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**Dangerous Activities within an Invisible
Playground: A Study of Emergent Male
Football Play and Teachers' Perspectives of
Outdoor Free Play in The Early Years of
Primary School**

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Abstract

This research was carried out during a study which focused upon the rough and tumble play of children in the early years department of a suburban primary school in Northern England. The child sample's playtime activities were ethnographically observed over a period of eighteen calendar months, during which time interviews were also carried out with the children's class teachers and several other adults taking part in the children's daily school routines. It was found that the narratives created by a cohort of 4½-6½ year old boys around their football (soccer) play were socially and symbolically complex, providing evidence that such play is a highly valuable developmental activity. However, the interview data indicated that principally due to very low adult: child ratios in playground supervision, the focus of the adults was strongly directed towards negative aspects of outdoor free play.

Introduction: Why does football play ‘emerge’?

Rough and tumble play has been defined as a physically vigorous set of behaviours, such as chase, jump and play fight, accompanied by positive affect from the players towards one another (Pellegrini 1995). Much research carried out to study such play among young human and non-human primates indicates that the activity creates valuable practice scenarios for complex social interactions that creatures need to undertake in order to become competent, socially mature adults (Pellegrini and Smith 1998). The first modern study of human rough and tumble play suggested that as children move beyond the nursery school period, this play style seems to undergo a swift metamorphosis into formalised running and chasing games with simple rules (Blurton Jones 1967). Pellegrini (1989) also proposed that rough and tumble was a forerunner of games with rules.

This article describes some examples of early football (soccer) play observed amongst a small sample of 4-6 year old boys, and how it was perceived and supervised by their teachers and carers. The observational analyses focus upon the social interactions and collective culture that a small sample of young human males used to build and consolidate a peer group in their early football play. It is suggested that these activities may depict a developmental ‘bridge’ between early rough and tumble play and later interactions between peers in sporting and language-based socially competitive activities. Reed, Brown and Roth (2000, p.335) suggested that development of human sporting behaviour has early origins in early infant development: ‘in aggressive sports the opposing player congratulates hard, clean hits. This knowledge begins at an early age where fathers are rolling around on the floor with their infant sons’. Jordan (1995, p.76) linked such play to a ‘warrior discourse’

amongst males, reflecting that ‘we have, as far as I know, little in the way of explanation of how or why these narratives gain such a grip on little boys, but the evidence that they do and have done for generations is inescapable’. But why would such a discourse be so specifically gendered?

Support for the greater prevalence of active, competitive play in males across primate species was found by Braggio, Nadler, Lance and Miseyko (1978) in the data gathered for their observational study comparing the behaviour of children, juvenile chimpanzees and juvenile orang-utans. They found that in all three species, males undertook a higher frequency of active, physically competitive play than female conspecifics. The reason the researchers suggested for this difference is sexually selected and hormonal; the activity of testosterone in male physiology. There is a surge of testosterone in mammalian male bodies in early infancy (the priming or organising effect), then again at puberty (the activating effect). If the priming effect is absent in males, there seem to be corresponding behaviour changes; in particular, reduced R&T has been observed in young rats and monkeys. Introduction of testosterone to young females correspondingly creates more physically active and ‘mounting’ play.

The importance of testosterone priming in human gender development was demonstrated by Berenbaum and Snyder (1995) and Hines, Golombok, Rust, Johnston and Golding (2002). Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH) is a condition in children that results from accidental pre-natal exposure to male androgens. Berenbaum and Snyder (1995) found that girls with the condition showed a significantly greater preference for physically active play, while boys with the condition did not differ

significantly from a non-CAH control group in any way. Hines et al's (2002) study calculated the amount of testosterone present in human expectant mothers' blood, and subsequently evaluated the behaviour of the resulting child at age three-and-a-half. These researchers found that higher levels of maternal testosterone during pregnancy resulted in statistically significant higher rates of physically active play undertaken by female offspring. There was no correlation between levels of maternal testosterone and male offspring behaviour. It is therefore suggested that the mammalian foetus is very susceptible to the presence of testosterone, and even slightly higher amounts than is normal in the female foetal environment will be used to fuel a mild priming effect. This has a direct effect upon free play activities in early childhood, resulting in more active and physically competitive behaviour amongst juvenile mammalian males, including human beings.

