

Parents as active playmates: Studies through interviews with mothers and observations of parent–child play.

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Abstract

Conventional research on parental experiences in relation to parent–child play has focused on the beliefs of parents about play, the content and sharing of play, and the burden of and support for parents. This research trend merges from the fact that the parent–child relationships are considered vertical in nature and that viewing parents in terms of their relationships with the development and characteristics of their children is self-evident. Thus, departing from this conventional research perspective, the current study focused on research that explored the horizontal qualities of parent–child play and how it served as sources of enjoyment and joy. However, previous studies did not position parents as active playmates who enjoy parent–child play in an intrinsic sense. Thus, the study expects that emphasis on the experience of parents as active playmates can provide a new perspective to enhance the multidimensional understanding of the concept of horizontality in parent–child relationship and play as a leisure activity. Therefore, this dissertation aimed to elucidate the experience of parents as active playmates and the involvement of parents and children when parents become active playmates (Chapter 1).

Toward this end, the thesis adopted an interpretative approach as its analytical framework and focused on the description of individual cases and on understanding the process of the subjective reality construction of a subject. Parent–child play was defined as “the act of sustained involvement of parents and children in activities in which children find enjoyment” and being active playmates with “parents themselves finding enjoyment in play, being proactively involved in play with their children and having an attitude of sharing the power to direct play with their children.” In Survey I (interviews), the researchers extracted the experiences of parents as playmates and their feelings and thoughts about their experiences from their narratives; in Survey II (observations), the study intersubjectively described their actual involvement in parent–child play (Chapter 2).

In Survey I, 22 cases from interviews with 8 mothers of children were analyzed. The results demonstrated that the mothers became active playmates in parent–child play, thus, reliving childhood play, making new discoveries, renewing their perceptions, experiencing a sense of freedom from the socially accepted constraints of parental roles and adulthood, and experiencing a sense of achievement. Second, the mothers enjoyed and desired being involved with their children on an equal footing as fellow playmates. (Chapter 3).

In Survey II, the study conducted observations of parent–child play at home on 5 pairs of mothers and their children. The results illustrated that the mothers who became active playmates openly expressed personal diverse feelings and desires through words and facial expressions, which led to struggles in play and changes in the way the children engaged with the parents. Additionally, the mothers became active playmates by discovering unexpected joy through play, being invited by their children or orienting themselves to be absorbed in play (Chapter 4).

Insights from the above-mentioned research were summarized, and the significance of the transformation of parents into active playmates in the parent–child relationship and in their lives was discussed based on the following points. First, in the context of parent–child play, mothers were freed from their roles and became active playmates, thus, reliving their childhood play and gaining new experiences, discoveries, and a sense of achievement and liberation. This result indicated that parent–child play could be a leisure activity for parents and that being an active playmate could help them escape the world of usefulness, regain wholeness of mind and enhance their sense of self-dignity. Second, mothers who became active playmates frequently attempted to deviate from the behavior expected by the child. The existing research considered the misalignment of intentions in play as discord and was not regarded as a component of parent–child horizontality. In reality, however, the ups and downs in the interaction due to such off-script acts could be interpreted as leading to confusion, surprise, tension, and expectation with enjoyment on the part of the child. Alternatively, mothers feel a sense of anticipation for the child’s response and a feeling of real understanding with the child. Furthermore, off-script acts were considered an opportunity for the mother to reaffirm the otherness of the child and to express her otherness to the child in an intimate milieu. Third, mothers as active playmates expressed diverse feelings through words and facial expressions and were willing to invite their children to participate in activities they preferred. When mother’s attitudes was taken as the frankness, the expression of this frankness enables children to understand the inner life, natural empathy toward the child, and the involvement of the mother with the child while being her essential self. The sense of being one’s true self or sense of authenticity is proposed to bring a sense of happiness, self-determination, and a sense of having a good relationship with others. Therefore, the literature reported that behaving openly and having a sense of authenticity could be the significance of parent–child play for parents (Chapter 5).

The significance of this thesis lies in the fact that it has demonstrated the subtleties of the experiences of parents as playmates and the relationship as playmates in a practical manner, which elucidates parent–child play from a new perspective and points to its polysemic nature. However, the study has methodological limitations such as the narrowing of case diversity due to in-home observation and the high similarity of the attributes of the participants. Thus, conducting observational surveys and interviews with the same parents and children and including outdoor play would be interesting issues for future research (Chapter 6).