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# Nonplay in Norwegian Early Childhood Education and Care Institutions

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The authors consider play to be critical and intrinsic to healthy human life and development, and they argue that children's right to play should be supported by the environment in which they live. Their study seeks to understand what children do when they appear not to play during free play periods at early childhood education and care institutions. Their analysis of nonplay activities produced five categories: conversations, practical tasks, passive observation, wandering, and conflicts (or crying). These categories, they believe, can help kindergarten teachers become aware of factors in the physical environment that prevent children from playing and detect children who fall outside the play community. **Key words:** affordances; child friendly environment; early childhood education and care (ECEC); nonplay; play

## Introduction

**A**RTICLE 31 OF THE United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNGA 1989) challenges us to understand play from the perspective of children. Viewing play as a fundamental need and right of all children offers a powerful construct that legitimizes and secures the place of play in the lives of young children (Kernan 2007). Children's play has been described as a form of daily participation in the cultural, social, and physical environments of everyday life (Meire 2007). As such, play is a critical and intrinsic part of healthy human life and development, and a child's ability to exercise the right to play should be supported by the environmental conditions in which that child lives.

A recent Norwegian study exploring children's free play in early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions demonstrated that there was a significant and positive correlation between children's play and their well-being and involvement in play activities (Storli and Sandseter 2019). Children spent two-thirds of their time in different kinds of play, both indoors and outdoors,

during their free play time in ECEC. However, Sandseter and Storli's study also demonstrated that almost one-third of the activity in the prime time for free play did not fit the categories of play (functional, constructive, and symbolic play) and was therefore registered as nonplay, which was shown to be significantly and negatively correlated with both well-being and involvement.

### **Play and the Play Environment in ECEC**

The Norwegian framework plan for the content and tasks of kindergartens (NMER 2017) emphasizes the importance of play for children's development and learning and states that play should have a prominent role in ECEC institutions. The plan acknowledges, then, that play is a key aspect in children's lives and in their daily lives in ECEC institutions.

Play is an activity that children carry out because they like doing it rather than using it as a means to an end (Sutton-Smith 1997). From children's perspectives, play is voluntary and self-controlled, fun, active, spontaneous, free, unlimited, natural, and self-initiated (Eberle 2014; Wiltz and Fein 2006) and, as such, is intrinsically motivated. Play promotes learning, including learning skills that are important for adulthood (Bjorklund and Pellegrini 2002; Pellegrini and Smith 1998). Play and learning can be seen as inseparable dimensions in pre-school practice that stimulate each other (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson 2006). Environments that provide children with meaningful contexts for play, learning, and a diversity of choices and possibilities for following their interest are those in which children learn best (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, and Eyer 2003).

Lillemyr (2007) described the motivation to play as a form of driving force, a desire to feel competent and motivated by the joy and mastery of the play. A child's play is meaningful, and children have the opportunity to try out reality when playing. Free play occurs when children can choose what they want to do, how they want to do it, and when to stop or try something else. The term "free play" is often used to distinguish such play from organized recreation and learning activities, and characteristics of free play such as self-control, uncertainty, flexibility, novelty, and nonproductivity produce a high degree of pleasure and involvement and, simultaneously, the incentive to continue to play.

The Norwegian Framework Plan for the Contents and Tasks of Kindergartens (NMER 2017) emphasizes that children should be included in events in which they can engage in physical activity, play, and social interaction and experience motivation and achievement according to their abilities. In Norway,

children's right to free play, during which they can choose what to play, with whom, and where is regarded as an important element of cultural content.

The theory of affordances (Gibson 1979) concerns humans' functional perception of the environment and how this perception must be understood as a complex interaction between psychological and environmental factors. In this way, this theory represents a dynamic framework for considering individuals' perceptions of the environment in general, stating that the physical, social, and cultural environment in which individuals live affords them different actions and behaviors (Kyttä 2004; Waters 2017). Affordance is relationally specified by the attributes of the environmental feature in question and by child characteristics.

The relational association between the environment and children's play was investigated by Miranda and her associates (Miranda et al. 2017), who claimed that high-quality play environments provide various affordances related to spaces, equipment, and materials that encourage social interactions and different types of play. In discussing what characterizes a child friendly environment, Kyttä (2004), in her empirical work, highlighted the positive cyclical interrelationship between children's independent mobility and the actualization of affordances. The less culturally and socially constrained the children are to explore and play freely, the more likely they will actualize new affordances in their surroundings. Actualized affordances will in turn motivate children's exploration, play, and learning. A Norwegian study by Bjørnstad and Os (2018) showed that some ECEC institutions have few toys and that many of them are inaccessible to children, resulting in children needing help locating the toys. Nordin-Hultman and her colleagues (Nordin-Hultman et al. 2004) note that access to material that children can choose from promotes free play, as well as children's ability to contribute more strongly to their own everyday lives. Easy access to toys and materials makes it more likely that children's play continues over time.

