2008).

According to Qadiri and Manhas (2009), majority of parents believe that a play-based approach is the best method for imparting early childhood education, but they prefer an academic based curriculum to provide the essential skills needed to enter primary school. Similarly, another research by Shiakou (2018) reported inconsistent parent attitudes – the parents valued play over the academic training, but this was not reflected in the daily after-school routines of their children. O'Gorman's and Ailwood's (2012) study of parent's views on play in Australia also revealed that parents held varying definitions of play and complex and contradictory notions of its value. We understand that parents' attitudes are related with the attitudes of ECEC professionals. The research (Rengel 2014) on teachers' attitudes indicate that, alongside contradictory conceptualizations of play in theory, preschool teachers have contradictory attitudes towards play, and this is reflected in their practice.

When parents have a solid understanding of play and its potential, their children actually attain higher levels of play (Fogle and Mendez 2006; Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2010). According to some play researchers (Bodrova and Leong 2015; Brėdikytė 2011; Ryabkova et al. 2017) "mature" or "fully developed" forms of play are the important indicators of school readiness. Smirnova's and Gudareva's (2004) research revealed, that less and less children develop mature forms of imaginary (role-play, pretend, sociodramatic play and etc.) play before school. This means that they might not reach the sufficient level of general creativity and imagination; motivation, volition and self-regulation; social understanding and etc.

Among the research on parental attitudes towards children's play (Shiakou 2018; O'Gorman and Ailwood 2012; Little et al. 2011; Veitch et al. 2006) we did not find research focusing on mothers observations of siblings peer play. As human interactions are of vital importance for development, possibilities to have peer relations with your siblings give some advantages (Cutting and Dunn 2015). There is evidence that constructions of shared fantasy with another child depend on the quality of the relationship between the children (Cutting and Dunn 2006), not on share fact of having some peers at home. There is also evidence that play in mixed-age groups gives more

possibilities (Gray 2011) to get more role models, emotional support and practicing of leadership. There is some knowledge about siblings' life, though not so much research pay attention to siblings shared peer play. Our research project was organized to fill this existing gap. We aimed to investigate the understandings of the mothers about the importance of play activity for their children. Instead of formalized questionnaires, we decided to ask the mothers open ended questions through interviews and allow them to speak freely. We sought to get deeper insights from the mothers and to find out: *what are the most significant and valuable aspects of peer play for their children, and what arguments can mothers provide to justify their thinking?*

## 11.2 Research Design

### 11.2.1 Participants

In this study, we invited families to participate in our research on children's peer play. For some reason only mothers expressed willingness to participate. We have deliberately chosen a very small number of mothers ( $n = 6$ ). It is a purposeful homogeneous sample and the results of our research cannot be generalized to all Lithuanian mothers. We sought mothers with two or more children, who spend significant amounts of time playing together. It was also important that the mothers have a positive attitude towards children's peer play. We expected that these mothers would be experts of children's peer play and that they could give us some valuable insights into the topic.

We invited in total six mothers from our neighborhood to participate in this study, and all of them agreed. The participants had from 2 to 4 children of various ages (from three to twelve years) and all of the children were described as "good players" by the mothers. Mothers' mean age was 39 years and all of the participants have university level education. Mothers' and children's age and gender are shown in the table below (Table 11.1 Participants).

**Table 11.1** Participants

Mother's pseudonym	Age of the mother	Age and gender of the children	Number of children
Mira	40	12-years-old boy, 10-years-old girl, 6-years-old boy	3
Ina	44	(20-years-old girl*), 9-years-old girl, 6-years-old boy, 3-years-old girl	(4*) 3
Indra	34	8-years-old boy, 6-years-old boy, 5-years-old boy	3
Irma	37	8-years-old boy, 7-years-old boy	2
Vilma	39	8-years-old girl, 6-years-old girl	2
Ana	40	6-years-old boy, 4-years-old girl	2

Notes: \*the oldest child was not involved in the interview analysis

### **11.2.2 Method**

During the semi-structured interview, we asked, where, when and what the participants' children usually play at home, what is valuable for them in children's peer play and what mothers can tell about children's relations during play.

