

## Analytic Commentary – Nonsense Play

Children enjoy playing with open ended materials (Drew and Rankin, 2004) and with language, the possibilities are endless. From the first manipulations of sounds to the more complex composing of jokes, playing with language is arguably a natural process (Freeman-Davidson, 2015; Chukovsky, 1963). Nonsense is the use of language in an incongruous way, usually as a means of humour, and rhythm and rhyme play a significant part of most children's lives. Starting with the soothing sounds of lullaby's, sung in their earliest days of existence, to nursery rhymes and popular television jingles, children's lives are embedded with rhythm. In this piece I will analyse an observation of six-year-old twin boys naturally playing with nonsense and rhymes, drawing on relevant theories and literature. I will also briefly look at the role of the adult in supporting nonsense play, and some of the possible implications for practice.

### **Observation**

The observation used in this analytic commentary was provided by a senior lecturer on the Early Childhood Studies Degree course at Roehampton University. It is a narrative observation of her six-year old twin boys. Since she provided the observation herself, there was no need to obtain her consent in analysing it.

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Twin boys, D and R, aged 6 are having breakfast. Their mother is also present in the room.

D starts singing jingle bells.

Mum joins in with the beginning of a popular nursery version – "Jingle bells batman smells, Robin flew away..."

D: "Uncle Mortar lost his daughter on the motorway"

D:" Did you hear that mum? Uncle Mortar lost his daughter?" He giggles

R: "Uncle bumble lost his fumble"

D: "Uncle Billy..." (then he looks at his mother and goes quiet and red. He starts whispering to his brother who is next to him, and then stops.)

The play continues for about five minutes – “Uncle Billy lost his filly, Uncle tellytoots lost his welly boots”.

D comes up to his mother – “Hey Mum how about this one Jingle bells, jingle bells Adam laid an egg. Uncle Lale lost his snail on the motorway”.

M: “That doesn’t work egg and motorway don’t rhyme”

D: “Mine isn’t a rhyming one. Lale and snail rhyme though”.

M: “True, how about Uncle Billy was quite silly on the motorway?”

R: “Uncle crazy was quite lazy on the motorway”

Mum leaves the room. After a couple of minutes the boys follow upstairs and go into their bedroom. They are still talking in the same vein; Mum catches a snippet of the conversation

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D: “No it’s Uncle Billy lost his willy”.

The game ends and they begin playing with something else.

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### **Analysis**

D begins singing, “Jingle Bells,” but it is his mother’s introduction of the alternative version, that initially guides the play. Recognised as scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1980), this form of verbal support encourages children to develop both new and recently acquired skills (Loizou, 2004). Although it is seen throughout the example, Broadhead (2010), would argue that adult interaction can interfere with children’s play. In contrast, some would claim that for adults to promote humour in a way of togetherness such as this, contributes to an appropriate learning environment (Bredenkamp and Cople, 1997, cited in Loizou, 2004).

D’s first creative contribution to the song, shows knowledge and understanding of the rhyming pattern as he correctly rhymes the right words together. Repeating it to his mother and giggling, indicates his sense of enjoyment, possibly due to the imaginary aspect of the play. According to Whitehead (2007), engaging in pretend play facilitates humour.

Additionally, asking his mother if she heard him suggests he is comfortable expressing his ideas to her. This could also be the source of his humour as children communicate in humorous ways when they are free to express themselves (Loizou, 2004). Dunn (1988) however, may suggest this was an attempt at making his mother laugh. Usually by three or

four years old children have grasped what their familiar others will find funny (Dunn, 1988). Similarly, sharing a joke indicates the prospect of the other person also finding it funny, consequently creating a pleasurable social experience.

R's contribution establishes the play as a game. He not only joins in with following the rhyming pattern but he uses the same idea of an Uncle losing something. He has followed his brother's example but adapted on it himself, thus making it a theme of the game. This shows how children are active in creating their own culture (Hannikainen, 2001) as there is an unspoken recognition of rules (Corsaro, 2000). The twins use rhythm and rhyme to adapt and expand upon one another's statements while using their imagination. This type of play is considered a significant form of social interaction (Freeman-Davidson, 2015). Although R copies the rhyming style, his version does differ from his brother's. Rather than rhyming two different words, R plays with the phonemes instead, replacing b with f in 'bumble' and 'fumble'. This adds a new dynamic to the game and D eventually verbalises a phoneme play himself using the same letters, b and f but in 'billy' and 'filly'.

While the boys have created their own complex and unspoken guidelines, there is an element of this type of play that suggest children enjoy pushing the boundaries and risk breaking conventional rules (Garvey, 1977). Using jokes to say naughty words is typically how they do this (Freeman-Davidson, 2015). In the example when D goes red and whispers to his brother, it is likely this is when he thinks of rhyming Billy with 'willy'. Although he does not say it out loud he does take the risk in sharing it with his twin right there and then. This behaviour suggests he may have had a feeling of excitement in which he felt he could not quite contain himself. Children tend to exhibit more boisterous humour when they are with their peers (Bergen, 2003, cited in Bergen, 2015), and this is further seen in the example when D thinks his mother cannot hear him.