So does such compelling evidence indicate that researchers should take a strictly biological approach to the study of human play-styles? While there is clearly good evidence for the contribution of evolved biology, it is also clear that behaviour in human beings is not 'programmed' by nature to the extent that it is within less complex organisms. This leaves us with the question of how much human shared and gendered cognition is determined by nature, and how much is open to flexible development in environmental and social interaction within childhood; how culture and biology may interact in developmental processes on the journey to the production of adult human beings. Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) suggested that the environment can have a huge effect on the internal settings of a diverse set of developmental and ongoing human skills, including those relating to perception, stress coping, knowledge/ skill acquisition, relationship maintenance, reaction control and

the language used to represent the physical and social environment. Bruner (1996) commented that there should be an end to the 'either-or nature/ nurture' approach to the study of child development in the future, proposing that human beings cannot be understood without considering primate evolution, brain biology and the thinking processes of the mind as equal partners in the causation of behaviour. Philosophers Mallon and Stich (2000) correspondingly proposed the concept of 'bioculturalism', highlighting the complementary roles of biology, evolution and culture in the production of human behaviour.

While the basic occurrence of active, physically competitive play in human children can be shown to have a biological pre-cursor via the action of testosterone in the body, and clear evolutionary roots in the non-verbal play of earlier species, such play in human beings is likely to show greater variability and complexity than that observed in less complex animals, due to the much greater psychological flexibility of the human being. In particular, such flexibility is underpinned by the human ability to represent highly abstract concepts in language. For example, in their comparison of young male primates of several species, Meaney and Stewart (1985) proposed that their samples were highly dependent upon peer groups to construct their free play activities, while O'Donnell and Sharpe (2004) correspondingly found that young human male peer groups provide a forum in which boys develop feelings of power which 'focuses their sense of nationalism and territory' (O'Donnell and Sharpe 2004, p.90). These two pieces of research illustrate both a clear similarity between human male peer group behaviour and behaviour described in earlier non-human primate species, and a clear human difference: both human and non-human primates develop a sense of collaboration and peer group, but the ability to use language, in which human

beings can construct and communicate highly abstract ideas, underpins the complex symbolic concepts utilised within specifically human interaction, for example, a highly abstract sense of 'nationalism'. Swain (2000, pp.95-101) correspondingly suggested that boys view their games of playground football as 'ritualised and fantasised performances (cementing)... . collective group identities'. From a biocultural perspective, it can thus be proposed that the metamorphosis of the collaborative but somewhat disorganised rough and tumble found in many mammalian species into the simple football play carried out by children in early years settings can be viewed as an early developmental example of human beings' symbolic extension of more evolutionarily ancient play- styles. The analyses of these observations of football play were undertaken from this theoretical position.

Research Methodology

The 'football' theme detailed in this article strongly emerged from a set of observations undertaken to more generally investigate narratives underpinning rough and tumble play in the early years of primary school. As such, the observations undertaken focused upon the outdoor free play activities of nine girls and nine boys, born within the six months between September 1997 and April 1998. There was some additional emergent participation from children with whom this focal sample engaged in play within their school playground, and from adults engaged in the daily activities of the child sample. The principal technique used for the observations was that of 'target child' (Sylva Roy and Painter 1994, p.9), undertaken in an ethnographic, broadly participant fashion. The total of target child observations undertaken for the project as a whole, which ran from April 2002 to November 2003, was seventeen male and sixteen female target child observations, two observations of fifteen of the

focal group, and one observation each of the remaining three. Each child who was the subject of two observations was observed once during a playtime (recess) period (20 minutes) and once during a lunchtime period (approximately 40 minutes, depending on how quickly the child finished his/ her lunch and emerged into the playground). Due to the damp English climate, the summer term (April- July) was the only time of the school year that this child sample were able to engage in football free play on the grassed sections of their outdoor play area, during break times and lunch periods. During the 2003 summer term, the observations of the boys within the sample frequently led me to the very simple football (soccer) games in which they engaged, and a substantial football play theme, with its own highly specific shared culture amongst the regular players, emerged from the resulting data.

