

[Stephanie Vibbert passed away on January 20, 2003. She was a sophomore Psychology and English double major at Kalamazoo College when she wrote this Observation Report in Spring of 2001. Since Spring 2001, Steph's paper has been available to students in the Social Development class as an example of a particularly astute and thoughtful observation report. Steph's paper remains on our site as a testament to her outstanding scholarship.].

## Observation Report Stephanie Vibbert

### Introduction

Over the past eight weeks, I have been attending regular “play sessions” on the playground of Woodward Elementary School. During this period of time, I became particularly aware of the rules and boundaries, set by adults and peers alike, that the children often encounter when attempting to frame their interactions in an acceptable way. To simply walk up to a group of children and ask them to play in a friendly manner represents only a miniscule factor of social development. As a child interacts, he or she must learn to interpret a wide variety of complex cues and requirements. Problems arise when separate requirements conflict with one another or with the child’s own perceived needs and, at times, it is difficult for the child to understand that these requirements even exist!

The internalization of formal rules is one facet of social development to which adults assign great significance. Indeed, noncompliance is the “most frequent reason for psychiatric referral of young children” (Schaffer, 1999, p. 250). Self-control *is* important, of course. “Adults play a crucial part in helping children to achieve control over their own behavior; it is only through initial dependence on others that a child can develop autonomy” (Schaffer, 1999, p. 249). What many adults tend to overlook, however, is that children are sometimes trying to operate within several different “realities,” each of which sets forth an entirely different set of rules. For example, Turiel (cited in Schaffer, 1996, p. 268) notes that the requirements set forth by the family differ significantly from the requirements set forth in the “outside world.” Similarly, the objectives of the adults on the playground are very different from the objectives of one’s cohorts,

and the child must find a way to interact that satisfies the rules delineated by both groups if he is to function successfully. Finally, the child must also learn the appropriate ways to meet his or her *own* needs. Thus, the process of moral development is far more complex than memorizing simple phrases such as “do this” and “don’t do that.”

Several attempts have been made to construct a model that tracks the moral development of children. In this paper, I have found the work of Piaget, and Kohlberg to be the most useful references to explain the observations I made on Woodward’s playground. In some way, each of their theories assumes that moral development follows a pattern in which the child progresses from fulfilling the needs of the self to fulfilling the needs of the whole. It is important to note, however, that, like any form of development, the internalization of rules does not occur in a rigid, homogeneous pattern. I witnessed displays of egocentrism in children who, according to Piaget, should have moved well into the third stage of moral development by then. The concept of “soft assembly” (Thelen, 1994, p. 30) in the dynamic systems perspective provides a much better format for the progression of moral development. According to the dynamic systems perspective, there is no predetermined outcome. Rather, certain innate possibilities, such as the potential for various types of moral reasoning, that lay within the child are assembled in a malleable configuration when the environment for such growth is provided. A pattern of behavior emerges as the self-organization continues, becoming more and more stable over time (Thelen, 1994, pp. 30-31). In the example of moral reasoning, the child, recalling memories from each stage in his or her life, attempts to create a sensible “pattern” from these experiences. It is this pattern that leads to the internalization of a belief system, the belief that “this” is the way things “ought to be,” and therefore, this is what I “should” do in this situation. Everyone has a unique life experience. Therefore, it makes sense that some children may have had more opportunity than others to expand their realm of self-awareness into the more complete awareness of the whole.

In this paper, I will explore different aspects of several experiences that I had with the children, attempting to make sense of their moral interpretations of each situation. I will use the

theories of Piaget, Kohlberg, and Eisenberg to provide a loose context for their behavior, with the understanding that each child is different, and may not fit the profile set forth by each theory in other situations. On the playground, the children do not know that they are learning. Their behavior is, for the most part, purely spontaneous, and, sometimes, they happen upon a new form of successful interaction quite by accident. It is then up to them to remember this behavior, and to utilize it in future situations.

\* To protect their identities, fictitious names have been given to all children mentioned in this report.