Garvey (1977), states that for fun, children distort things that they have learned. D conveys this with his suggestion of Adam laying an egg, (assuming he imagines Adam is a boy and not in fact a hen with a typically masculine name). The incongruity of his statement is typical of literary nonsense (Chukovsky, 1963). Although superficially it may seem that D has made no sense, his ability to do this suggests he has complete understanding of it being

nonsensical, and it actually displays his understanding of who is capable of laying an egg. Nonsense could not exist without sense, indicating children must have an understanding of the words they are playing with, to be playing with them in the first place. This implies that to play with nonsense is to reinforce knowledge (Chukovsky, 1963; Freeman-Davidson, 2015).

Chukovsky (1963), argued that nonsense play helped children to understand reality and the use of these rhymes is a sign of intellect. To visualise the incongruities of nonsense is to use the imagination and that is a complex psychological process and function of consciousness in itself (Vygotsky, 1980). Additionally, to both receive and then express language is also an incredibly intricate process, connecting and using two different parts of the brain (Hayes, 2016), suggesting here that the implications of children using nonsense play in practice would be beneficial to their language development. To appreciate the incongruity imbedded in nonsense play there must also be a recognition that the rules of language are being subverted in some way (Smeed, 2012). This is complex, particularly when they are then creatively replaced with complicated poetic features such as repetition and rhyme (Kennedy, 1991, cited in Smeed, 2012). D's acknowledgment of his statement not rhyming when his mother responds to him is also an indication of intellect. He shows an ability to reflect on his own language as language, demonstrating a meta-linguistic competence (Shultz and Robillard, 1980). The use of incongruity is usually very humorous for children (Chukovsky, 1963; Pien and Rothbart, 1980; Smeed, 2012). Although there is only one example of D giggling in this example this does not indicate that the boys did not find the play humorous. Vygotsky (1980), argued that play is serious work for children. The fact the twins maintain the play for as long as they do is an indication that they are in fact enjoying it. Loizou (2004), considers there to be a parallel between the development of humour and mental abilities. The more developed their mind, the more appreciative of absurdities. In agreement with this, Klein (1992), states that because humour is based on incongruity, it enables creative thinking. Additionally, it is recognised that humour helps children manage stressful situations and can help in developing coping skills (Freud, 1963 cited in Loizou, 2004), it is arguably essential for overall development (Brown, 1990, 1991; Moreall, 1989, cited in Loizou, 2004). Therefore, the element of humour in nonsense play makes it beneficial in helping children to deal with challenging feelings. Consequently, practitioners

could use nonsense rhymes and humour to support children during the initial settling in period as well as those experiencing emotional difficulties.

The idea of an Uncle losing something was the main theme of the play until their mother makes another contribution. Scaffolding their learning further, she suggested, "Uncle Billy was quite silly." R then makes a contribution following this new pattern. For him it is also an extension of his phoneme play rather than his brothers more hyperbolic style which is based in incongruity. According to Varga (2000), D demonstrates high cognitive and language skills as he initially began the nonsense play and continued to extend it in a more hyperbolic way. Engaging in this type of activity together has learning potential beyond just developing language skills. Not only is a complex cohesion of consciousness taking place (Alcock, 2009, cited in Smeed, 2012) but the child is also aware of their own ability to make jokes. In my opinion, this is an interesting point for discussion.

Most play requires an element of self-deception and it can be argued that the more self-deception involved, the more enjoyable the play (Chukovsky, 1963). With nonsense play however, it is the awareness of the self-deception that provides a source of humour rather than the self-deception itself (Chukovsky, 1963). To me, this suggests that playing with language is highly beneficial to a child's sense of self, therefore their overall personal, social and emotional development.

Being aware of the importance of nonsense play is imperative in supporting children's overall development (Whitehead, 2007). Teachers, parents and early years' practitioners have every responsibility to facilitate and promote playfulness in their environments (Loizou, 2004). Language is an incredibly open-ended tool, quite possibly the most flexible, so there is always opportunity to promote playfulness with it. An implication of nonsense play for practitioners is that it promotes an awareness of the structures of language (Loizou, 2004). Considering that the attainment of language is key in developing a successful sense of self and others (Dowling, 2014; Dunn, 1993), the implications of nonsense play are therefore greatly valuable to not just communication and language skills but also to personal, social and emotional development too. According to Whitehead (2007), within the early years, play with language should be of utmost importance. As the example demonstrates, the simple addition to her son's singing, sparked a wonderful play between  
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them all, promoting development on a multitude of levels. This highlights how practitioners can support children in their care by scaffolding and creating child led activities. The most valuable lesson we can instil into our children is to have a playful attitude (Pullman, 2005). More importantly it is up to us to ensure they also keep a playful attitude and that is determined by our own words and actions.

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