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Privilege or Right? On the Status of Free Play in the Context of Contemporary Parenting Trends and the Phenomenon of Childhood Design

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

free play, childhood design, methods of upbringing, contemporary child, teaching through play

The subject of the study is the status of free play in contemporary parenting trends and in the phenomenon of *childhood design*. The author's objective is to discuss the problem of marginalized role of free play in children's upbringing. Classic theories of play define it through the prism of free, spontaneous activity, which is an inseparable element of childhood. Nowadays, in institutional education, free play gives way to teaching through play, as evidenced by nursery and pre-school education curricula and a wide range of extra classes. The author therefore assumes that the issue of free play should be considered in the family environment. In view of the above, the article reflects upon contemporary parenting trends and the phenomenon of childhood design. The picture that emerges from their theoretical analysis is the picture of free play as a category which is missing in contemporary childhood. The author recognizes the problem of appropriating child's autonomy and raises the question of the child's right to play in the 21st century.

Play – definitions and redefinitions

Attention to the issue of play goes back to the 18th century. Then, thanks to Friedrich Schiller, the first theory was put forward to explain play in the categories of activity that gives vent to the excess of life force (Chojak et al. 2017: 237). Perception of play through the prism of its functions enabled subsequent researchers to answer the question of *what people need play for?* However, clarification of the issue of *what play is* raises definitional difficulties. One of the most constructive proposals, which remains relevant, appears to be the theory by Johan Huizinga. He believed that “we might call play a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘*not serious*’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space” (Huizinga 2007: 29). Researchers working on the topic of play (Dodgson 2017: 87) emphasize that this preoccupation with the activity as interpreted by Huizinga is identical to the state of flow, which Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi understands as full involvement in an activity and feeling of being detached from reality (2008). A similar research perspective is taken by Anna Brzezińska, who defines play by indicating the conditions for its existence (Brzezińska et al. 2011). She highlights, in particular:

1. Spontaneous activity – the driving force behind play is internal motivation. From the perspective of environment, playful activity is undertaken in an unexpected manner, but in reality it is the result of internal maturing readiness of the participant.
2. Play is accompanied by selflessness and unproductiveness – understood in the context of absence of formal targets. The purpose of play is the process of its continuance. An individual gets involved in play for the sake of doing something, not having done / achieving something. This type of participation is a source of functional pleasure to an individual having fun.
3. Emotional involvement. As interpreted by Brzezińska, play not only activates certain emotions – children in fact create them.
4. Being in another time and space. Participation in play, acceptance of its convention and emotional involvement create feeling of being detached from reality in the participants. Play becomes a microcosm functioning according to separate rules.
5. Harmony and order – play is accompanied by certain logic and rules. Participants accept convention and rules of play. As seen by an observer, a playful activity may appear to be chaotic, but pursuing to comply with rules is a prerequisite for a common play.

The authors of the above-mentioned concepts describe play as free, uncontrolled and spontaneous activity. Over the course of the 20th century play has been perceived as an inherent element of childhood, integral and necessary, being the center of all children's activities. According to Maria Przetacznik-Gierowska, the whole world of the child is play-oriented (1993: 20). It takes some time until task-related grounds that involve learning and working are formed in the child's mind. This does not mean, however, that there is a separation between playful activity and learning process. Free play strengthens children's knowledge. Thanks to the projection function, it enables children to establish new contacts, reveal potential and new skills inside them. In free play the child gains, unlike in any other area, autonomy, independence and a sense of agency. The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* validates the child's natural right to play (1989). Play, however, on the theoretical level, evolves and takes on new forms.