At the commencement of the project, in April 2002, I first met the children who were going to comprise my observational sample, during the last term of their nursery year. The participant school had an integral nursery class, which children attended from the September or January following their third birthday, moving up into the Reception class of the main school in the September following their fourth birthday, which is the conventional English practice. The child sample were subsequently placed in the Reception class of the main school between September 2002 and July 2003, moving up to Year One (first grade) in September 2003. I initially visited the children in nursery, arranged the necessary ethical permissions and carried out preliminary observations during their final nursery term between April and July 2002, during which time they got used to my presence and the experience of being observed by an adult speaking quietly into a small dictophone. I used the approach of modelling my interaction role with the children as much as possible upon a volunteer parent-helper

in school, attempting the 'observer as participant' research methodology (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor and Tindall 1994, p. 39). I responded to children's requests for help with buttons and shoelaces, and overtures to 'show' objects, while avoiding involvement in any of the directive or play-theme generating adult roles within the playground and the classroom. After a short period of initial interest from the children (2-3 weeks) I was treated by the sample as part of their usual classroom adult cohort, being asked for help with various everyday practical tasks, occasionally shown objects of interest and otherwise fairly generally ignored.

I never approached the children on disciplinary matters, and where children initially asked me to referee arguments or deal with disciplinary issues I referred the complainant(s) to other relevant adults. After a few weeks I found that the sample and their classmates did not tend to bring these matters to my attention, or (as far as I was aware) avoid or hide minor behaviour violations when I was present. The formal observations began in September 2002, focusing on the children's outdoor free play during break times and lunch breaks. My usual procedure was to walk around the playground dictating my notes quietly into a dictophone, standing approximately 10 yards away from the relevant child and his/ her playmates. If a child reacted by stopping his/ her activities and looking directly at me, I would walk away for a few moments and look elsewhere, returning when the child(ren) were reabsorbed in play. This seldom happened after the pilot period. When children became very absorbed in play I was usually able to move close enough to hear some of what they were saying; I also made a practice of chatting to them about what they had been playing during that play period as they walked towards their class lines after the bell had gone. I dictated my fieldnotes in an ethnographic style, describing all the target child's play

activities, and associated language during the period of the observation, noting any interruptions, then fully transcribed the tapes.

Each observation transcript was summarised onto an observational data sheet, during which I allocated pseudonyms to the children to protect their anonymity. I then organised the summarised data into gender-based groupings with sub-sets for girls' play, boys' play and mixed gender play, eventually detecting a substantial sub-set of 'football' play themes within the boys' play during the summer term of their Reception year. Most of the play observed appeared to have some aspect of narrative that engaged the children and directed their play, in the sense that the moment-to-moment activity involved had a specific meaning for the child or children concerned. Such narratives were not always located in fantasy; often, particularly with respect to football play, they related to rule construction and negotiation.

Five semi-structured interviews, focused on perceptions of the children's outdoor free play, were undertaken with the children's class teachers during the period that each one was actively working with the child observation sample. In addition to this, I conversed with several other adults within the children's daily environment, usually when the adult in question had also observed incidents that I had recorded in my own observation field notes, appending their comments to the fieldnotes in question. The formal interviews were conducted in a variety of venues, usually in an empty classroom. I put the dictaphone on the table between myself and the participant, started with my first listed prompt, and then we talked for approximately half an hour. Once the data set was complete I went through the printed transcripts, marking up themes that emerged from the set of interviews.

