



Forms of vitality play and symbolic play during the third year of life



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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the development of *forms of vitality play*, a recently described type of play, and links it to the development of symbolic play, one of the most studied types of play in developmental psychology. Two adult–infant dyads were videotaped longitudinally during in-house free play meetings every 15 days during the third year of life. Convergence technique was applied in order to accelerate the longitudinal study. A total of 17 h 48 min were registered in 28 sessions. An observational code with categories of forms of vitality play (a non-figurative play frame in which child and adult play together with the dynamics of their own movements and sounds in a repetition–variation form), symbolic play, and categories of combined patterns of both types of play was applied. The rate of each play was calculated for different age periods. Forms of vitality play is present at a constant rate during the third year of life. Symbolic play flourishes during this period. Combined play patterns are not the most frequent but are present from the beginning to the end of the third year. We suggest that FoVP favours intimate and intersubjective experiences essential to the understanding and the development of the interpersonal world; that it can be thought of as a good runway for the development of symbolic play; and that it prepares the child to participate in the temporal arts that belong to his culture.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Introducing forms of vitality play

Forms of vitality play is a recently noticed non-figurative play frame linked to *early social play* and *temporal arts* in which child and adult – in an active and enjoyable reciprocity context – play together with *forms of vitality*: the dyad elaborates the dynamics of their own movements and sounds in a repetition–variation form which become the focus and the essence of this play (Español, Martínez, Bordoni, Camarasa, & Carretero, 2014). The introduction of forms of vitality play requires a brief description of vitality forms and early social play.

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1.1.1. *Forms of vitality*

Forms of vitality (Stern, 2010) have been described to represent how we, as humans, deal with dynamic experiences. Forms of vitality can be easily observed and are clearly available to experience. When a force shifts on any kind of movement we are talking about vitality dynamics, which focus on how excitement, interest, and aliveness fluctuate. Vitality dynamics emerge when the experiences of movement, and what Stern calls its daughters – time, force, space and directionality/intentionality – come together all at once as a psychological experience. A form of vitality is a *Gestalt*, a spontaneous integration of the above mentioned elements emerging from a holistic experience. According to Stern our minds grasps dynamics by means of this pentad. Dynamic forms of vitality are the psychological experiences in which the human mind represents or processes the physical qualities of movement (time, space, force, direction). Forms of vitality are modality non-specific, they are usually paired to a specific content although not exclusively. These can be physical or mental movements, actions, a sequence of dance steps, etc. They are not sensations, nor emotions, although they are both possible contents of a vitality form. Forms of vitality can be directly observed in the behaviour of others. They concern the way in which things are done, the “how”. Recently, Di Cesare et al. (2013) suggested that besides the goal and the intention of the performing agent, vitality form is a third aspect an observer may capture when seeing an action done by another individual. Vitality forms characterize action styles, and are detected on the basis of movement dynamics, for example the act of touching can be done in different vitality forms: energetic, gentle, etc. Forms of vitality do not inform us about the goal of the action, they provide us information about the subjective state of the agent performing that action. According to Rochat et al. (2013), individuals with autism reveal severe deficits in recognizing vitality forms. The experiences of dynamic forms of vitality are crucial in interpersonal encounters. Stern highlights they are also at the heart of the temporal arts, which provide an excellent example of how vitality forms work on us, they also show them in a purified form offering a context in which they can disentangle from everyday life contingencies. The temporal arts, music and dance in particular, specially explore the dynamic dimension of human experience. Artistic performances produce arousal shifts, from which vitality forms emerge as the experiential units working in those shifts, sometimes accompanied by specific emotions.

1.1.2. *Forms of vitality in early social play*

One of the first joyful activities adults offer their babies is playing with movement and sensations associated to it: they lift them up, cradle and toss them moving their arms and legs around. In these situations of early social play, they also expose patterns of sound for vocal playing by clicking their tongues and lips, pairing these activities with tickles, rocking, and patting. Sounds, facial expressions, and movements are all resources adults use to hold a baby's attention, generating expectation, driving the baby to different levels of arousal, some impossible to be achieved in solitude. Early social play is a frame often organized in the form of repetition–variation: parents repeat movements, sounds, words or short sentences. This repetition is not mechanical or boring but varied in rhythm, intensity, kinetic or melodic contours; parents also modify the duration of pauses between repetitions playing with their baby's expectations (Español, 2014; Papoušek, 1996; Stern, 1971, 1974, 1985).

In early social play Stern (2010) found a ground where forms of vitality become evident. Sometimes early social play is almost purely a play on vitality forms (e.g. sudden almost explosive movements when a mother gives tickles to her child). Adults usually play with forms of vitality to avoid the child's habituation and boredom. “The result is a theme-and-variation format of vitality forms” (Stern, 2010, p.108). The form of repetition–variation helps adults to level, modulate, and play off the baby's arousal as much as themselves'.

In addition, Stern (2010) defends the idea that forms of vitality are a meeting point between early social play and time-based arts: the feelings that run from excitement to quietness, tension to relaxation, characteristic of early social play, are the same feelings that time-based arts such as dance and music express with mastery; and together with early social play they share the same backbone: the repetition–variation form. In early social play adults manipulate forms of vitality through the repetition–variation form, while the baby participates primarily as a receptor.

1.1.3. *Forms of vitality play*

Although Stern (2010) points out that in early social play the adult plays with forms of vitality, he never assigned a separate name for this play. We agree with him. We cannot call these kinds of play *forms of vitality play*, for the same reason we do not call *pretend play* to the incorporation on the adult's behalf of any type of fiction in early social play when playing with his baby – for instance simulating a rubber duck biting the child's leg. The infant play modality is defined in terms of what the baby effectively does while interacting. In this sense, early interactive play is not forms of vitality play but early social play.

Finesse in manipulating or elaborating vitality forms is most likely to be acquired along development, and interactive play is certainly a privileged context for a safe rehearsal. We think that at some point in infancy, early social play turns into *forms of vitality play* when the child actively wields these vitality forms with repetition and variation. In forms of vitality play, child and adult play together with forms of vitality. Forms of vitality play is a pleasant and joyful play frame, where adult and infant elaborate units (or motifs) of movement and/or sound (like moving a spring forward, stretching and shaking it) according to a repetition–variation form. These units are repeated at least twice with variations in the rhythm of sound and movement patterns, in the form, the dynamic or the quality of movement, in melodic contours, sound sonority, dynamics, and timbre. The whole activity unfolds around the varied repetition of sound and movement, making it the core of this activity.

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