Play versus playful teaching

Currently, representatives of many scientific disciplines show interest in the subject of play. Regardless of the area and methods of exploring this issue, there is a common ground between researchers as to the role of play in the learning process. And even though experienced function pleasure is an indicator of play, it seems to act less and less of a role in the social discourse. With the development of cognitive psychology, relationship between play and science becomes more and more important. A new image of play becomes visible, presenting it as an activity stimulating the child's cognitive, social and emotional development. Play loses an aspect of freedom, ceases to be associated with uncontrolled activity, its original form disappears. Janet Moyles divides play into three areas (2010: 22). She identifies *pure play*, *playful learning* and *playful teaching*. *Pure play* is a synonym to free play, since Moyles defines it as an activity within the control of children, in which they initiate all actions. This perspective is characterized by openness. The role of the adult is limited to creating play space and observing. Joining play activity should only occur at the explicit invitation of children. The second category, *playful learning*, is associated with gaining experience by the child, primarily of social nature. It is thus presumed that the learning process is embedded in interpersonal interactions. This sociocultural accent makes adult and child participants equal in play. The adult is an equally active participant in play, in addition, he or she sees it through the prism of educational goals. The last category, *playful teaching*, emphasizes the role of an adult. Play is a planned process based on the postulate of individualization of teaching. *Playful teaching* uses didactic materials and tools perceived by children as attractive from the perspective of play (Bilewicz-Kuźnia

2015:24). Pre-school and early-school education curricula are the evidence of an active use of the idea of playful teaching. Completing ready-made activity cards with coloured pencil crayons, musical and poetic works recited at the teacher's dictation, putting stickers into adequately designed frames – these are only *pseudo-play* activities, while the question about their teaching effectiveness seems to be valid. Playful teaching is a certain methodology of work during educational activities. However, children in facilities of institutional education (and crèches, nursery schools and schools are considered to be such institutions) have leisure time, in which they should theoretically play freely. The paradox of contemporary childhood is that the category of leisure time is distinguished – isn't it so that the child has nothing more than that? The situation is not unambiguous. The suggestion of conducting educational activities for children appears in *the Act on the care for children up to the age of 3* (2011). And even though the very idea of lifelong learning is obvious, when being misunderstood it leads to the current practice of offering educational activities to the youngest children. In this way, already from infancy, children are prepared to being taught through play, while the role of leisure time is marginalized. Lessons of English, rhythmic, music appreciation classes, classes using Sherborne developmental movement, pottery classes, speech therapy, classes using Edwin Elias Gordon's theory, art classes, fairytale therapy, sensory integration therapy, sensoplastics – the list of activities offered by individual nurseries provokes reflection on the absence of free play. This seems to be confirmed by *the core curriculum of pre-school education* according to which 1/5 of the time children spend in the institution is to be devoted to free play (2014). The implementation of educational program for children at the pre-school age is so intense that bureaucratic regulations need to be applied in the fight for presence of leisure time. Free play gains a privileged status. The above considerations lead to the conclusion that the only environment in which play has a chance to exist in its original (free) form is the family. In connection with the above, we will have a look at contemporary parenting trends and the role of free play in home education.

Facets of parenthood

Reflections on the contemporary parenting trends should begin with citing the definition of parenthood. For the purpose of this article, the term *parenthood* is defined as the area of human activity which implies fulfilling the role of a mother or father, including the entirety of behaviours undertaken in relationship with a child (Bakiera 2013:20). In other words, the mere fact of being a biological father or mother does not entitle you to being called a parent. Parents provide care conditions and

create educational environment in a broader sense. The latter aspect has undergone a metamorphosis during the past several decades. The beginning of the twentieth century and so-called New Education changed the face of childhood. The period of emancipation of children, emphasizing their separateness from adults and, at the same time, caring for their rights began. The century of the child promoted by Ellen Key resounded fully in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), mentioning among others the right to play. As stated by Key, care and education of the new generation became the main task of the society (1928). The first half of the twentieth century promoted the idea of introducing public protection and support for children. The turn was observed in the 1980s. Childhood came to be considered as a private matter being the responsibility of parents, not authorities (Bakan 2013: 264). That phenomenon was accompanied by an increase in the emotional and psychological value of the child (Szymanik-Kostrzewska 2016: 7). Having children and their upbringing was no longer a part of everyday life, but it became the purpose and meaning of parents' lives. The new concept of childhood, the increase in psychological and medical knowledge about the development of children, the digitization of the world and statistically good socioeconomic circumstances have contributed to the change of parental attitudes and shaped the new status of free play.