### **Previous Research on Children's Nonplay Behavior**

Several studies exist about children's free play and about categorizing play behavior among children (Dyment and O'Connell 2013; Garner and Bergen 2006; Kleppe, Melhuish, and Sandseter 2017; Storli and Sandseter 2019). Nevertheless, as far as we know, there are few studies about what children do when they are not playing in an environment supportive of free play. However, Rubin (2001) examined nonplay among a sample of children based on the Play Observation

Scale (POS). The POS guides observations to be made about the structural components of play as they are nested in the social participation context during free play. The POS is particularly influential because it allows detailed assessments of children's nonsocial play. Based on the POS, Coplan and his associates (Coplan et al. 1994) identified three distinct subtypes of nonsocial play behaviors: reticent behavior (e.g., onlooking or unoccupied behaviors), solitary-passive behavior (e.g., quiescent exploration of objects or constructive activity while being alone), and, finally, solitary active behavior (e.g., repeated functional activities or solitary dramatizing). Therefore, the POS directs the assessment of several other nonplay behaviors, including unoccupied behavior, onlooking, exploration, peer conversation, anxious behaviors, hovering, transitional behavior, rough-and-tumble play, and aggression (Coplan, Rubin, and Findlay 2006).

Some of these might logically be something other than play, while others, for example, rough-and-tumble play, might be looked upon as a type of play (Storli and Sandseter 2017). Additionally, although some researchers clearly distinguish between play and exploration (Pellegrini and Gustafson 2005), others see exploration as a precursor to play or as an integral part of play (Bjorklund and Gardiner 2012; Olofsson 1993). In differentiating play from exploration, Rubin, Fein, and Vandenberg (1983) stated that while play asks "what can I do with this object or person," exploration asks "what is this object/person and what can it/he/she do."

Another relevant study about children's nonplay behavior (Grady-Dominquez et al. 2019) introduced six categories of nonplay in investigating novel interventions for promoting play on playgrounds in five Australian primary schools for children with developmental disabilities. The six categories were: aggression; sedentary; walking, jumping, or transitioning; eating; talking with others (about nonplay-related matters); and observing.

In examining the impact of playground design on children's play choices and behaviors in preschool centers, Dymont and O'Connell (2013) recorded the dominant type of play in diverse play spaces. The categories of play in this study were functional play, constructive play, and symbolic play. In addition, they recorded two categories in which the children were not engaged in play: self-focused or looking on and talking with another child.

While categories of children's play are observable descriptions of what children are doing in general, categories of nonplay are contextual because they are observable descriptions of what children are (not) doing in a supportive environment for play. In the same way that differing comprehensions of exploration

as a part of play or a precursor of play exist in the literature (e.g., Pelligrini and Gustavsson [2005] versus Bjorklund and Gardiner [2012]), onlooking, observing, and transitioning have different interpretations. Some researchers focus on the passive and even negative role of such behavior related to types of play (Herrington and Brussoni 2015; Kytta 2004), but others emphasize onlooking and observing, for example, access strategies for gaining entry into ongoing interactions (Corsaro 2003; Strandell 1994). Sutton-Smith (1997) thoroughly discussed the ambiguity of play, and in his concluding remarks, he emphasized that play's definitions must be broad rather than narrow, including passive or vicarious forms as well as active participant forms.

### **Aim of the Study**

As we mentioned in the introduction, we positioned this study within a larger study that explored how research-based interventions of the physical environment could influence children's play behaviors. Our aim in the present study is to explore what children do when they do not play during free play periods in ECEC, where they can choose for themselves what to do and with what and whom. Finally, our aim is to suggest broad categories of nonplay. Since play is positively associated with children's involvement and well-being (Storli and Sandseter 2019), we discuss this knowledge as it relates to child friendly environments that support free play in ECEC institutions.

### **Methodological Approach and Analysis**

Our study formed part of the Competence for Developing Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Institutions' Indoor and Outdoor Environments (EnCompetence) project, funded by the Research Council of Norway and approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services. The project lasted from 2017 to 2021 and was conducted in close collaboration with three owners of ECEC institutions in Norway. The data collection involved systematic and randomized video observations of children in indoor and outdoor environments during free play, where free play implied that the children could decide what they wanted to do, where they wanted to be, and with whom they wanted to interact.