### **Observations**

Monday, April 16, 2001

Immediately upon entering the playground setting, I became engaged in an opportunity to define a rule for a group of children and apply its importance to a greater context. The discussion took place between myself and three little girls who were enthralled by my necklaces. The necklaces, I told them, came from my grandmother, and so they were pretty special to me. I then took the necklaces off to give them a closer look, and offered to let them wear one each for the duration of recess. I made it clear, however, that I needed them back at the end of the play period, assuming that they would understand that this deal was non-negotiable. The girls wanted to keep the necklaces for themselves, however, and seemed unable to comprehend that I had set this boundary because I had a “greater motivation” (i.e. I did not want to keep the necklaces simply because I liked them and was being “selfish,” but because they were from my grandmother and therefore had sentimental value). Instead, they were more focused on the immediate, tangible evidence, which to them implied that I should be more thoughtful of *their* needs. “Why should you get to keep all of them?” one of them asked me. I had several necklaces, they went on to explain, so why couldn’t I just give each of them one of mine and keep

one for myself? When that didn't work, they tried to show me how similar the necklaces were—I could give them that one and keep the one that looked just like it. When I held my ground, they resorted to bargaining: if they could make it all the way across the monkey bars, *then* would I consider relinquishing the jewelry? At this point I reminded them that gifts from relatives were very important to people, and that my grandmother would be hurt if she knew that I sometimes gave away the presents that she had given to me. I asked them how they would feel if somebody wanted to take a gift from their grandmothers. I also stressed that I had explained the conditions before I took the jewelry off. After this explanation, they seemed to be more thoughtful, and willing to accept the limitations of our agreement. At the end of the play period, each of them willingly sought me out and gave the necklaces back, asking if they could wear them again next time.

Without guidance, these girls evidently operated within Kohlberg's second stage of moral understanding, the instrumental purpose orientation. At this stage, children are able to understand individualized needs, but believe that each individual should and will act in his/her own best interest (Kohlberg, 1969, cited in Berk, 2000, p. 493). Accordingly, the girls formed the belief that they deserved to have the necklaces based on their personal desires, and believed that my desire to keep the necklaces were purely based on self-interest as well. This level of thinking coincides nicely with the "needs of others" orientation, which is the second stage in Eisenberg's levels of prosocial reasoning. Without my guidance, they displayed limited perspective-taking skills, as they were unable to conclude on their own that I might want to keep the necklaces because they were a gift. Their interest was more focused on the concrete, material desire (Eisenberg, 1982, cited in Berk, 2000, p. 493). Once I pointed out that my grandmother would be hurt and discussed how they might feel if they were in my position, they were able to take a more empathetic perspective on the situation. In this situation, the girl's thinking process coincided more effectively with Eisenberg's level of empathetic orientation (Eisenberg, cited in Berk, 2000, p. 505), as Eisenberg was less concerned more with an empathetic understanding of rules than

Kohlberg, who is more oriented toward a utilitarian ethical structure that focuses on punishment, authority, and the needs of society (Berk, 2000, p. 505). With my reminder, they were able to reflect hypothetically upon the situation and understand how they would feel if they were either in my situation, or my grandmother's.

While it is helpful to classify the children's level of moral reasoning in order to understand that a progression did take place with the proper instruction, it is more important to understand that a child's moral development is just that: a *progression*. With their life experience, the girls were not yet able to instantly consider how another person would feel, and based their demand on their immediate need. Here, the theory of soft assembly comes into play. They would be able to take this experience and apply it in the future, incorporating more and more experience into their moral development. Selman (1980) indirectly supports the theory of soft assembly through his model of children's stages of empathy, by postulating that children begin upon the path to empathy by understanding the views of others as being highly individualized and flexible. Later, as their ability to think in more abstract terms develops, and as their experiences accumulate, they begin to consider the views of others simultaneously (Selman, 1980, cited in Schaffer, 1996, p. 173). Although the fact that they were unable to advance right away is partially due to their lack of sufficient cognitive development, empathetic reasoning is also hindered by lack of experience, and a sufficient "template" of the circumstances of others. I provided this template by describing my feelings and my grandmothers feelings, connecting both of our individual sentiments to the overall concept of sentimental value. When I reminded them to reflect upon "how they would feel," they considered their own varied assortment of life experiences and applied certain experiences to the concept I had just explained, and were more capable of understanding why I had placed this limitation on their use of the necklaces. With clear and positive guidance, these third graders demonstrated that they were capable of developing a sense of empathy *and* understanding a standard in the spirit of its application, but only when they were provided with the opportunity to think about their actions.