Traditional parenting styles

Traditional parenting styles will be interpreted according to Szymanik-Kostrzewska, who distinguishes the following styles:

1. Authoritarian (or autocratic) style.
2. Authoritative (democratic) style.
3. Permissive (liberal) style.
4. Noninvolved (occasional) style.

As stated by Szymanik-Kostrzewska, authoritarian style has the longest educational tradition. It is characterized by parents' emotional distance from children, focus on visible effects of upbringing and supervision of children's development and education. There is a disproportion in parent-child relationship – children remain subordinated to parents and their commands. The child's autonomy is, therefore, limited. In contrast, there is authoritative parenting when parents are the authority figures for the child. Authority, however, is not introduced through orders, but it is built up as a result of mutual, respectful relationship of family members (Szymanik-Kostrzewska 2016: 17). The fundamental role in the process of education is played by dialogue as a tool which shapes the child. Both sides of the upbringing process, their needs and

feelings, are important in the relationship. Deceptively, this style is demanding. Its supporters emphasize the need to raise a child as an independent, resourceful person. Advocates of permissive style declare concentration on the child's needs. According to Szymanik-Kostrzewska, however, by following this style parents express their helplessness towards the child. Typical lack of borders, which is supposed to be a sign of being conscious of the child's autonomy and belief in the necessity to reduce stressful situations, raises (according to the author) the question of parenting skills. Liberal parents' aspirations are focused on unlimited freedom which is a condition for happy life. The last of these styles (noninvolved) is an expression of parent's psychological unavailability (Szymanik-Kostrzewska 2016: 20). There is no control or showing feelings, and communication is limited to the minimum.

According to Szymanik-Kostrzewska, pure parenting styles are not observed in practice. Their contemporary form is a mosaic. The second half of the 20th century was dominated by the so-called *free raising*, while the 21st century showed the trend for the so-called *stress-free education* (2016). The society was influenced by a growing value of the child who was placed in the centre of family life. Who, then, are contemporary parents? What are their educational objectives? What status do they attribute to free play in upbringing?

Contemporary parenting styles

The media attack parents with a clear message – you should be the best parent. Childhood is the most important stage of human development. It is too valuable to leave it to children (in their possession) (Honoré 2011: 10). The century of the child opens up the era of the child managed as a project, whilst also cherishing childhood above other periods of development. This paradoxical escalation of the emphasis on the role of the child's development and the child's needs turns out to be directed against the youngest. It is difficult to clearly classify contemporary parenting behaviours, because their actions, as Janusz Trempała notes, are dictated by faith in the so-called educational myths (2010). These include:

1. The child is the most important in the world.
2. You need to give the child a happy childhood.
3. The child cannot be punished.
4. It is enough to love the child, you do not need to bring it up.
5. You need to be friends with the child.
6. You need to accept the child as it is.