Semi-structured interviews lasted from 25 to 50 minutes, a total of 3.5 hours audio taped six interviews. These were conducted in a quiet place at the participants home or working place. The mothers consented to participate in semi structured interviews.

### **11.2.3 Data Analysis**

Both investigators transcribed the interview material and wrote down ideas and theme categories for the analysis. The interviews were read and re-read, reoccurring patterns extracted from the interview texts. Further, a list of potential themes and sub-themes was created. The three main themes that are relevant to children's peer play are discussed in this chapter.

## **11.3 Results and Discussion**

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate attitudes of the mothers' concerning their children's play at home. From the interview data we wanted to single out *the most significant and valuable aspects of play activity*. A secondary purpose was to learn more about *the types of children's peer play, the forms of parental support* for their children's peer play and *how conflict situations are solved* in play.

In the following paragraphs, we will discuss the main findings that were extracted from the interview data in the course of the analysis. We will discuss them considering the most important theoretical ideas and recent research on children's play. We will start from the types of play and then proceed to the most significant aspects of children's peer play as described by the mothers.

### **11.3.1 The Meaning and Significance of Peer Play for the Children as Described by the Mothers**

We singled out several important aspects of children's peer play from the interview data. These aspects highlight the significance of peer play for the children as described by their mothers: (1) peer play releases children's creative potential; (2)

peer play as a space where children develop long-lasting mutual relationships; (3) peer play as constantly changing activity.

### ***11.3.2 Play Activity Releases Child's Creative Potential***

The first very strong message that came from the interview data was mothers' claim, that play activity provides children with the opportunity to realize their creative potential.

All mothers distinguished creativity as a very important aspect of peer play activity. Play is the burst of creativity, "creativity flourishes" through play. From mothers' point of view, play is children's "real life", because only when playing children reveal their real selves. Mother Mira connects this with the freedom that children experience while playing, she believes, that play gives "real freedom" to the children. The freedom to explore those aspects of life that are important and interesting for them.

Theoretically, imaginary or pretend play fosters the development of cognitive and affective processes that are important in the creative act. Relations between play and creativity are studied widely by Russ (2003), Saracho (2002), Howard-Jones et al. (2002) and many others. The mothers' participating in our research project also captured this very important connection. Several mothers were surprised to see how creatively children "process" their everyday experiences transforming them into play actions. Mother Ana described her children's play "when playing with an imaginary stove, [...] cooking [...] I can see where from they took that example". The same with the cars and trains "after seeing the cars and trains in the city [the child] introduced them into the play". Mothers refer to an important peculiarity of pretend play when children transfer their real-world experiences into imaginary make-believe situation.

Some mothers noticed, that the power of creativity in play spreads like a "contagious disease". Mother Indra: "the first one [the oldest boy] starts and involves two younger brothers. And recently the second one seems got that impulse [of creative play], because he did not have much of his own." Mother Indra concludes that this must be "brother's positive influence – he is now also developing. He learned [to play], but he was not playing very creatively". This mother is convinced, that her younger son learned to play creatively from his older brother.

The mother's example is an illustration of imitative learning, which is a part of cultural learning described by many scholars starting from Vygotsky and more recently researched by Tomasello and his colleagues. Tomasello's (2016) research is revealing, that young children are really concerned to copy the exact actions of others (adults and peers), including arbitrary gestures, conventions, and rituals. Being accepted to play activity for the young children means belonging to a peer group. Interestingly that the mother is talking about playing "creatively". She is admiring not plain imitation, but the ability of the child to create his own "creative play".