Teachers' constructions of children's active outdoor free play tend to create somewhat negative narrative structures. Bishop and Curtis (2001, p.182) proposed: 'many teachers... found it hard to accept... evidence of video recordings of positive (playground based) play, many having observed nothing but bad behaviour', while Blatchford and Sumpner (1998, p.79) reported that the Elton Committee, commissioned by the British government, proposed that teachers regularly deal with the largest percentage of behaviour problems in school outside the classroom, during break periods. When teachers' typical experience of playtime duty in English schools is considered, the issues underlying this finding begin to emerge. The school in which I carried out my observations operated typical English primary school 'playtime' conventions, in that during the 15 minute mid-morning break, one teacher on playground duty carried the responsibility for the surveillance of approximately 120 children aged between 4½ and 7½ (4x classes of approximately 30 children). At lunchtime, during which the children could be in the playground for up to 40 minutes, this task was spread between two or three lunchtime supervisors. As such, the adults concerned were heavily burdened with the vigilance required, given so many children to watch over. The themes generated between the two parts of the investigation, observation and interview, were quite dissonant, and presented side by side they raise several issues that highlight the controversial nature of 'break time' within the school environment (Pellegrini and Blatchford 2000).

Analysis: The 'Dangerous Activities'

The participant school owned a small, grassed field situated behind the tarmac playgrounds. Football play was only allowed on the grass, and during the period of the year that these areas were dry enough to play on (approximately April-September) there were always football games ongoing. These games tended to be exclusively populated by boys, who independently divided themselves into age/ size defined cohorts. The football games I observed were populated by a constantly changing cohort of boys from Reception/ Year 1 (children aged between 4½ and 6½). Girls of this age very rarely attempted to join the ongoing games. There were some Reception boys who could nearly always be found playing in the football area during the summer months, others who would be there occasionally and yet others who seldom or never joined in the 'main' game. In general, it was the older and larger Reception boys who were regular players.

My initial description of the boys' football games was 'rough and tumble with a ball'; however I quickly learned that there were some generally agreed rules guiding the organisation of the play, even though many of these tended to be implicit. For example, although I never observed any discussion between the children on this point, the division of territory between the age cohorts within the school (with the field split into rough quarters) was never disregarded during the times of my observations; the children appeared to have a firm, implicitly agreed sense of where 'their' territory began and ended. The Reception/ Year 1 games routinely used only one 'goal'; this was permanently marked by two saplings that had been planted at the end of a line of saplings across the field.

I asked Grant, an outgoing child who would frequently chat to me about his play activities spontaneously, to explain to me where the boundaries of the Reception / Year 1 'football pitch' were located. The resulting conversation proceeded as follows:

Pam Jarvis: How do you know when the ball is offside?

Grant: When it goes behind the goal it is offside.

PJ: What about when it goes down there, when it goes down the hill? Is that offside? (pointing towards a small hill that sloped down into the tarmac playground).

G: Not there, there (pointing to an imaginary line just above the brow of the hill). And anyway, that isn't offside, it's a throw-in.

PJ: And the other side? (pointing to the far end of the field)

G: Here (indicating an imaginary line level with the far 'goalpost' (sapling)).

The youngest boys' game organisation did not involve teams. All boys who wanted to play played, with the primary aim of scoring a goal. They joined and left the game at will, most Reception boys taking several brief 'time outs' within an individual play session. Passing and tackling were sporadic, but there did seem to be a general tendency to pass the ball to the boy judged to be a better player in order to maximise

goal scoring. In this way the Year 1 boys tended to get more time on the ball when they played, but there were three Reception boys who were quite well- favoured in this way, Rory and Elliot who were bigger than some of the Year 1 boys, and Lee, who was small, wiry, fast and agile. Lee kept goal at some point during all of the games I observed. The role of goalkeeper seemed to be seen as a prize by the Reception boys, a sign that the boy in this role was seen as a worthy opponent by the older Year 1 boys also engaging in the game.