Upholding these myths is accompanied by the belief that the purpose of upbringing the child is to make them perfect and happy. In addition, adults hold themselves responsible for achievements of their children in all areas. This psychological investment of a parent into child, as Trempała calls it (2010), results in raising the generation of children, whom Aneta Jegier calls *children neglected by well-being* and in attributing to them a *utilization* syndrome. The first category is connected with the consumerist vision of a happy childhood understood through the prism of the number of toys (often so-called educational toys). The term *syndrome of a utilized child* defines the situation in which the child functions according to the schedule and activities imposed by adults (Jegier 2016: 7). In this way parents design a product – the child, who after a few hours of stay in the educational establishment has seemingly free time, which is in fact busy with organized activities. In the world of constant changes, parents do not want their child to miss any of its wealth. The product – child, placed in the centre of parental care and attention, loses its autonomy. Its real needs are overshadowed by the vision of endless possibilities of a better start in life. At this point, it is appropriate to return to the question which is crucial as regards this article: what is the role of free play in contemporary educational trends? There is a risk that this role is marginal. The dominant educational function is played by institutions where free play, as presented in the introductory part of the article, is implemented by bureaucratic methods, and the daily plan is filled with so-called educational games conducted at the adult person's dictation. In addition, the trend of educating children increases (with the approval of parents) through informal education and rapidly developing market for extra-curricular activities. As noted by Jegier, they become free time fillers for children. Boredom, inseparably connected with free time, is evaluated more pejoratively than ever before. According to contemporary parental trends, the presence of boredom is identified with the child's developmental stagnation. As a consequence, the role of free play is diminishing. Unassisted, unorganized children's activities are perceived as a risk factor in proper development. Only play arranged by adults is viewed as a properly organized free time. With that upbringing parents assume the role of managers ensuring proper implementation of a thoroughly designed schedule for the child. Such a created reality, like a *panopticon*, is intended to provide optimal development for children under the watchful eyes of experts: pedagogues, psychologists, speech therapists, coaches, etc. The digital world has unlocked the door to the knowledge which has become the source of additional parental concerns. Parents moving in the area of educational myths lose their faith in their own parenting skills. Worries about sustainable development of their children bring families to further specialists in education. In the 21st century, as never before, a young man appears to be a being that requires constant stimulation, otherwise his or her existence is threatened. Parents are made to feel that the world itself is the environment that does not sufficiently stimulate development of

children. Designed childhood created by parents-managers displaces free play outside the area of desired activities. In addition, if we take into consideration that there is a social phenomenon referred to as KGOY – *Kids Growing Older Younger* by sociologists (Lauwaert 2008: 225), which involves increasingly early abandonment of traditional games and toys by children primarily for digital devices – the question of the status of free play in upbringing becomes essential. This does not mean, however, that play itself has been denied by children. Jegier's research into leisure time of pre-school children leads to the following conclusions – the majority of children understand leisure time as a break, during which they can do things which are otherwise prohibited, limited or impossible due to logistical reasons (41% of respondents). Then they can: go outside, play, sleep longer, watch TV, relax, go to the seaside, climb the hills, be with mum and dad, do whatever they want, go to visit someone, talk, ride a bike, go for a walk (Jegier 2016: 26). A worrying fact is that these forms of spending leisure time are absent in everyday life of young children. Free play has become a privilege of childhood.

In connection with the analysis of contemporary parenting trends and social changes, one should risk making the statement that free play (in the traditional sense) has become an absent and undesirable category in contemporary childhood. It is sometimes excluded by parents for educational activities of playful nature. Free play itself, in its pure form, becomes a synonym of boredom and non-developing, infantile activity, which does not satisfy (according to parents) the needs of prematurely growing children.

Summary

As Neil Postman warned (2002), play has gone beyond the sphere of previous meaning of entertainment. Paradoxically, in the time of play transgression, it becomes a category which is absent in the period of childhood. Advancing infantilization of adults stands in contrast to maturing generation of children-projects – programmed for educational and social success at the cost of sacrificing childhood. Free play has lost its current status – it has become a privilege for children, and an educational failure for their parents, a state of unutilized boredom. A category which is infantile and dull. Mariana Souto-Manning notes that the period of early childhood should be the time of increased social responsibility for children (2017). And even though the author calls for respecting the right to play among disadvantaged ethnic minorities, it appears that the denial of such right to play takes place in many families that follow the principle of designing childhood. The question about the status and rights of the

child may come as a surprise, especially in the European culture, which clearly emphasizes humanistic values. Nevertheless, contemporary parenting trends direct parents towards unconscious appropriation of children's autonomy. Designed childhood is the result of glorifying education and marginalizing the role of parenting (Hannikainen et al. 2013). A self-upbringing young person, burdened with educational duties, does not differ much from an adult guardian. However, their equality does not result from partnership, but from a desire to model a child as a small adult. Joel Bakan was right: childhood is under siege. Marginalization of free play is just one aspect of the problem. The question is: does childhood design prepare children for life success or does it perhaps move them away from life? The emancipation of children is developing in a worrying direction. The century of the child has passed. It is time for reflection.

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