## Participants

In this study, we selected the participating ECEC institutions from a pool of twenty-two institutions suggested by two private ECEC corporations and one municipality, all of which were partners in the project. Importantly, we selected institutions that had at least twenty children (without special needs) aged three to four years old who could be recruited as participants. The research group strategically selected eight ECEC institutions that represented a mix of size, urban and rural, building year, and organizational structure (departments, bases, zones, flexibility). For empirical (and practical) reasons, ten children (five girls and five boys, totaling eighty children) were selected for observation (following parental and child consent as required by Norwegian research ethics). These selection criteria ensured that an equal number of boys and girls participated, as well as an equal distribution between ECEC institutions. In one institution, one girl was replaced by a boy due to difficulty recruiting enough girls. The total number of participants was thirty-nine girls and forty-one boys between the ages of three and four years.

The Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergarten (NMER 2017), which applies to all Norwegian ECEC institutions, states that staff shall design the physical environment both outdoors and indoors so that all children are provided the opportunity to participate in play and that staff should organize space, time, and play equipment to inspire different kinds of play. All the participating ECEC institutions in this study conforms to these requirements. The staff-child ratio for the three- to six-year-olds (decided based on the norm in Norway) was six children per staff member, and the group size in the sample of this study was fifteen to twenty children. The Norwegian norm for the area of indoor environments for children in the relevant age group is four square meters per child and that for the outdoor environments is twenty-four square meters per child. Although there was considerable variation between the participating ECEC institutions in this study, all the normative requirements met what can be described as high-quality play environments as suggested by Miranda and her associates (Miranda et al. 2017).

## Data collection

All observations were video recorded and conducted in accordance with a strict observational protocol during a period of four weeks in October. This protocol

ensured a random sampling of observational sequences and that the data collection was carried out in the exact same way at each institution. The protocol also instructed each institution to offer children opportunities for two hours of free play indoors and two hours outdoors on days when the data were collected. In Norwegian ECEC, children normally have at least two hours of both indoor and outdoor free play (Moser and Martinsen 2010), and commonly some of the outdoor play occurs outside the ECEC institution's playground (such as in hikes to forest areas). The protocol stipulated that the outdoor play took place within the institutions' playground and not on hikes to other play environments. Two child participants were selected for each observational day (each child gave in situ consent), and the researchers focused on these two children for the whole day. As a result, there were five days of structured observations for each of the participating institutions (a total of forty observation days).

During each observation day, we applied the following protocol: we decided the starting point of video recording and the order of the children to be observed before we began data collection. We did this to ensure that the researchers would not influence which child or which situations got recorded. Each child was observed for twelve two-minute sequences, six indoors and six outdoors. The protocol instructed researchers to carry out this observation as follows: Child 1 was recorded for two minutes, followed by a six-minute break to locate the next child in the play area. Child 2 was recorded for two minutes, followed by a six-minute break to find the first child to record again. The project researcher was responsible for following the protocol, watching the time, and writing field notes to capture more nuances of each situation than the video would capture. The fellow researcher was responsible for video recording. If the researchers found a child in a situation that could not be filmed, such as toileting or changing clothes, they postponed the timetable for video recording accordingly. If the child was in a situation that could not be filmed for more than ten minutes, the researchers moved forward with the other child and then conducted the missing observational sequences at the end of the timetable.

Altogether, the data material consisted of 950 two-minute sequences (approximately 1,900 minutes of video).

### **Initial Analysis**

The background for the present exploration of nonplay was an analysis of chil-

dren's play initially conducted in the larger EnCompetence project. In all the 950 two-minute sequences, the type of play occurring was coded second by second, meaning that if a child switched from one type of play to another during the two minutes, the code also shifted. Dymont and O'Connell's (2013) play categories were used in the coding process:

- Functional play includes physical play activities, such as running, riding bikes, tumbling, climbing rocks, sliding down slopes, climbing trees, and playful skiing.
- Constructive play includes building play activities, such as building sand castles, creating huts and shelters, and playing with loose items such as sticks, cones, and pebbles.
- Symbolic play includes imaginative play, such as social drama play like family play, rescue play, or superhero play.
- Self-focused or looking on (no interaction with others, not engaged in play, such as day dreaming, empty staring, and watching activities).
- Talking (not engaged in active play but talking with another child).

