

Structured, or semi-structured play, differs from free play because it is influenced by method, type, established time and space, not freely chosen by the child. Children participate in these types of play because others, either adults or peers, propose them. The level of involvement may even be high, but it loses part of that motivation that supports de-structured play. Furthermore, in structured play, it is necessary to abide by rules which are no longer freely chosen and dynamic (subject to continuous adjustments and modifications), and thus adaptable to the needs of the player, but more stable and rigid in order to exceed the needs of the player.

On the other hand, living an asymmetrical relationship of dependence on the adult, the child is used to the rules he/she receives from his/her carer and tries to conform to them for the love that binds him/her to his/her parents and carers. In structured play, unlike de-structured play, rules are imposed to order play and make it safe.

Obviously, the path to the rule, as intended by the adult, is not immediate, but passes through several phases that characterize the progression of playful experience<sup>1</sup>: assuming the sense of the rule, namely understanding its need; respect for the rule, namely understanding its essential value; giving oneself a rule, namely self-determination, self-control.

This evolution is more impactful and meaningful the more the child has the possibility to exercise it in the creation, modification and adaptation of the rules of play. This is valid in particular in the transition from solitary play to parallel or social play, where the rule is a necessary condition for playing together: «you are free to play but not free in play»<sup>2</sup>, since the freedom to invent the rules exists but not the freedom to violate them. Acquiring the sense of the rule, namely experimenting its importance as a condition to make play achievable and accessible, leads the child to two different kinds of awareness: respect for the rule as culture of legality; giving oneself a rule as a way to control one's impulses and emotions: playing and having fun within the limitations of action in relation to what can and cannot be done. Gray<sup>3</sup> believes:

*«The instinct for play leads them to ignore the discomforts and to repress their impulses, so they respect the rules, and these abilities gradually transfer to all other areas of life».*

The child, therefore, must learn to control his/her excessive mobility and not his/her immobility; structured play, within the concept of giving oneself a rule and respecting it, offers an ideal framework to support the path of self-control. This situation is the

starting point of education that, over time, must accompany the child to control, discern and choose what should and should not be done.

The exercise of giving oneself rules marks the transition from free and symbolic play to a form of play with rules and, in particular, to competitive play. Establishing and abiding by the rules is a fundamental aspect of play and of competition, without which it would be impossible to govern the activity and, at the same time, allow for the total involvement of the child. The rule, in fact, stimulates attentive tasks in the person who participates in play, defining the limits in which it is necessary to place oneself at each moment of play, outlining itself as an ambiguous aspect because it limits possible behaviour but makes play possible. Therefore, the child who plays puts him/herself into an environment in which he/she exercise self-control between what it would like to freely do and the limits that the rule imposes in order to play with others.

Competition, therefore, is not a situation to avoid or prohibit because the child interprets it as play. The usual request “will we play?” clearly defines the playful background inside which competition is carried out. It is up to the adult not to emphasize the concept of victory, placing competition inside the educational sphere, knowing that educational experiences can take place in it, in relation to social and cooperative skills. Supporting the competitive games of children, helping them to have fun during the playing process and reducing any emphasis on winners or losers, is an important educational approach to help children who are little educated to rules. The sense of self-discipline, stimulated by the presence of the rule, implies the ability of the child to develop the sense of limit, namely the ability to steer behaviour within the established framework. This device sows the seed of moral and ethical development, as regards to what can and cannot be done, and starts to develop awareness on the theme of loyalty-disloyalty, legitimacy-illegitimacy.

<sup>1</sup>Farné, R. (2010) Sport e infanzia. Un'esperienza formativa tra gioco e impegno. *Milano: Franco Angeli*

<sup>2</sup>Gray, P. (2015) Lasciateli giocare. *Torino: Einaudi*

<sup>3</sup>Caillois, R. (1995) I giochi e gli uomini: la maschera e la vertigine. *Milano: Bompiani*