

# **Empathic expressions among three-year-olds in play and interaction in ECEC institutions in Norway: Bodily empathic expressions purposed for peers' wellbeing and confirming relationships**

## **Abstract**

This article is based on video observations of three-year-old children's empathic expressions in the context of playful interactions in Early Childhood and care institutions (ECEC) in Norway. The data were analysed within a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, searching for a system of the children's self-initiated empathic expressions in their play and interaction. The findings show that young children's inherent empathy largely appears as an embodied intonation in the other's emotional state, expressed through facial and bodily intersubjective expressions, followed up with empathy-related responses adapted to the context through physical communication. This study reveals that funny behaviour and play-invitations are empathically motivated actions, making peers happy again and confirming relationships. This new insight contributes to a broader understanding of young children's empathy and may contribute to developing the knowledge of how ECEC's educational work can support children's empathic development based on an understanding of the body's phenomenology and integrated in children's play.

## **Keywords**

ECEC, empathic expressions, intersubjectivity, playful interaction

## **Introduction**

The educational system in Norway, in which this study has been conducted, emphasizes basic values such as democracy, respect for human dignity and children's right to participate (Ministry of Education and Research, 2005). Norwegian ECEC institutions are committed to following the purpose, values and tasks stated in the day care program of Framework Plan of the Norwegian Kindergarten Ministry (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017), which states that educational work shall be based on a combination of play-oriented education and care, promoting children's social competence and empathy development. The term ECEC covers educational institutions for children from ages one to six years, and approximately 90% of these children attend these institutions (Statistics Norway, 2017) The municipalities are responsible for providing and running municipal kindergartens, as well as approving and supervising both public and private kindergartens. The Norwegian ECECs emphasize wellbeing and joy in play and learning and strive to be a place for challenge and security through community and friendship. The free play and peer participation are priorities and important arenas for children's comprehensive development and learning, and this is evident in how time and space are organized in the daily practices among children and adults (Kallestad & Odegaard, 2014; Nilsen, 2000; Seland, Beate Hansen Sandseter, & Bratterud, 2015).

We know relatively little about the normative development of young children's empathic behaviour aimed at alleviating others' emotional state in play and interaction. There seems to be a lack of observational studies of the range of empathic behaviour in naturalistic contexts in which a *mélange* of affects are aroused, according to Greener (Feshbach, 1997; S. Greener & Crick, 1999; S. H. Greener, 2000). Observational studies

tend to focus on the types of prosocial behaviour that adults notice, such as sharing, comforting and helping behaviours, which implies that at least some of children's prosocial behaviours may go undetected (Baillargeon et al., 2011). According to Greener (2000), children use a broader spectrum of prosocial behaviours directed towards peers who are focused towards relationships and, for that reason, must take advantage of the complete range of behaviours children use for relational inclusion. Malti et al. (2016) suggest that future research to promote practitioners' understanding of young children's normative empathetic development must include all the subcomponents of their empathy-related responses and expressions of prosocial actions to capture the complex nature of empathy. There is currently insufficient knowledge about how educational work in ECEC can support children's empathic development and in this way prevent social rejection and antisocial behaviour. This study is an inductive observational study of children's empathic expressions in play and with its phenomenological approach can elucidate the spectrum of empathic expressions they use to accommodate their peers' emotional states. This article intends to contribute new knowledge through descriptions of how three-year-olds express their self-initiated empathy with peers and is based on a study with an understanding that children's empathy-related responses are results of their emotional understanding and other-oriented concern in the context of playful interactions. The research question in this article is thus: *How do three-year-old children express empathy with each other in their interaction?*

## **Theoretical framework**

To explore, understand and discuss how young children express empathy, theories of intersubjectivity, empathy and corporal phenomenology are used. The findings will be discussed in turn from these approaches.