In this project we noted the two latter categories—self-focused or looking on and talking—as children not being engaged in play, and as such we collapsed them into one category with the preliminary name nonplay.

The coding was conducted by one researcher, and then 10 percent of the sequences were randomly chosen for a second coding by another researcher to secure the quality of the coding (for more information about this coding process, see Sandseter and Storli 2019).

### **Method for Further Analyzing and Categorizing Nonplay**

The main body of data in the project consisted of 950 two-minute video observations. From these, 452 two-minute videos contained at least one period of nonplay. For the purpose of this study, these 452 videos, including nonplay videos, which accounted for approximately half of the data material, were further analyzed to explore what children actually did in these sequences and how this could be categorized. Video observations provide an opportunity for both quali-



tative and quantitative analyses. In this study, we chose a qualitative approach in exploring the material, aiming to develop robust subcategories of nonplay. We subsequently used these categories for a qualitative, second-by-second analysis of the material, in which we coded all the video observations based on the new nonplay categories. This allowed us to describe the qualitative fundament for each of the different categories we identified and to quantitatively determine how much time each subcategory of nonplay represented in the underlying data. The process of analysis and the development of nonplay categories was executed in four phases based on an inductive approach, in which we moved from the particular to the general, from specific descriptions of what happened to categories that could help further analyze the data (Marvasti 2014).

In phase 1, we analyzed all 452 video observations using a qualitative exploratory coding process. In this phase, we viewed each observation and wrote down descriptions and characteristics of what the children did when engaging in what had already been coded as nonplay. Three researchers performed this coding, each for one-third of the total material. In addition, we created preliminary codes close to the data (Johanessen, Rafoss, and Rasmussen 2018) directly based on what emerged from the observations. The preliminary codes included, for instance, children just watching other children playing or just looking around for something to do, children and practitioners talking about things other than play-related themes, or children engaging in practical activities such as changing mittens or finding water to drink.

In phase 2, we reviewed all notes and suggestions for codes and discussed them in a workshop among the three researchers. The purpose of phase 2 was to determine what characterized the nonplay situations and whether there were similarities or differences among the three researchers' suggestions for codes. In the process of compiling the codes into overarching, robust subcategories, we identified nine preliminary subcategories of nonplay. We then developed descriptions of the main characteristics of each of the categories and how this was represented in the data material.

In phase 3, our focus was to analyze quantitatively the video observations that contained nonplay, using the nine categories identified in phase 2. This was performed in the Observer XT analysis program, in which we coded the data material for nonplay categories second by second. Initially, phase 3 was carried out by one researcher. Subsequently, 10 percent of the video observations were randomly selected and controlled by an independent assessor to heighten the reliability of the coding. Similar to the coding of play in the initial analy-

sis, interrater calculations for nonplay were not conducted. The coding of the independent assessor resulted in discussions about how specific observations should be interpreted as nonplay or not. These discussions resulted in a unified understanding of the content of nonplay and in minor revisions to the initial coding. The data from Observer XT were imported into the statistical program Stata MP 15.1, where we performed quantitative analyses of the occurrence of each of the subcategories of nonplay.

In phase 4, the nine preliminary subcategories of nonplay were interpreted in light of play theories and earlier research. This process resulted in a reduction of nonplay categories from nine to five. In the following section, we present and discuss the nine preliminary subcategories of nonplay and how and why we conclude this study with five nonplay categories.

## **Findings and Discussion**

We present a description of the nine preliminary nonplay categories and the occurrences in time (percentages of total nonplay observations) of each of them. Some will also be exemplified with descriptions of children's behavior and dialogues in the data material and further discussed in an ECEC context.

First, following the quantitative analysis of the nonplay data material, the results (figure 1) show that the prevalence of the nine categories differed widely. One category represented 23 percent of the material, and one category represented only 2 percent of the material.

The first two categories represented some kind of conversation for 37 percent of the nonplay behavior registered in this study. Dymont and O'Connell (2013) also included a category of talking in their play categories framework. They described their talking category as conversations between children who are not engaged in active play. In our material, we chose to divide talking or conversations into two categories, discussed separately: child-child conversations and child-adult conversations.