There was little debate about individual incidences of throw-ins and goal kicks, although occasionally a game would stop for a few moments to allow for a brief debate about what was 'fair' if one or more players objected to a particular action. One absolute rule was that goal keepers wear gloves; the outgoing goalkeeper would give his gloves to the incoming one. Several boys would bring pairs of gloves to school for this purpose, but only one pair would be selected for use within an ongoing game during a specific play period. The goalkeeper tended to be the one adversary against whom all the other players competed, bearing in mind the 'no teams' format of the play. I discussed this issue with Grant:

Pam Jarvis: When you are the goalie, who is on your side?

Grant: No one is on your side.

PJ: Isn't that a bit lonely?

G: Um. But I'll have some friends later- next time.

This seemed to be a reference to the fact that the role of goalkeeper changes hands from game to game, and frequently even during a game; as such the 'loneliness' of keeping goal appeared not to be perceived as a permanent state. During one game, Grant attempted to create an alternative goal with himself as goalkeeper, donning his own gloves and piling up discarded jumpers directly opposite the saplings goal. This was completely ignored by the other boys in the game, apart from one of the Year 1 boys who took his jumper off the pile, saying crossly 'why did they put it over there?' Some imitation of professional footballers was observed, with David Beckham (the very famous and glamorous England captain during the period of these observations) being the only one frequently mentioned by name. A few of the players also demonstrated closely observed imitations of Beckham's trademark 'victory wiggle' after scoring a goal.

The 'rules' most strongly invoked by the boys involved handball and 'time wasting', which was used as an admonishment to boys trying to stop the game for a lengthy debate about another player's action. The specific role of the goalkeeper was also protected by agreement to some extent, but was vulnerable to usurpation when the boy in the goal keeping role attempted to 'time waste'. During one game when he was keeping goal, Grant disputed a general cry of 'score' by firmly stating his opinion that the ball was 'past the line'. When the other boys ignored him and continued to cheer and hug one another, celebrating the goal, Grant responded by refusing to send the ball back into play. While the other boys chanted 'time waster', Aiden snatched the ball from Grant and attempted to take the goal kick. Grant stopped him by pulling him

back and saying emphatically ‘what are you *doing?*’ Aiden retreated, Grant took the goal kick and the game continued without further comment.

The boys clearly showed care and concern towards each other in order not to exclude regular members of the footballing group. When Rory was recovering from a broken arm and was not supposed to engage in rough football for the week after his cast was taken off, the other boys playing football encouraged him to join in, made a point of passing to him and refrained from tackling him when he had the ball. A subtle signalling system was also observed that allowed the football players to show approval towards one another, a light tap on the back, usually administered by a slightly older boy to a boy who had taken a heavy fall or a minor injury without making a fuss.

Older boys also seemed to have an important part to undertake in the development of their younger peers’ ball skills. There were several brief, spontaneous interventions in the participant children’s football games, most often by slightly older Year 2 boys (aged 6½- 7½), with occasional participation from male Year 6 ‘monitors’ (aged 10½- 11½), who worked on a rota to act as supervised ‘playleaders’ in the younger children’s playground. The usual interventions in the early years football play from such ‘mentors’ were gentle ‘one-off’ demonstrations of how to tackle and shoot at goal. When such advice was offered, it was typically well-matched to the younger children’s ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ (Vygotsky 1978) and clearly appreciated by the recipients. Sometimes one of the boys’ older brothers acted as instructor to a group of younger boys; for example, when Aiden tired towards the end of a lunchtime outdoor play period during his first week of ‘all day’ school, he sat down next to his brother who was acting as goalkeeper in the Year 1/Year 2 football play. The older

boy left Aiden alone for a short time, during which some of the other Reception boys joined him. The brother and another boy of similar age then picked the younger boys up and showed them how to make a 'wall' in front of the goal, while another boy prepared to take a goal kick. The boy taking the goal kick yelled and made a gesture that appeared to indicate that he was not happy with this development, but subsequently took the kick without further objection, after which the ball returned to general play, and the younger children wandered off.