In order to facilitate this development, the authority figure can use several techniques. Each can have a different impact upon the way that a child processes information, and therefore each can lead to a different outcome in the development of a moral code. Hoffman (1977) hypothesizes that authority figures use three methods of discipline to show children the nature of their “moral mistakes:” love-oriented discipline (if you do/don’t do this, my opinion of you will be enhanced/lessened), power-assertive discipline (do/don’t do it because I said so), and inductive discipline (do/don’t do it for this reason) (cited in Schaffer, 2000, pp. 305-306). Hoffman’s research has shown that inductive discipline is usually the most effective, because it not only explains the rules, but also appeals to the child’s own emotions (Hoffman & Salzstein, 1967, cited in Schaffer, 2000, p. 306). This was the technique that I used, and it did indeed prove to be effective. Through this exchange, one can see the connection with the dialogue between the authority figure and the child described by Schaffer. With patience, the adult uses the child’s questions to provide feedback about important details in everyday life, and to establish and negotiate rules and boundaries (Schaffer, 1996, p. 261). I used the girl’s questions to talk about the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren, and the nature of giving gifts. By the end of the conversation, the little girls had a slightly deeper understanding of the concept of “sentimental value.”

Thursday, April 19, 2000

Hoffman has found that, while most parents tend to use one of the three techniques more often than the others, parents usually end up using some combination of all three in order to gain compliance from their children emotions (Hoffman & Salzstein, 1967, cited in Schaffer, 2000, p. 306). I found that, in order to effectively maintain control over a larger group of children, I sometimes assumed the role of the enforcer, using power-assertive discipline along with inductive discipline. The first incident that illustrated this combination of techniques involved a small group of boys, both in the third or fourth grade, who were threatening to jump off of the swings. I told them that this might not be such a good idea, because, I explained, they seemed to be able

to swing very high. They talked back, claiming that they would, and I told them that if they did, they would have to sit with me for the rest of the period. This assertion seemed to have the desired impact. The boys decided not to jump off of the swings. Later, however, it became apparent that my more authoritative instruction failed to instill a true sense of “playing safely on the playground.”

This was illustrated five minutes later, when I turned around and saw that the boys were challenging the other children to walk *between* the swings without getting hit. Once again I informed them that their behavior was unsafe, but they continued to play in this manner until I stepped into the area between and physically *stopped* the swinging. “If you can’t play safely,” I told them, “You can’t play.”

By assuming a more authoritative role, I was responding to two aspects of the situation. First of all, their behavior was dangerous, and there was a very real chance that one of the children running between the swings could have gotten hit at any moment. Secondly, these boys were responding in a very confident manner, and acting assertively was the only way I could get their attention. Actively stopping the swinging by itself without providing an explanation would have been a purely power-assertive role, however, because I provided the boys with feedback for *why* I was doing this (they were not playing safely and somebody could have been seriously injured) I was also using inductive discipline. However, there were drawbacks to my reaction, and, while it did keep them safe for the moment, power assertion is not the best way to instill an autonomous reaction to a rule. The rule came from the “outside,” and (fortunately) they were unable to witness the consequences of their actions. Piaget argues that the best way for children to obtain his highest stage of moral understanding, moral subjectivism, in which children recognize that rules are “arbitrary agreements” that are sometimes based on motivation, is to interact with their peers. He believed that “cognitive conflict,” which is the most powerful motivating factor in provoking change, can be caused most easily by “interpersonal conflict” (Piaget, 1932, cited in Schaffer, 1996, pp. 292-293). It is difficult for interpersonal conflict to

emerge in a vertical relationship between a child and an adult, the one-way interaction wherein the adult sets aside his/her own needs in order to meet the needs of the child. In a horizontal relationship, however, which takes place between peers, reciprocal behavior is demanded by both parties, and conflict can easily begin if one party feels that his/her needs are not being met (as cited by Tan, 2001). It was not until I became involved in a more structured game, where adult rules were consistent and obvious, and the interactions of the children were cooperative and directed at meeting a wide variety of goals, that I was able to observe the scope of the variables in moral development. I also was able to compare the more flexible nature of the informal rules that emerge within a group of children without direct adult feedback.