### *Conversation Child-Child*

Conversations between children accounted for 19 percent of the nonplay material. Verbal requests and conversations between children characterize this category. This coincides with the definition by Dymont and O'Connell (2013) of their talking category. These conversations were, however, not related to play in the manner

Subcategories of nonplay	Percent
Conversation child–child	19%
Conversation child–adult	18%
Practical tasks	7%
Exploration	2%
Onlooking behavior	8%
Passive observation	23%
Wandering	20%
Conflict/crying	3%
Sum	100%

Figure 1. Distribution of preliminary subcategories of nonplay in percentages of total observation time.

that Grady-Dominguez and her associates (Grady-Dominguez et al. 2019) use the term. Often, the children in our study talked about everyday events, agreed about matters, and told each other about issues with which they were concerned.

Such conversations can be important for many aspects, including language development, establishing friendships, and creating a sense of community by being listened to by others (Gjems and Løkken 2011). An example of such a conversation took place between two girls who climbed onto a box in the outdoor setting. The conversation concerned one visiting the other in the afternoon. They agreed that they should stay together all day in kindergarten. Another example involved two girls discussing how their rooms looked at home and how they both slept alone at night. They further talked about having a sleep-over. Some of these conversations primarily focused on who should spend time with whom, without this being part of play or planning to play.

### *Conversation Child-Adult*

In this category, we analyzed conversations between employees and children, which occurred in 18 percent of the time spent on nonplay behavior. Neither Rubin (2001) nor Grady-Dominguez and her colleagues (Grady-Dominguez et al. 2019) distinguished whether a child talked to another child or to an adult, but in our data material, we were able to record this difference.

The content of the conversations between children and adults was not related to play and was often about everyday events or about what a child wanted. Gjems (2008) pointed out how important conversations between children and employees are for several aspects of children's development, including language skills. ECEC employees who are able to support children linguistically assist them in their cognitive, linguistic, and social development (Coplan, Rubin, and Findla 2006). An example of this type of conversation in which an adult deepened children's understanding and social competence occurred when an employee, lying in a hammock, talked with four boys. One of the boys forgot what he was about to say, after which the employee suggested that maybe it would help if he thought about it. Then, one of the boys said, "We must do that if we hit each other, too. Then, we also have to think about it." The employee elaborated: "Yes—then we have to think about what we have done, right?" The conversation continued, focusing on what should not be done against others and how it is important to think about whether you are about to hit somebody or whether you have hurt someone.

This category includes all kinds of talk between children and adults. Included are observations of adults who read to children or tell them stories as well as staff who reprimand children or guide them in aspects that do not involve play.

## **Practical Tasks**

Children doing practical tasks accounted for 7 percent of the nonplay observations. We observed two prominent characteristics of practical tasks when the children spent time fetching toys or equipment they needed for play as opposed to when they were eating, drinking, or getting dressed. In this category, it is important to distinguish between longer periods of such practical tasks and tasks that were integrated into the play (for example, when children brought pots and pans from the toy chest to the table inside the doll's nook).

Examples of this category included situations in which the children had to stop playing to retrieve materials both indoors and outdoors or in which they had to ask for help to obtain toys that were inaccessible, resulting in their stopping play. In some of our observations, the children had to walk quite a distance to gain access to toys and equipment, especially outdoors. The situations that fall under practical tasks within nonplay are circumstances in which the play stops or practically has to start over.

In a child friendly environment, one in which children have free and easy access to play materials as described by Kyttä (2004), Bjørnstad and Os (2018), and Nordin-Hultman (2004), it is more likely that children's play continues over time. An example of this is to have several depots or carts of toys that the children can easily access when playing outdoors. Indoors, it is important to organize material on shelves, making them visible and easily accessible for children.

## Exploration

In our qualitative analysis, we made some observations that involve exploration. Exploration occurs when children test the properties of an object, trying to gain information about and experience with the environment or to acquire an understanding of it (Pellegrini and Gustafson 2005). We coded exploration behavior in 2 percent of the nonplay material. An example of exploration involves a rainy day in the outdoor environment, where large raindrops hung on a plank on a climbing frame: "A boy gathers raindrops with his hand before he 'drinks' them. Then, he uses his tongue and licks the next plank but does not get as much, so he goes back to collecting water by hand."

Although some researchers clearly distinguish between play and exploration (Pellegrini and Gustafson 2005), others see exploration as a precursor to play or an integral part of play (Bjorklund and Gardiner 2012). Olofsson (1993) used the concept of exploratory play, in which children develop their curiosity by examining and testing the properties of materials. As such, children explore something in their environment to play with it. Much of the literature pertaining to play in kindergarten considers exploration part of playing and learning. For instance, the Norwegian framework plan for the content and tasks of kindergartens states that children should experience a stimulating environment that supports their desire to play, explore, and master (NMER 2017).