The following example sheds light on how this creative play is co-constructed between the peers. Mother Mira is revealing how children become involved in joint peer play. “Usually one child starts the play, then the next joins even if he/she was not interested at the beginning, and then the third one... Every child brings something new to the play and the activity seems to grow and expand incorporating the ideas of all children”. Sawyer (1997) in his analysis of children’s play defined it as an improvisational activity and compared with the activity of jazz musicians. He also points out that play is important because it is *unscripted* and allows the children to practice *improvisation*. Sawyer (2001) concludes that there are reasons why play has to be random and chaotic. Mother’s description of peer play captures the essence of play improvisation: the first child brings an interesting theme, the next – accepts the theme by joining play and enriches it with his idea or action, and then the third joins with his proposal. If each proposal is accepted, the play moves forward, if not, it stops.

The same mother noticed that sometimes peer play activities might last for a longer time. Such themes as “secret agents”, searching for the hidden “treasure” were lasting for several weeks during summer. Mother Mira named long-lasting play activities as the “highest level” of her children’s play. Several other mothers characterized such play episodes as “honey for my heart” and “peace and calmness” at home.

Bredikyte (2011) points to the continuity of play as one of the important criteria defining mature forms of play activity. Long-term play activities indicate, that children managed to capture really exciting theme and that they have developed necessary skills of co-regulation of their actions and ideas.

Mother Irma revealed that siblings are not always playing together. She described how the refusal to play by the peer becomes a stimulus to develop own play activity:

Often, they might play in parallel imitating each other. The younger one starts playing while the older one is away. When he is back, he wants to join the play, but the younger brother says, no! and then the older boy starts creating his own play imitating the younger brother’s play activity. [...] usually one child starts creation of a new play activity and the other child joins if accepted, but if not, he starts building his own play imitating the brother. (Mother Irma).

The mother notices how the situation of non-acceptance does not necessarily end with the conflict or the retreat of the child. In this case, it encourages the child to look for the alternatives. This episode reveals that the child needs to “work” hard in order to uncover his creative powers. The presence of a sibling and his creative example stimulates to act. At this point, just imitation is not enough, the child needs to use his/her imagination, real-life experiences and develop own play with siblings.

The idea of “play as the root of all creativity” in humans was expressed by Vygotsky (1931/1968/2004). Mothers in their interviews underline the ‘productive’ aspects of creativity. They notice that children are not directly imitating reality, which would be ‘reproductive’ creativity, but rather transforming real events into creative play actions. According to the mothers, peer play provides children with the opportunities to experience their ideas, to create the worlds that are “in their heads”. Mother Mira concluded, that “play empowers the children more than other activities”. During the interview, she was talking about “real freedom” and the “power to create the world” in children’s sibling peer play.

One mother said that peer play is children's "school of life" as children expand their experiences playing with other children. Other mothers see play as a perfect possibility for "self-learning" and "self-creation". In one way or another every mother mentioned "learning" aspect of play but all of them stressed independent and free learning.

Mother Ana explained, that in play children get to know physical world better, can "experiment and explore different materials getting ideas from each other". They also "learn how to play" meaning that they become better players, when playing with siblings. The younger learns from the older, they imitate each other during the play, borrowing each other's ideas, and, at the same time, constantly challenging each other.

Mothers also noticed the advantages of playing in a bigger peer group. Mother Indra told, that her three boys like to play with peers: "there are lot of children during summer – 7-8 playing in sand". She noticed positive changes in her children's behavior in group play: "if the younger one is destroying something ... he will be more careful afterward".

Surprisingly, none of the mothers spoke about academic learning in connection with play. On the contrary, few mothers expressed pity, that children are playing less when they started school. Seems that when talking about their children's learning mothers are more concerned with social learning which happens between children when they are playing together for a longer time. This contradicts with the opinions of many early childhood professionals, who claim that parents want their children to practice skills needed for primary school. Still, in the absence of a credible research, we could not say what Lithuanian parents really think about the importance of play.

Mothers captured important aspects of learning in mixed age groups of peers that has received little attention recently. The advantage of having a sibling at home is possibility of constant dialogue with a peer – your play mate is always available whenever you are ready to play. I am inclined to argue that the presence of a peer is of vital importance for creativity, learning and development.

Gray (2011) noticed in his article, "age-mixed play is more creative" and "children have more to learn from others who are older or younger than themselves than they do from age-mates" (p. 518). On theoretical level we can talk about the zone of proximal development that children are creating for each other and about scaffolding episodes that occurs in play of different age sibling groups.