Where adults intervened, they tended to show misunderstanding of the day-to-day conventions of the game, which had the result of completely disrupting the fragile rule systems created by the children. After Grant took a heavy fall during one game, a lunchtime supervisor intervened and told the boys that she was going to help them to 'play properly'. This mainly involved supervising a lengthy team picking exercise which was poorly understood by the children. When the game finally re-started, it very quickly became chaotic as boys left and joined at will in the customary fashion. One of the adult-designated 'captains' (one of the oldest boys in the cohort) picked up the ball and, taking it under his arm, went off in search of his previously selected team members. While play was again at a halt, the Reception boys engaged in chasing and play wrestling on the area they usually used as a 'pitch', and discussed a name for their team. The oldest team 'captain' had previously designated his own team 'England'. Suggestions for the alternative team name ranged from France (highly derided) to Manchester (quite popular) to Australia (generally seen as the best suggestion). The game was at a standstill for the best part of twenty minutes, restarting barely five minutes before the end of the lunch break with mainly Year 1 participants. It would therefore appear that the intervention of older boys was far

more in tune with the playground culture as it was experienced by the child participants of these observations than this adult intervention, which triggered a cascade of events that conspired to curtail the play activity altogether.

Analysis: The ‘Invisible Playground’

A theme that I entitled ‘Invisible Play and the School Playground’ emerged during my adult interviews analysis, outlining the teachers’ and lunchtime supervisors’ feelings towards their playground duties. In summary, the theme constituted a set of reflections upon a feeling of overwhelming responsibility. Teachers and ancillary staff described grappling with a myriad of complaints and mishaps arising from the active free play of approximately 120 children aged between 4½ and 7½ which, they proposed, left supervising adults little time to observe any ongoing unproblematic play. The emotional pressure experienced by supervising adults within such an environment was clearly described by several participants as rendering most of the ongoing playground- based activity ‘invisible’ to them. Teachers in particular described their playground duty as essentially a fire-fighting exercise where the main aim was to get through the duty period without major incident, with one’s attention split between a huge cohort of children in an outdoor environment filled with various minor hazards. The most tangible and pressing of these were the hard surfaces that tore and bruised flesh and occasionally caused more serious injuries to skulls and bones; the tarmac playground and the brick walls.

When I observed the boys’ football games, I had noted that, for goal posts, the youngest cohort used a pair of saplings at the end of two rows planted to create an avenue across the field. Every so often a supervising adult would tell them not to do

this, as they would damage the trees, and the game would stop for that play period. I eventually realised, as I moved through my interview schedule, that I seemed to be the only adult working within the school who knew that the saplings were being regularly used in this way. A universal response from the teachers was that they had few insights into what the children generally did in the playground, as they were constantly drawn to various problematic situations that involved small cohorts of children demanding their complete, focused attention, hence they were unable to perceive many other events unfolding in the environment.

This invisibility of the children's play, buried under the continual mediation of complaints that formed the teacher's playtime experience was described again and again by the teacher- participants, some more graphically than others:

Teacher 1: I don't really know (*what imaginative ideas children use in their outdoor play*), I am too busy sorting things out in the playground... you'd know better than me. Perhaps they will take the (*current home corner*) theme we are working on out into their playground play?..... I think the sad thing about not being able to comment really, definitely on it all is that firstly you are out there for a short time, secondly you are often dealing with complaints or injuries, so you've often... got your head down, you've rarely got time to stand and survey.... Sometimes it is a nightmare, if you get several accidents at once and still the children are trying to talk to you. Often the little ones pat or tug at your sleeve or coat to get your attention, and if there are several pulling you in several directions at once it can get really stressful.

Teacher 2..... you're so with the negative things you pick up on like who bumped their head or who you've got to send in or sorting out some argument that has happened or, chasing after someone who has taken a wheelie up onto the field and shouldn't have, silly things like that...

Teacher 3: I dread it (laughs), but... you always seem to be sorting out problems, which is awful and really negative, but.... I suppose it is the responsibility as well.