## Onlooking Behavior

This category included children who observed others with obvious commitment and empathy and registered in 8 percent of the video observations of nonplay. The criterion we used to define someone as an onlooker held that this child looked at other children or employees with some interest. We could see from eye movements and expressions that the observing children paid attention to what they were watching. There was a great deal of mimicry in onlooker children's faces and eyes, which indicated that they were watching the activities of others as well as what was happening in the situation they were watching. Their facial expressions changed throughout the clip, and we saw that onlooker children would mirror the facial expressions of the other children and staff they observed, for example, smiling when the others smiled.

Sometimes they also moved nearer to the situation to get a closer look at what was happening or to show more active interest in it: "A girl throws a ball around and is also very aware of another boy and a girl in the room. She sits down by the wall and holds her own ball at rest as she looks at the others and watches their activity. We see that her eyes follow the ball and the children. When one of them loses the ball and it rolls in her direction, she picks it up and gives it to the boy. Afterwards, she gets up and walks closer to the boy playing with the ball."

Another example involved a girl who observed one of the kindergarten employees: "The girl looks at an employee who cuts the image of one of the children in the kindergarten from a picture. The picture is detailed, so the staff member concentrates to cut carefully around all the details. The girl stares and opens her mouth as the details are cut out. She tilts her head to see better."

In this category, we also observed what can be perceived as taking a break from playing. An example involved a situation in which several boys were playing with toy cars in a corner. One of the boys sat up and continued to sit while watching the others through almost the entire video sequence before continuing to play with his car.

What we refer to as onlooking coincides with the categories of onlooking and transition used by Rubin (2001), the observer category of Grady-Dominguez and her associates (Grady-Dominguez et al. 2019) and the reticent behavior described by Coplan and his colleagues (Coplan et al. 1994). In our study, onlooking behavior indicated that a child was paying close attention to the activities of others but that he or she did not participate directly in the play.

An observant child could also make comments to or laugh with the other children but not be involved in the activity itself. Onlooking behavior might also be described as access strategies for gaining entry into ongoing interactions (Corsaro 2003). A child's transition from observer to participant in play begins by looking at others and their play, often staying in close proximity, tuning into the activity, and signaling a desire to join in.

It is reasonable to suggest that onlooking behavior is sometimes closely linked to play or perhaps even constitutes part of the play activity. In many cases, observation of others can give the spectator a play-like experience, such as vicarious risk taking (Kleppe, Melhuish, and Sandseter 2017), or represent a break from play or an attempt to become more involved in the play (Strandell 1994).

### **Passive Observation**

In the passive observation category, we included situations in which the children either apparently had no intention regarding what they were doing or had no interest in what was going on around them. In our study, passive observation was the largest category of nonplay behaviors, at 23 percent. Passive observation characteristically involved children sitting, staring blankly into the air, often physically passive with no or very little facial mimicry. Our interpretation of these situations held that these children were neither interested in nor aware of anything happening around them.

In some of our observations in this category, children sat next to other children who were playing without becoming involved or showing interest in what was happening around them. They were often completely silent, staring unfocused into the air. We also saw some children sit inactive on a tricycle without visible interaction with other children. Other times, we observed children sit in proximity to other children who were playing and seemingly show no interest in the other children or what they were doing: "There are three boys and three girls involved in the observation. One of the girls sits a little distanced and looks at the others before she looks down at the asphalt. She is not actively involved in the play; she does not get the ball during the entire clip and looks down at the asphalt during the entire observation. The others fool around and laugh next to her."

While Rubin (2001) described situations such as unoccupied behavior, wherein a child stares blankly into the air, Grady-Dominguez and her colleagues

(Grady-Dominguez et al. 2019) would more likely have described a child doing nothing as engaged in sedentary behavior. Coplan and his associates (Coplan et al. 1994) called their nonplay category “reticent behavior” (e.g., onlooking or unoccupied behavior), and it would fit both into passive observation and, partly, into our onlooking behavior category.

Dyment and O’Connell (2013) used a category called self-focused/watching. They describe this as an activity in which a child has no interaction with others and is not engaged in play. The child is possibly daydreaming, staring into the air, or watching others’ activities. This description is similar to our passive observation category, except that viewing other individuals’ activities in an interested and engaged manner belongs to the onlooking behavior category in our study.

However, it is important to make clear that observations categorized as passive observation are based on the researchers’ interpretations of the children’s behavior. Although we tried carefully to evaluate each situation and the multitude of children’s expressions, we cannot entirely dismiss the probability that the children had meaningful thoughts or reflections we were unable to capture through our observations.