### ***11.3.3 Peer Play as a Space Where Children Develop Long-Lasting Mutual Relationships***

All six mothers singled out "creation of mutual relationship" as significant aspect of peer play activity. Constructing play together takes time, children need to agree upon the topic and theme of play, the spaces, objects, the roles, and props. This is a long process in the course of which children's characters become revealed better. Mothers can observe how they are building their relationships: who is dominating,



who is following, who is creating the rules, how they solve complicated situations. Mothers stressed that through play peers are “learning to be with each other” and creating “mutual relationship”.

### ***11.3.4 Conflicts as a Part of Play Life***

All mothers mentioned conflicts while describing the most valuable aspects of children’s peer play. Conflict between young children could be viewed as “an aspect of social growth when two or more children have incompatible goals, such as ideas, feelings, and interests.” (Andrews 2017, p. 6). Chen et al. (2001) pointed out that it is important to distinguish between the terms aggression and conflict: “equating conflict to aggression, (...) leads to the tendency to see conflicts as negative events that must be terminated as soon as possible, rather than as natural contexts for children to develop socially, morally, and cognitively” (p. 540). Meanwhile, aggressive behaviours are a negative response to conflict.

Observational studies (Ross et al. 2006) have revealed that siblings between the ages of three and seven clash 3.5 times per hour, on average. According to Ross et al. (2006) only about one out of every eight conflicts ends in compromise or reconciliation – the other seven times, the siblings merely withdraw, usually after the older child has bullied or intimidated the younger. Sibling expert Laurie Kramer, who has studied the topic for several decades explained, that the best ways to nurture positive connections between the siblings is play (Kramer and Gottman 1992). Kramer discovered that high-conflict siblings can have great relationships in the long run if they played together often, and as long as they play together more than they fight.

Peers disagree often and for various reasons. Apart from classical situations when someone’s play is destroyed or when children are teasing each other, mothers in our study named several other reasons for conflicts in play. In some families’ conflicts arise when one of the children, refuses to join the play, or on the contrary – to accept the sibling in one’s play. In other cases, conflict arises if someone leaves the play unexpectedly or wants to join when the play is already in progress. Several mothers underlined, that conflicts usually arise when children are tired, upset, feel fatigue or hunger. When children are tired, the mothers try to prevent children from starting a new play activity if possible.

At the same time, mothers appreciate play activity just because of the conflicts and disagreements that naturally arise in play. Mother Ana likes her children to find solutions for disagreements independently: “I expect them to learn how to solve the conflicts. When one wants something, another does not [...] when [in play] they come to an agreement, it is good for both [...] in play they really learn, because they create the situations and they solve them.” Seems that the mother is talking about children’s ability to negotiate, make decisions and to be responsible for the consequences.



Other mothers also pointed out that peer play has benefits as a learning-space for conflict resolution. Mother Irma described, how she was pleased to observe children's negotiations and their ability to agree upon difficult issues. It amazes her that "in play children manage to find the solutions that would never be possible in real life situations!" Her conclusion is, that in play children manage to come to some mutual agreement, but not in everyday situations. The mother formulated nicely her observations that "in the play, at a moment's rage, children finally find a compromise!" One of the boys would say: "... ok, ok, then you can be this [role]", and change the roles, allowing the other one to get desired role or mascot.

The mother states, that children are "more advanced" in play situations. We would say that this is a very in-depth observation. Mother's statement echoes famous Vygotskian (1933/1967) claim that "in play a child is a head taller than himself". We often observe similar situations between children in the research laboratory of play. We have several explanations for such behavior: the child who give up a role or a toy is motivated to continue play activity and is more interested to construct the plot of play that to perform a certain role. The child is also able to anticipate what happens – if he/she would not give up the role – play activity will stop. The logic of collaboratively elaborated play events at some point start demanding certain steps from all the players (children). Children have to follow the rules (through roles), preserve the structure of play and through creating new events develop it further. Such tasks are very difficult for children with little or no play experience. It is peer play that helps children quite early to practice co-regulation of intentions, ideas and actions in favor of joint play activity.