Teacher 4: You are often the only adult... well, sometimes there is two of you, but you are often the only *teacher* there who sort of can deal with it, and I think you feel very much bound to follow the more serious episodes up ... Sometimes half way through the day you might think to yourself, oh, I forgot to tell so and so that so and so banged their head, and you think, oooh, what if they get home and this and that, you know, and it is an awesome responsibility.... You know they are not your children so you just have to be ultra careful.

Another teacher very simply summed up her perspective on teachers' core playground task: '....you're solving problems'.

Clearly, there is a fair amount of adult tension and attentional overload involved in supervising 'playtime' activity, which means that there is little time for observation of children's day-to-day play constructions. In this frame, it is clear why the non-problematic activity engaged in by the children is to a great extent invisible to

supervising adults. However, this has the result that the panorama of play surrounding such an adult is reduced to the overall core perception that outdoor play consists of unharnessed, unfocused potentially dangerous physical activity, generating a string of minor injuries, and the occasional major incident. In a society increasingly eager to lay blame for every accidental incident with the perceived negligence of another individual rather than bad luck or fate, it is easy to see how this can become an increasingly heavy (and dreaded) responsibility for a supervising adult to negotiate.

The playground also appeared to be invisible to some parents when they dressed their children for school, which added a range of potential mundane complaints for teachers and playground supervisors to negotiate. One of the teachers told me that there were very few parental complaints about children's playground injuries, but quite a lot about mud soiling of coats in the winter, particularly those belonging to girls, which increasingly tended to be light coloured/ designer label. A lunchtime supervisor elaborated on this point, telling me 'I hate stopping play- they need to blow that energy off. But we get complaints from parents, they say they ruin their clothes'. She went on to reflect that it was 'Catch 22- you end up telling (children) that they can't play, but if they go in muddy the teachers get cross because the parents complain to them. So whatever happens, someone is going to be upset or cross'.

Discussion: The Beautiful, Stressful Game

My interview data indicates that adult perspectives relating to children's outdoor play are complex and multi-faceted, in agreement with Pellegrini and Blatchford (2000, p.61) who describe the literature on this topic as 'controversial'. In a similar vein to my adult participants, Connolly (2003, p.118) described playground based free play as

‘an inherently dangerous activity’; however, Pellegrini and Blatchford (2000) cited evidence indicating that for five and a half year old boys, the amount of time spent in active social play with other boys directly predicts their level of success in social problem-solving one year later. Reed et al (2000, p.332) proposed that active, competitive play provides ongoing opportunities for boys to learn about caring, intimacy and rule negotiation: ‘friendship expression in a masculine not feminine perspective’. These researchers averred that as adult male-to-male intimacy is expressed in a different way to female-to-female intimacy, this will inevitably be reflected in child gendered interaction styles. A juvenile system that equates to such adult ‘male- to- male intimacy’ was clearly indicated in the observational data obtained by this research, in the light ‘approval’ touch from older to younger player seen between the sample during their football activities, and the boys’ jumping and hugging when a goal was scored. Holland (2003) found that boys engaged in active competitive play did not simply ‘play fight’, but also explored complex aspects of justice mediation and peace keeping. Correspondingly, when my observation sample’s ‘warrior mentality’ (Jordan 1995) was channeled into early football activity, it was clear that much positive social interaction was undertaken in the resulting play.

It must be noted that these findings were made in small-scale research, focusing on one age group in one specific geographical location; however, it was clear that there was a unique culture observed within this set of observations in the boys’ football play, with regard to the rule negotiation and collaborative, highly symbolic interaction that the children undertook within it. It is emphatically not suggested that girls and mixed gender groups do not also take part in highly developmental social play on the school playground; however, the specific rule-negotiation culture that the boys

developed around their football play resulted in my choice of focus for this short article. As a Briton, I grew up in a culture that lionised football as ‘The Beautiful Game’ (Williams 2001), but had never personally connected with the source of this concept until I carried out these football play observations. ‘It is difficult to over-stress the role that football can play in the playground activities and indeed the lives of many English boys’ (Blatchford, Baines and Pellegrini 2003, p.502); correspondingly, I observed the complexity of boys’ social development in a synthesis of physical, social and competitive play emerging from the football games described above. Such games were the source of so much more than physical development, from the boys’ idolisation of footballer-in-chief Beckham to their absorption with the creation and development of the rules for their game; their mediation of ‘fair play’; their approval of ‘sporting behaviour’ and disapproval of whining timewasters and bad sports; and the care that they showed for those who were injured. This finding reflects Reed et al’s (2000) proposal that competitive, physical play provides opportunities for juvenile male peer groups to develop skills relating to intra-gender caring, intimacy and rule negotiation.