Thursday, April 26, 2001

The game that allowed such a rich opportunity for observation is called “Pom Pom Pull-Away,” and it is usually run by Mary, one of the head playground supervisors. The formal rules are quite simple: players run across the soccer field in order to avoid being tagged by the players who are “it.” The “its” are accumulated until one runner is left out. This runner then gets to choose whether or not he wants to be it for the next round. This game, I have found, is the most efficient way to observe the children’s behavior on their own terms, in “their world,” according to their own laws of social functioning.

When the game runs smoothly, Mary and I are merely there to ensure that the game proceeds at a quick pace, and that the “chaos” remains ordered. The kids in this group are fourth graders, and they seem to be quite competent at following the simple structure of the game. According to Piaget, children of this age have generally entered what he calls the “cooperation stage” of the application of rules. At this age, winning is still the primary goal of playing the game, but by now the children have developed a “sense of mutual control, unification of rules, and agreement within a game” (Piaget, 1932, cited in Singer & Revenson, 1996, p. 99). The children tend to be “hyper-conscious” of the rules, and are quick to point out the mistakes of their teammates. Usually they try to direct Mary’s or my attention to the actions of the “culprit.”



Although their censure usually coincides with an action that has negatively affected their own performance in the game, their awareness demonstrates that they are beginning to internalize the need for the rules, and most of them understand that the rules do not merely exist because the adults “said so.”

I am more interested, however, in the *kids’* set of rules; they have their own “code.” Piaget accounts for this in his stages, stating that children at this level often retain individual interpretations of the rules (Piaget, 1932, cited in Singer & Revenson, 1996, p. 99). During the course of the game, it also became apparent that they had a separate understanding of the purpose of the game from the adults. Mary mentioned that she has them play this cooperative game because it helped them to function better as a group, and since they had started it she had noticed a significant improvement in their cooperative behavior at lunchtime. The children themselves, however, seem to play the game for various other reasons, especially status. The game becomes an excellent opportunity for the child to view his or her own behavior compared to other members of the group, and, generally, there is a firm consensus about what is acceptable to the group and what isn’t. For example, whiny or pouting behavior is tolerated far more easily by the adults than by the children, whereas, interestingly enough, the children seem to have a higher tolerance for aggression, unless it is directed at them. For example, I observed several particularly “rough” tags during the course of the game, but only the children at whom the aggression was directed would respond. However, when children resisted assuming the position of “it,” (and they often did) I would frequently hear comments from his/her peers such as “You are holding up the game!” Conversely, Mary and I are more likely to stop aggression, and we are far more sympathetic to tired or frustrated children, reminding them frequently that it is ok to take the option of resting on the side of the field. Nevertheless, it seems to be far more detrimental to one’s social status to break the code set forth by the children themselves than it is to break the rules set forth by the adults! This “code” is far more intrinsic in their behavior; it is simply *expected* that their standards (such as bravery or stoicism) will automatically be known. This

higher expectation could be because they have yet to understand the situational nature of behavior—as stated before, “rules” are still rather rigid and universal before Piaget’s stage of moral subjectivism is reached. Also, the rules set forth by the adults represent a convention that shifts from situation to situation; the teachers in the classroom hold different expectations from Mary on the playground. However, at Woodward, the children’s group always remains the same—the same class has the same playground hours. Thus, *they* have more of an opportunity to observe one another, and they establish a more consistent code, which I will call the “code of social morality.” This code is intrinsic enough to be consistent with Turiel’s definition of convention versus morality, as described by Schaffer:

“. . . children learn to make the distinction between these two categories from a quite early age because of the different types of social interaction that they involve. Conventions are dogmatically taught, being handed down by authority. Initially, they may be regarded as universal; it does not take long, however, before children realize that the done thing in one’s own family is not necessarily the done thing in any other family. Moral principles, on the other hand, are acquired because children perceive that certain actions have consequences for other people that are intrinsically harmful: witnessing a younger child being hit is sufficient to show that such an act, in whatever social context, is undesirable. Thus children begin to construct two quite different domains of knowledge about the social world and its functioning” (Turiel, 1983, cited in Schaffer, 1996, p. 268).

In this quote, the teachers play the role of the “family,” and the playground assumes the role of the “real world.” Here, the children have the opportunity to witness the actions that are intrinsically harmful within the social needs of their age group. Because they are less closely supervised on the playground, they are more likely to “be themselves,” and witness the consequences of their behavior firsthand. And, because status is so important, the requirements of the adults naturally become a second priority. One boy grew particularly angry at his peers during a hiatus in the game and a shoving match began. Later, I saw two children collide, and their immediate response was to ask one another if they were all right. Positive and negative responses such as these occur without any adult intervention, and it is the social outcome of these behaviors that catalyze the child’s formulation of a moral theory.