It seems that mothers tend not to interfere in conflict resolution during play and in most cases, children find the solution. All mothers underlined that they become involved only when the conflict could not be solved peacefully. They step in when children respond aggressively to the conflict situation. Few mothers mentioned, that they might interfere in some situations to prevent the conflict before it escalates. Seems that mothers' expectations are reasonable. As Corsaro (2003, p. 193) concluded, "conflict is a central feature of kid's peer culture". Research shows that when given the opportunity and skills, children can resolve conflicts (Arcaro-McPhee et al. 2002). Roseth et al. (2008) noted that conflict resolution between children is more successful without adult intervention. Similarly, Corsaro (2003) states that "in groups where kids are given more opportunity to settle their own conflicts, highly complex negotiated settlements occur." (p. 162). According to Roseth et al.'s (2008) research, children have a natural conflict resolution cycle that typically involves solving a conflict while staying together, rather than separating. Andrews (2017, p. 7) pointed, that "opportunities to practice problem solving independently have long-term positive effects on children, such as developing an ability to communicate feelings, adjust to new situations, and maintain relationships." Björk-Willén (2012) in her detailed analysis of 6-year-old girls' pretend family role-play concluded, that "play (...) gives space (...) for renegotiating relationships between children in a very sophisticated way." (p. 136).

When children grow older mothers can clearly see how much their conflict resolution skills have developed. Mother Mira is talking about her three children as a team: “it is interesting for me to watch them as a team, they see and hear each other so well, even if there are some conflicts, they seem able to solve the conflicts themselves.” Mother noticing that children become better functioning not only in play but also when stepping out into everyday world.

All mothers unanimously agreed, that conflicts and disagreements are an integral part of peer play culture, they expect that children would resolve difficult situations independently and they would step in only in cases of aggressive behavior. Mothers believe that this is the way how their children develop mutual relationships.

Mothers’ thoughts confirm the findings of many scientists that sibling and peer play interactions provide children with the opportunities to learn “to enjoy each other’s companionship, play creatively, negotiate and resolve conflicts and form unique relationships that allow for individuality” (Oden et al. 2015, p. 298).

## 11.4 Play as Constantly Changing Activity

Mothers were talking about peer play as constantly changing activity. Ana explained very clearly, that through changing play she can observe children’s development: “...when very young, they played in a certain way and now I can see how they are improving, what new they bring into their play. Through play I can see their development. That’s why play is significant for me.” The mother’s words resonate with Vygotsky’s (1933/1967) idea that play activity itself is developing and only constantly changing and evolving play activity could support the development of the child. We managed to single out several factors causing the changes in children’s play according to their mothers.

The first important factor bringing changes of the forms of play is the *season* of the year. In summer, when it is warm, children spend more time outside, more play with natural materials and could use very different spaces for their play. During winter when it is cold, children spend more time playing inside. During school breaks they have more time for play and this often result in long-lasting play activities.

Another factor affecting the play activity is the *location*, where children play. Mothers were dividing play activities into inside and outside play. Ana described how her children’s play is changing: inside, for home play children use bunk bed. Outside, in the city playground they would play a ship sailing in the sea using playground equipment. We can see that the theme of play could change when children move to another location. Even when children continue the same play theme the new aspects or sub-themes of play might appear.

One more factor – *new players*. When changing the location (e.g. moving from the house to the yard) children tend to incorporate new objects, spaces and often new players into their play. Mother Ana made an accurate observation noticing that her children’s play interests might shift because of their peers’ initiatives and the

toys that peers would bring. New friends with their play props and ideas entering play activity definitely affect its' character. We could say that play tends to stretch when new players enter the play and narrow, when some players leave the activity.