The construction and maintenance of a ‘tiered’ male peer group was clearly highlighted in these observations, in the encouragement towards hardiness and contingent instruction given to these young footballers by older boys, reflecting Meaney and Stewart’s (1985, p.31) finding that the non-linguistic socialization of non-human male primates also relies heavily on the peer group, which ‘transiently includes participating sub-adult... males’. The clear importance of team nationality designation for my apparently anglocentric sample also raises several biocultural questions relating to the interactions through which concepts of ‘nationalism’

(O'Donnell and Sharpe 2004, p.90) are built upon the basic rough and tumble play actions found in earlier, non-linguistic species, and further developed through language linked to action within human male peer groups during the early years of collaborative play. The semiology of the 'goalkeepers gloves' could additionally be posited to indicate a symbolic use of culturally shared 'signs' (Bathes 1993) linked to physical activity play amongst these young boys, marking out the roles of specific individuals within the game. Grant's lack of success in his attempt to subvert this system by using an alternative pair of gloves to become an 'alternative goalkeeper' further indicates that the children's understanding of the semiology that they had collectively created within their football activities was strong enough to withstand this level of attempted manipulation.

The intervention of adults tended to create a considerable change in the play the children were undertaking, with the introduction of ideas that were conceptually beyond the child players; this issue did not seem to arise when older children intervened. Perhaps the vital difference between older children and adults in this type of interaction with young children is that older children are still young enough to share in the 'sacred mystery of child's play' (Newell 1883, 1963, p.12). Some non-western societies appear to use this basic hypothesis to allocate carers for young children. Whiting and Edwards (1988) found that in rural African societies, 6-8 year old child nurses were far more frequently allocated to 'mind' 2-4 year olds than adolescents, even when adolescent candidates were available, 'perhaps because having been recently little themselves they are better able to intuit young children's wants' (Whiting and Edwards 1988, p.177).

This proposed adult incongruity with the play worlds of children dovetails with my interview data, in that that none of the adult participants created a discourse around any positive feelings associated with playground duty, or around any complex concepts relating to what the children might actually be socially and cognitively accomplishing during their day-to-day outdoor play; in this sense, the rich playground panorama of play was invisible to them. The discourse themes they created evoked Connolly's (2003) 'dangerous activity', describing pressure, stress, and heavy responsibility for a large cohort of children in a hazardous environment with the ever-present possibility that various play activities might develop in myriad possible problematic directions. When the more mundane issues are also taken into account, for example, those relating to parental complaints relating to the soiling of expensive outdoor clothing that has not been constructed to withstand energetic play activity, teachers' negative discourses on the topic of playground duty can be postulated to be an understandable human response to a clearly stressful experience.

Conclusion: A Football Play Dichotomy

These observational analyses indicate that young boys are engaging in complex social and symbolic development when they take part in the earliest school playground-based football play. As Swain (2000, p.103) suggests, 'it was the performance, rather than the result that counted: the taking part'. It is proposed that such juvenile football play can be seen as a richly symbolic, very human extension of evolutionarily ancient rough and tumble play, an activity that supports young boys in their very human socialisation and creation of some of their first peer-shared symbolic cognitions, harnessing these to an activity that additionally encompasses the development of motor skills. However, the interview-based data suggested that due to current

physical playground environments and supervision policies, adults in primary schools find playground duties overwhelmingly stressful; consequently they seem unable to directly perceive the positive benefits that children may be gaining from such free play activities.

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