Friday, May 11, 2001

Frequently, the children search for ways to “bend” the adult rules in order to advance their status. Most of the time, in this game, the key to status is to be tagged last, proving that they are faster and better athletes than their peers. Others resort to other methods, such “playing tricks.” This is usually amusing to the adults as well as the kids. They are permitted to take breaks that last one round, sitting on the sidelines when they get too hot or too tired. Several of the boys, however, simply began to walk across the field one day, stating that they could not be tagged because they were “on break.” For them, this was merely a strategy that would help them to avoid being tagged until they reached the other side of the field, at which point they would call “time in” again. When I reminded them that breaks could only be taken on the sidelines, they claimed that the rules stated that breaks had to be taken by walking across the field. I understood that this was not the case, and another supervisor supported me. At this point the boys laughed, and began to run again.

It is amusing to fool the adults and their peers, and none of the children would ever label their own behavior as “cheating.” They are quick to recognize it in others when it interferes with their efficacy in the game, but they do not seem to realize that these rules can be applied to themselves as well. When they are labeled as “cheaters,” they will in fact say almost anything to defend their behavior, demonstrating that, while children of this age are just learning to understand the actual value of the rules as they apply to the group, they are simultaneously learning to view themselves as *playing a functional role within* this group. Although the boys were “breaking the rules,” Schaffer reminds us not to become worried by some demonstrations of noncompliance. Through simple tricks such as these, the boys were developing “social skills and strategies to express their autonomy in a socially acceptable way” (Kuczynski, Kochanska, Radke-Yarrow, and Girnius-Brown, 1987, cited in Schaffer, 2000, p. 251). They were tired, but they did *not* want to be removed from the game, and it was perceived as being more socially acceptable by their peers to walk across the field rather than to sit down. Furthermore, it is completely understandable that they would still demonstrate some egocentrism by believing that

the rules apply to others and not to themselves, for they are still forming their identities in a group context. Schaffer cites a study by Hartshorne and May (1928-1930) that found that children's tendency to lie fluctuates depending on the situation with which they are confronted, and that a child's tendency to lie is therefore not an innate characteristic (Schaffer, 2000, p. 301). It seems that, when children engage in behaviors such as bending the rules, they are in fact testing socially acceptable boundaries.

Monday, May 14, 2001

I observed the most obvious struggle for status in a child whom I will call Justin (not the child's real name). He did not seem to be as athletic as the other children, and many times he would accidentally collide with somebody, or trip, and then burst into tears. After falling, he would often blame the other child for his misfortune, and at times making an appeal to authority, telling me that he had been singled out by his peers, once more, as an object of their aggression. Early in the game, I observed that this was not the case; that the falls were all accidents, and Justin's reactive behavior might be exacerbating his social situation. After one particularly bad episode, I decided to talk to Justin.

As he collected himself, he began to tell me how he felt. He claimed that "Nobody ever left him for last," meaning that he felt that his teammates were singling him out personally to tag first. Here, he demonstrated that he had a more egocentric interpretation of the social code. Like a younger child in Piaget's egocentric stage of moral interpretation, his concept of rules was flexible, indefinite, and tailored to fit his individual needs (cited in Singer & Revenson, 1996, p. 98). At this particular moment, he firmly believed that one of the implied rules of the game was that *he*, as an individual, should not be tagged so often, even though, to an adult, it would seem that he did not get tagged any more often than the other children. This slight difference in maturity also affected his perception of the "social code," and he eventually developed a tendency to rely upon *me* to enforce his current interpretation of the rules. For example, when we returned to the game, he expected that I would tell the other children that it was his turn to be "it."