Mothers appreciate their children's play with friends. Like all the mothers, Irma was glad that her boys often play with the peers: "I lack fantasy, I can't initiate play that I haven't played myself [...] when they meet peers outside their house, they pick their ideas [...] their horizon naturally expands". The mother is making connection between her own childhood play and limited abilities to introduce new forms of play to her children. Mother Mira also mentioned that she was not a good player herself, so she was glad that her children were learning to play with other children in Waldorf daycare. In spite of the fact that siblings are playing with each other, both mothers admit that their kids gain new [play] "ideas" playing with peers. They both see peer play as a resource expanding play repertoire of their children.

The last factor – change of children's *skills* and *interests*. One mother described very nicely that play of her children is shaped by different interests – every child has his specific interests. She describes this as changing "waves of interest". Mother named "waves" of dinosaurs, cars, trains, animals and ships. Interests change as children mature, acquire new knowledge and develop new skills.

From mothers' interview data we can conclude that play is a very dynamic, flexible and fluctuating activity sensitive to different factors among which are: the season of the year, the location, play objects, play peers, children's interests and skills.

#### ***11.4.1 Interview as a Tool Deepening the Awareness of the Significance of Their Children's Peer Play***

Reading and re-reading interview transcripts we constantly got impression that mothers possess a lot of knowledge and understanding concerning their children's peer play. At the same time grew the feeling that this understanding is partly due to our research project. To be more specific, due to the interview method that we used to collect our data. According to Kvale (1996, p. 159) "the interview is a conversation in which the data arise [...] is coproduced by interviewer and interviewee." During interview the interviewee does not have ready-made answers, to the questions. The answers are coproduction of the participants of the interview. The interview questions "turned" the mothers to their own thoughts and knowledge about children's play and prompted them to formulate their ideas in words. We believe, that part of the participating mothers discussed their children's peer play aloud for the first time. "[T]he *subjects themselves discover* new relationships during the interview, see new meanings in what they experience and do" (Kvale 1996, p. 189). We believe this process of discovery and awareness was going on during the interview and that mothers left the interview more knowledgeable than they entered it.

Analyzing interview data, we realized, that answering to our questions about the importance and value of peer play for their children, mothers provided us with the information concerning their own activities related to their children's play. Data

analysis revealed, that mothers are observing their children, analyzing their behavior and trying to understand them better on a regular basis. It became clear, that the mothers pay attention to children's activities and often watch their play. All six mothers shared not only their everyday observations, but also long-term insights.

The mothers were able to describe their children's characters, differences, similarities, individual preferences and how all those aspects unfold in play activity. They noticed, that through peer play "children reveal themselves" – their characters and their relations become more visible.

In addition to observations, the mothers have developed specific strategies to support their children's peer play. All mothers demonstrate *positive attitude* – they *encourage* and *show appropriation* of children's peer play. They try *not to disturb* play if possible, even in the case of a conflict or disagreement.

All mothers offer *indirect help* like providing spaces, props and materials, inviting friends and sometimes proposing ideas for play. One mother confirmed that she is constantly thinking how to enhance children's peer play: searching for new ideas, new props and clothes, making costumes and bringing new materials for play. In addition, she sometimes provokes children: proposes unexpected ideas, hides "treasure", strange objects and etc.

Situation is different with *direct participation* in children's play. Only in one family both parents become involved in role-play with their children. Several mothers doubted if adult involvement is appropriate as peer play is more children's own business. In spite of the fact that in general the mothers acknowledge peer play as children's activity where grownups are not needed, at the same time they stressed, that adult encouragement and approval is crucial for play activity to develop and flourish. According to one mother (Mira), children stop playing if adults express negative attitudes towards their play.

Mothers also expressed their expectations towards play. All mothers expect their children to solve conflicts arising in play. They would love to see more cooperation and collaboration in play, they expect to see their children learning to act as a team able to solve challenges not only in play situations but also in real life. Few mothers wished that there would be more children in the neighborhoods to play and have fun together. Several mothers expressed pity that while growing and starting school children were playing less.

