

FIGHT GAMES AND EDUCATING AGGRESSIVENESS

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I am filming 5-year old children during the hour of free play in the school courtyard. A group, armed with small tennis rackets, moves into a corner of the garden and starts playing a sword-fighting game. Here we go; I think to myself, someone is going to get hurt! I remain silent, behind the camera tripod; the children have been ignoring me for some time, accustomed to my presence. The battle has begun and, as expected, a child receives a blow from the top down which, moving down the racket handle, reaches the grip and, consequently, his/her hand. The child runs crying to the teacher who, strangely, does nothing to interrupt the game. A short time later, having calmed down, the child returns to his/her friends, with racket in hand. The child stops the group and they mumble, talk and exchange views. The game re-starts and, to my surprise, the top down blow, the one that had previously caused the accident, has disappeared, the children are no longer using it. The problem has been solved, the new rules make the game safer and this excites and engages the children, to the point of making them solve the situations rather than abandon the experiences.

Reflecting on this episode, I thought about how many things the children have learnt through this combat game: organise play, adjust and readjust the rules, exchange views and take decisions, solve problems and share the experience again. When we prevent these playful situations with preoccupied and hyper-protective attitudes, it means we are undervaluing them and do not consider the potential of children, their ability to explore the zone of proximal development and reach the place where we never thought it possible to lead them.

The ecological observation of children highlights categories of aggressive play that can be attributed to fights, battles, races and chasing, as the evolutionary trend of the child, supported by ancestral aspects connected with the instinct of self-preservation and the need to establish dominating hierarchies. The combat and fight game is actually a form of interaction between peers that seems to occupy 10% of children's free play (Smith et al. 2004), involving more males than females. Our culture expects the aggressive behaviour of the male, who is directly reinforced by it, through peers, and, indirectly, through adults. The females use more indirect relational aggression such as excluding a peer from the group or threatening the end of a friendship.

Aggression is part of the social world of children (Kokko Pulkkinen, 2005). Like other forms of behaviour, it is influenced by the child's experiences. Multiple factors concur to manifest the aggressive behaviour of children: individual differences, social influences and conditions, exposure to violence or to abuse, family experiences. The manifestation of aggression should be seen – in the process of education and care of children, but also at subsequent ages – as an element of development to be tackled and

not avoided or inhibited. It is a necessary step to acquire relational skills with which to tackle address and solve inevitable conflicts that are created in day-to-day experiences, to avoid the interpretation of aggression as acceptable behaviour or strategy to succeed in solving conflicts.

Today, education tends to limit the manifestations of aggression, even playful ones, while the child risks being strongly exposed to passive violence, including domestic, if not suffer it directly without possible mediation (Ceciliani 2009a). Educating aggressiveness in childhood can prevent problems that propagate in subsequent ages avoiding that it turns into violence in the most serious cases.

Mediating the natural development of aggression through fight games, supports the child in the development of social-relational skills, thanks to interaction with peers and the ability to control aggressive reactions in an acceptable and suitable reality (Ceciliani, 2009b).

The combat and fight game is a dimension of social behaviour, composed by vigorous physical actions, which is similar to a real battle except for its playful component. Unlike real combat, it is characterised by the presence of pleasing effects highlighted by smiles, reciprocity, alternation of subordinate or higher-level roles and continued affiliation: playing together, also at the end of the battle (Smith, 1997).

The fight game, markedly distinct from physical aggression, assumes the features of an activity tending to facilitate friendship and prosocial cooperative behaviour (Scott and Pankeseep, 2003). Unlike virtual games or passive exposure to violence, the fight game allows the child to understand the effects of aggressive action. In cartoons, the heroes are struck down and always get back up; however, in the real game, the child who is brought to the ground or receives a blow perceives it physically and understands that beyond certain levels, beyond the game, violence is harmful and negative. This gives way to the need for real, physical, not virtual play, to understand these concepts.

A recent research-action activity, based on the playing of traditional-popular games (Pierobon et al. 2010), has shown that in free activities the game most practiced among the many presented, by males and females, was the tug of war, the only indirect fight game (without physical contact) which attracted the participation of almost all the children, spectators and supporters alike. It is interesting to point out how it was precisely the girls who varied the game, which is normally carried out in teams, in the individual form of one against the other. Moreover, played in teams, it was possible to observe behaviours of paradoxical play (Staccioli, 2008) when, for example, the children moved from one team to another to support the group that was losing and continue the game; or, when a group, close to defeat, agreed to let go of the rope suddenly and let the winning team fall making all the children laugh.

To conclude, the fight/combat game is presented as a complex and complete educational framework, useful to mediate the natural development of aggression and educate the child to social relations. The strong socio-relational connotation of this playful form is highlighted in the fact that, after a certain age, when the asymmetry of play could escalate into real fights, it tends to decrease and disappear taking on forms of indirect confrontation. The increase in child bullying and cyber bullying, as early as in primary school, should make people reflect on the need for education which

contemplates the idea of offering educational contexts for the playful exercise of aggressive behaviour, rather than deny its existence with the risk of a drift towards real violence.

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