According to Piaget, write Singer & Revenson, in the egocentric stage of social development, “[children] feel a communion with the abstract, ideal adult who epitomizes fairness and justice, but at the same time they may be inventing their own rules throughout the game” (1996, p. 98). Justin clearly hoped that I would intervene when it seemed that his peers were not treating him according to his perception of fairness, even though this perception would alter to fit the current situation. His style of interaction with me also often assumed the form of a “monologue,” which is Piaget’s stage of language development that coincides with the egocentric stage of rule development (cited in Singer & Revenson, 1996, p. 98). In the collective monologue, a group of children play together and speak, but the speech is often unrelated to what the others are saying or doing, and the purpose is rarely to exchange real information (cited in Singer & Revenson, 1996, p. 60). This immature style of communication may inhibit a child’s ability to communicate with more mature peers, limiting his or her opportunity to absorb the “code” set forth by the group.

Shortly before Justin and I returned to the game, I tried to encourage Justin by stating that “everybody has different talents,” and that “some people are better at sports than others.” He comprehended my implication, and stated that he was good at playing tic-tac-toe. However, he then attempted to show me how to play the game by drawing in the dirt, when I needed to be with the other children, because the other playground supervisor had gone in. He did not seem to notice that I needed to be interacting with the other children, and showed little interest in the bigger game until he realized that he now had an opportunity to be “it.” “I want to be ‘it,’” he told me, but made no further comment when the other children protested. He simply looked at me and was apparently waiting for a response. Here, he relied heavily on our vertical relationship to ensure that he would be treated fairly. For him, it was perfectly natural to put the game “on hold” while he showed me his skill, and to expect me to help him to assume a leading role once he was finished. Unfortunately, this perception did not coincide with that of his peers, and Justin experienced even more trouble with acceptance as the game progressed.

Later on, Justin did tag one of the bigger boys. This particular child, Alex, often displays reactive tendencies as well, but is far more athletic, and generally it seems that the other children leave him alone. I happened to be watching Justin, and thus happened to witness Alex's immediate reaction as well. Immediately he turned around and leaned over Justin, who was a good head shorter than he. His eyes were wide and his expression was angry, and it seemed to me as though he was ready to push the smaller child. I yelled Alex's name and told him that this action was not acceptable, that Justin had tagged him "fair and square." This diffused the immediate conflict. Alex, however, continued to insist that Justin "always went after him," and that "it wasn't fair."

Once again, this illustrates how children have the egocentric tendency to alter their own rules to fit their needs during the course of a game. Alex did not want to be "it" anymore, and so he felt that he was justified in blaming Justin for tagging him "all of the time" so that he would not have to be. Perhaps he selected Justin because his peers were biased against Justin at the time, and would be more likely to accept his assertion that "Justin was acting out again." In this instance, the "understood rules," the intense desire for "fairness" that so often dominates the game, could have very well developed into a bully/victim dynamic should this aggressive pattern have been allowed to continue. However, in this early stage of the interaction, it was clear that Alex's behavior was largely due to his perception of Justin's intent. In late childhood, asserts Schaffer, children are more likely to link their behavior to the motivations of others (1996, p. 280).

Alex also displayed some egocentric behavior, however. His actions, in this instance, can be linked to Kohlberg's stages of moral understanding. By stating that Justin "always went after him," he assumed that Justin (and probably others) was doing this in his own self interest, probably because it made Justin "look good" to tag one of the bigger boys. This fits nicely into Kohlberg's instrumental purpose orientation, in which behavior is reciprocal, but each participant acts in his own self interest with the assumption that the other will do the same (cited in Berk,

2000, p. 493). This provides insight into the perspective that bullies often take when defending their actions toward victims. Because the aggressive child attributes his/her actions to another's behavior, he/she is likely to believe that the other child "brought it on himself." The aggressor's assumption is precluded by another assumption, a moral belief that may lead to a bullying dynamic: that the victim should *know* that the bully will behave in a way that will further his own interests, and therefore, the victim should take the appropriate measures to protect himself.

Fortunately for everybody, the need for social status also encourages prosocial behavior, especially in children such as Justin, who are having difficulty with acceptance from the group. This was certainly the case with Justin. The next observation I made of Justin's interaction with his playmates had a far more positive outcome. Either somebody had been teaching him the benefits of prosocial behavior, or he had simply figured out that it is more beneficial to act in a manner that keeps the game moving "forward." This time, around the beginning of the game, Justin entered late, when the team member who had been tagged last was trying to choose a partner who would be "it." Justin asked rather brightly if he could "help," and the other boy said that he could. Mary, Bill and I all acknowledged his contribution.