## 11.5 Concluding Remarks

Although small in scope, our study differs from others of a similar nature in that we asked participants open-ended questions seeking to hear their authentic thoughts about children's peer play. Most studies exploring parents' attitudes used ready-made questionnaires or protocols, in this way receiving data on rather narrow topics. The vast majority of the studies have explored the links between children's peer play and different aspects of school readiness. We had no such purpose. Despite the fact that only six mothers participated in the study, they provided us with a rich data.

The study allowed to explore the attitudes of the mothers and to highlight the most significant and valuable aspects of peer play. All mothers agreed, that peer play activity allows children to realize their creative potential. The advantage of the children growing together with their siblings is that your play partner is always available and for this reason peer play becomes a space for learning. All mothers articulated clearly, what kind of learning they value most in peer play: (1) "learning to play", (2) "learning conflict resolution" and (3) "learning to build mutual relationships". They pointed nicely, that children are learning to play from each other: less experienced are learning from more experienced and this doesn't mean, that only the younger ones are learning from the older ones. The learning is both sided in peer play. Mothers noticed, that every child brings something new into play and all players have to learn to accept different ideas and to find the way how to incorporate them into joint play activity. This doesn't come easy. Children constantly have disagreements with peers while constructing joint play activity. All mothers underlined that conflicts are important part of peer play. Constructing play with peers takes time, children need to negotiate and agree upon many issues. In the course of this long process children learn how to be with other children and how to develop long-lasting mutual relationships.

These significant aspects of peer play are theoretically sound and confirmed by different researchers as we already discussed earlier in the chapter. Moreover, these aspects often are not sufficiently emphasized and thoroughly described in different books and play guidelines for the students, teachers and parents. They are usually defined as social skills that children acquire playing with the peers. Meanwhile, the mothers, participants of our research project described the mechanism of how these so called "social skills" developed in the course of long-lasting peer play among the siblings.

The findings convinced us that it is crucial for the researchers and professional teachers to be aware of parents' knowledge and understanding as it could help all parties to reconceptualize some important topics in early childhood education. Our study highlighted two such topics: children's conflicts in play and constantly debated contradiction between play and academic learning.

It turned out, that mothers' attitudes towards peer conflicts in play are radically different from what is happening in everyday practice. According to our observations, discussions with educators and recent research, professionals tend to avoid conflicts between children or to terminate them as soon as possible. Theoretically and practically, adults, while doing so are depriving children from the opportunity to develop conflict resolution skills. Many early childhood professionals admitted that they are concerned about children's safety on the first place, and in addition, some of them feel that they lack knowledge and skills how to act in such complicated situations.

Another topic is connected with ongoing debate about play and academic learning of young children. Should play be valued as an activity for its own sake or as a context and/or a tool for learning? This is an "eternal question" for the educators and for the parents. Participants of our research project did not speak about academic learning at all. We did not ask them directly about play in connection to

academic achievements, but we expected that mothers would mention this topic if they consider it important. How we can comment on that? Probably, the fact that all mothers in our study had school-age children, they knew, that engagement in play at early age does not prevent from successful learning at school. In other words, they already have experienced that play and learning are not revivals.

We understand that our data is coming from a very small number of parents, but it is deep and valuable, it comes from daily observations of children's peer play. Knowledgeable parents should be used as a resource to reach other parents, to teach professionals and as partners while creating new curriculums, guidelines and etc.

## 11.6 Implications for the Further Research and Practice

The significance of this study is primarily practical, since it made us to think about further research: different research design, like having focus groups of expert parents and a mixed group, both experts and non-experts. We believe, that many parents have implicit knowledge of play that should be revealed for them. We also plan to interview ECEC professionals and ask the same questions.

The research project expands our understanding of the use of the interview method. Focus group interview could be used as a tool deepening the awareness of own knowledge in the interview participants: professionals, parents, and probably in the researchers as well. The results could help in developing more precise interview questions or even questionnaires for the broader circle of parents and ECEC teachers.

For the educational practice, it could result in better recommendations how to organize appropriate environments for the development of children's peer play: age-mixed play groups in ECEC institutions and neighborhoods; the recognition of the conflict as an integral part of play activity and etc.

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