## Wandering

Children walking around, often alone, looking for something to do or someone to play with made up 20 percent of the video sequences pertaining to nonplay. Rubin (2001) categorized this as part of unoccupied behavior or hovering, which is quite similar to what Herrington and Brussoni (2015) called channel surfing. This term covers children’s restlessness and bored wandering about in search of something to do because they ostensibly could not find someone or something that seemed to engage them. Channel surfing can also include short attempts of exploration and play without becoming involved. In our analysis, we also recognized situations in which other children rejected the wanderers from participating in play or in which their invitation to play was not accepted:

A boy runs around outdoors. He stops for a short while when he gets to an employee and two other children, a girl and a boy. The girl stands by a sandbox. The observed child walks over and lifts the lid to the box. The girl just moves to the side. He tries to talk to her: “I’m Captain Sabeltann,” he says, but she does not respond and walks away. The boy follows her and tries to push



or catch her. She just ignores him and goes in a different direction. Finally, the boy sits down on a tricycle and looks down on the ground.

We also observed an example of wandering during which a child tried to make contact with a staff member without any visible interaction developing between them: “A girl walks around in the outdoor area. She speeds up a bit before walking slowly again. An employee emerges, and the girl runs over to him. She tries to take him by hand, but he does not respond and walks away with another child. The girl walks around in the area alone.”

From the perspective of the theory of affordances (Gibson 1979), wandering as a category of nonplay can be interpreted in different ways. Affordances theory considers individual perceptions of the environment, and it states that the physical, social, and cultural environment affords individuals different actions and behaviors. For the ECEC, the purpose of the environment is to facilitate and support children’s development, play, and learning. The Norwegian framework for the content and tasks of kindergartens (NMER 2017) states that play should be a key focus in ECEC and that staff should promote an inclusive environment in which all children can participate and experience the joy of playing. In nonplay, generally, children’s wandering can be interpreted both positively and negatively. Children’s exploration and search for someone or something playable (e.g., social and physical environment affordances) will always be a natural part of daily life in ECEC, given children’s inherent desire for play (Lillemyr 2007). Nevertheless, as described in our observations, wandering has many negative effects of which we should be aware. Herrington and Brussoni (2015) argued that channel surfing behavior is a consequence of an unstimulating play environment resulting in boredom. Play environments that provide various affordances related to play equipment, materials, and spaces encouraging social interactions and different types of play are defined as high-quality, child friendly environments and should not include too much wandering behavior among children (Kytta 2004; Miranda et al. 2017).

### **Conflict and Crying**

Three percent of the video observations in the nonplay material contained conflicts and crying. In this category, we observed that children who quarrelled were upset because they had hurt themselves or cried for other reasons.

Both Rubin (2001) and Grady-Dominguez and her associates (Grady-Dominguez et al. 2019) included a category they called aggression, which they described as nonplayful, negative, and conflict-filled interactions, characterized by discomfort, anger, fighting, punching, and pushing. Our conflict-and-crying category is similar to these aggression categories, but we also included observations that did not necessarily involve aggression from one or more children. Applicable behavior can also be seen in children who are alone and unhappy.

### **Outcomes: Five Categories of Nonplay**

The aim of this study was to expand the knowledge of what children were doing when they apparently were not playing during free play periods in ECEC and to suggest broad categories of nonplay. Sutton-Smith (1997) stated that play is like a language—a system of communication and expression, not in itself either good or bad. To develop definitions of play, he emphasized that play definitions must be broad rather than narrow, including passive or vicarious forms as well as active participant forms. We argue that this is also relevant for understanding and defining children's nonplay behavior in an environment supportive of play. Facilitating play is one of ECEC's most important tasks (NMER 2017), and expanded knowledge of what we here refer to as nonplay can be helpful in developing child friendly environments.

Initially, our analysis of nonplay activities in this study resulted in nine preliminary categories (figure 1). As noted in the discussion of each of these categories, we propose that some of these categories are interpreted as precursors to play or as having elements that are difficult to distinguish from play. In analyzing children's explorative behavior, we argue that exploration is a precursor to play or possibly intertwined in play behavior, sometimes as a playful activity in which children are actualizing affordances in the environment (Kytä 2004), alone or together with their playmates. In this study, play and exploration go hand in hand, and we suggest that exploration is play, or exploratory play, as Olofsson (1993) labels it. Onlooking behavior is a category in which we see that children become sensorily involved and interested in play activities in the surrounding environment. Sometimes the observations also demonstrate that onlookers intend to become part of play activities. Corsaro (2003) discussed onlooking behavior as an access strategy in which children use encirclement as a nonverbal entry to ongoing play. Corsaro also emphasized the importance

of observing access attempts within children's social context and of not relying on short, arbitrary time samples when studying children's play. Onlooking for Corsaro includes this kind of behavior as play. When defining exploration and onlooking behavior as play, we are left with five categories of nonplay.