The need for acceptance, however, is not the only motivation for internalizing the rules. I believe that, above all else, the children *like* each other, and participate in the game with the understanding that everybody *should* be having a good time. These children had moved well beyond the stage of egocentric empathy described by Hoffman (1987), and well into the stage of having empathy for another's feelings. Schaffer expands upon Hoffman's theory by stating that "it is . . . when confronted by another person's distress that a child's prosocial tendencies become most evident" (Schaffer, 1996, p. 271). Most of the children whom I have come to view as more confident *and* popular seem to have internalized the rules of empathy and are able to put them into practice during the appropriate times, indicating that they have improved their social skills with their peers, *not* simply their ability to interact well with adults. For example, during this game it is very likely that children will fall, and, while it is not very likely that the child is hurt,

most of the kids demonstrate concern for their fallen peer. After one particularly rough collision, the boy who stood up first immediately and sincerely asked the other boy if he had been hurt. Replying that he wasn't, the other boy reciprocated by asking his friend if *he* had been hurt. This demonstration of prosocial skills exemplifies the awareness that is required for successful peer interaction.

### **Conclusion**

As time went on, it seemed that more and more of the children were truly integrating the various codes set forth by the different situations in their lives. They began to develop a sense of empathy necessary to understand the purpose of boundaries, and they began to internalize the real rules of the game and understand how the restrictions of the game applied to their group function. This is partially due to the modulation provided by the adults. For example, I indirectly talked with the three girls about empathy, and Mary continually stressed the importance of "keeping the game going," and, eventually, they began to demonstrate their new understanding in several ways. For instance, they tend to argue less now when they are caught breaking the rules. During the beginning stages of the game's development, they would become very argumentative when they ran "out of bounds," which serves as the equivalent of a "tag." Often, they would blame the person who was chasing them for "making" them run out of bounds. Now, however, they are far more good-natured. When a player runs out of bounds now, I am often amused to witness the realization spread over his or her face. Usually, they grin and shake their heads, make a comment such as "Oh, man!" and go to their proper place as a "tagger." This slight difference in reaction illustrates a more mature interpretation of the rules. Children who react in this manner have made a connection between their realm of understanding and the realm of the adults; they realize that the rules do not exist in order to restrict them as individuals, but to keep the game going and to help them to function more smoothly as a whole unit.

The interaction itself also gave the children feedback on how to play the game. By acting, and observing the acceptable and unacceptable interactions of their peers, the children first



internalized the socially acceptable ways of responding and, in turn, began to view the rules in the spirit in which they were intended, instead of interpreting them as “moral realism,” the outside edict of an adult with the power to punish (Piaget, 1932, cited in Singer & Revenson, 1996, p. 101). Mary has noted that the game proceeds far more smoothly now, and the children seem to facilitate decisions more quickly about who will be “it” at the end of the game, when there is usually some confusion. Arguments about whether somebody was tagged or not are usually less frequent now, which tells me that the children have begun to apply the rules as “something built up progressively and autonomously,” thus eliminating the “need to quarrel” (Singer & Revenson, 1996, p. 100). This increase in cooperation signifies the gradual emergence into the “codification of rules stage,” the final shift into an adult decision-making system based on the needs of the group *and* the individual.

It seems that, while this integration of social codes is a natural occurrence, that the opportunity to negotiate and interact in a cooperative setting provided the greatest environment for the children to learn about the value of rules. When the rule came as a command to “get off the swings,” for instance it was simply an inconvenient imposition. Provided with an in-depth explanation of how their behavior might affect others, however, as well as the opportunity to improvise and test new styles of interaction, the children grew remarkably quickly. They are indeed eager to learn the system as quickly as possible, and absorb information rapidly. It seems that a host of factors, such as a wide variety of new situations, appropriate feedback, and positive reinforcement throughout development all contribute to a child’s development, allowing him/her to flourish a thoughtful, attentive, and adaptable adult.

**References**

- Berk, Laura E. (2000). Child Development. Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon.
- Schaffer, Rudolph H. (1999). Social Development. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers.
- Singer, Dorothy G., & Revenson, Tracy A. (1996). A Piaget Primer: How a Child Thinks. New York: Plume.
- Thelen, Esther. (1994). The improvising infant: Learning about learning to move. A dynamic systems approach to the development of cognition and action. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press/Bradford Books.
- Tan, S.L. (2001, April 25). Lecture, Kalamazoo College.