First, conversations between child and child and conversations between child and adult are combined into one category describing conversations. Although the content of these conversations was not directly connected to play, we argue that verbal communication forms an important part of everyday life in ECEC institutions and that it is beneficial for many different reasons, such as cognitive, linguistic, and social skill development (Coplan, Rubin, and Findlay 2006). In our effort to create broad and robust categories, we suggest communication as one category of nonplay, although we acknowledge that child-to-child and child-to-adult communication may have different developmental outcomes for children.

Second, practical tasks essentially deal with two types of tasks: covering children's basic needs, such as dressing and drinking and eating, and spending time fetching play equipment, especially outdoors. Common to all practical tasks is the interruptive effect they have on children's play. Sometimes this effect can be positive in the sense of prolonging a play activity after the interruption (e.g., drinking), but many times, the effect is negative because the play stops. If access to needed play materials lies far from where the play occurs, children easily lose involvement and interest should it be too time-consuming to fetch these materials. To minimize the negative effect of practical tasks on play, ECEC institutions should strive to develop child friendly environments that afford easy access to a multitude of play materials where the children normally prefer playing, both indoors and outdoors.

Third, passive observation, on the contrary, is described in this study as an activity in which the child has no interaction with others, signalling no interest in the play activities of others in the environment. Since children's participation in play is associated with subjective well-being (Storli and Sandseter 2019), it is important that ECEC practitioners be aware of this category of nonplay. Attentive ECEC practitioners might passively help involve children in play activities or other activities that could be interesting for them.

Fourth, wandering, as a nonplay category, is complex, with differing interpretations in the literature. While Herrington and Brussoni (2015) identified wandering behavior as channel surfing because, in an unstimulating environment, wandering can also contain elements of exploration or orientation as a precursor of play (Bjorklund and Gardiner 2012). In the vocabulary of affordance

theory (Kyttä 2004; Waters 2017), this means that in an unfamiliar environment, or in play transitions, children need time to discover potential affordances for play in the environment before later realizing them. Since wandering is considered to be a nonplay behavior that is negatively associated with children's well-being and involvement in play (Storli and Sandseter 2019), it is important for ECEC employees to be aware of the negative aspects of this type of behavior.

And fifth, conflicts and crying constituted a very small part of the nonplay material (3 percent) and was probably the most easily detected category in this study of children's nonplay behavior. We recognize conflicts and crying as a natural part of daily life in kindergarten, but at the same time, we emphasize it should not occur often.

There are limitations to this study. We acknowledge that the qualitative and inductive development of the nonplay categories was based on the researchers' interpretations of the situations documented in video recordings. Verbal utterances from the children in focus could support these interpretations, but we cannot be sure if we as observers fully captured or understood what was going on. Particularly concerning the passive observation category, we cannot guarantee that some of the sequences were situations in which children could play with their thoughts and feel engaged rather than go any further. Additionally, we have not included children's views on what nonplay constitutes and why they do not engage in play activities during periods of time dedicated to free play. In future studies, it would be interesting to include child interviews to shed light on this.

The starting point of the present study was to explore what children do when they choose not to engage in play during free play periods in ECEC, where they can choose themselves what to do and with what and whom. Although play is essential in ECEC's institutional daily life, nonplay behavior can only be understood contextually within a child friendly environment that promotes play. Since play is such an important and essential activity for children, ECEC institutions must have environments that give children ample opportunities to engage in play. Nevertheless, research shows that children in ECEC do not always engage in play when they have the opportunity (Storli and Sandseter 2019). To be able to identify nonplay in children's activities, the aim of this study was also to suggest broad categories of nonplay. These categories could be useful in further research on children's diverse activities, as well as in studies reviewing the associations between nonplay and the physical, social, and cultural environments in which children live and spend time.

For the ECEC profession, knowledge of the categories of nonplay can guide ECEC teachers in their work to promote and support children's play by more easily detecting children who fall outside the play community or become aware of constraints in the physical, cultural, and social environment that prevent children from playing.

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