Movement is our most primitive and fundamental experience, where feelings and experiences are internal motions in which our thoughts are brought out of bodily experiences as tacit embedded knowledge (Merleau-Ponty & Smith, 1962; Polanyi, 1962; Stern, 2009; Stern, 2010). During events of motion, we realize its “how” before we understand the “what” and “why” (Stern, 2010, p. 45). Children’s play and bodily social participation give them the opportunity to communicate and create an intersubjective world with moments that Stern (2004) calls present moments. This jointly lived experience is mentally shared where each person intuitively partakes in the experience of the other as an intersubjective sharing of a mutual experience that expresses without being verbalized but through reading others’ feelings and intention within their bodies (Stern, 2004). This is experienced differently by two people, despite the fact that this “now” is a present moment with a duration that is just long enough to share an emotional story about their relationship (Stern, 2004). Stern states that “Presentness is something like an existential affect” (Stern, 2004, p. 24) and compares it to “the all-of-a-suddenness of a memory or a new thought or perception” as Merleau-Ponty refers to (Stern, 2004, p. 25). This type of affective dialogue based on awareness, rhythm, affective attunement and movement has a major role in communication and will increase in variety and complexity through life (Stern, 2010). According to Stern (2010), this participating in another’s mental life creates a sense of feeling, sharing and understanding the other person’s feelings and intentions. In this way, he discusses the terms of intersubjectivity

and empathy and notes that they both overlap and diverge. Empathy provides essential information for all intersubjectivity that permits us to participate in another's experiences and feelings, as though we were executing the same action or feeling the same emotion (Stern, 2009). Empathy is regardless an important part of children's relational skills and a prerequisite for successful interaction with peers.

In psychology, empathy and affective role taking have traditionally been understood as distinct processes in childhood, and the discussion continues to whether perspective or role taking is a precursor to empathy or otherwise (Feshbach, 1997; Hoffman, 2001; Strayer, 1987). "While perspective taking is a necessary component of empathy, empathy includes an emotional experiential component that is not a part of perspective taking" (Russ & Niec, 2011, p.28). Affect is necessarily involved, and the issue here is the extent to which affect primes cognition or results from it (Strayer, 1987). Hoffmann (2007) describes empathy as an emotion, an underlying and involuntary bodily experience of another person's emotional state, triggered by the other's bodily communication. According to his theories (Hoffman, 2001; 2007; 2008), empathic development emerges from a synthesis of empathic affects and the cognitive sense of the other, where children from the age of 2-3 to 5 years, with increased understanding of causes, consequences and correlates of emotions, can empathize with complex feelings and adapt their empathic responses to what they imagine are others' needs. This perspective on empathy as a mediating process promotes skills involving the ability to identify emotions in oneself and others, the ability to assume the perspectives of others and the ability to express emotion in a controlled, articulated manner (Feshbach, 1984). Children with high empathy tend to use more prosocial behaviour and are perceived as

displaying fewer behaviour problems, such as aggression or shyness, because they are more able to represent the emotional states of others in play than children with lower empathy (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Sadovsky, 2006; Niec & Russ, 2002; Strayer & Roberts, 2004). Empathy, as one of the underlying prerequisites of social skills, is not taught but is rather absorbed by experiencing the “social dance” through interpersonal and playful relationships (Russ & Niec, 2011; Stern, 1985b; Woolf, 2013). Unstructured play, with its characteristic social bodily life form, is an acknowledged avenue for developing empathy that will increase children’s experiences to identify their peers’ intentions and feelings by watching their face, movements and posture; hearing the tone of their voice; and noticing the immediate context for their behaviour (Woolf, 2013). This may develop their sensitivity towards the needs of others and a variety of viable responses they can keep in their emotional repertoire for later use (Russ & Niec, 2011). Creating relationships in which children can recognize and experience their contributions as important is essential and allows children to live new adventures and life experiences (Stern, 2010).

The lived body, as a basic concept in phenomenology, underlines the unity of interplay between body and soul in perception, and that knowledge is created through this bodily perception (Løkken, 2012; Merleau-Ponty & Smith, 1962). Humans are, by nature, intersubjective and live in an insoluble relationship in a shared world with other subjects (Merleau-Ponty & Smith, 1962). The body is a direct expression of ourselves and our inner life, which through bodily communication and interaction is shared in its immediacy, while we are participating (Merleau-Ponty, 1994). Perception is the primary and founding term of these processes, and the lived body is the transparent source with its

prereflective consciousness of itself, while being in the world (Merleau-Ponty & Smith, 1962). It is through this aware and prereflective bodily relationship that we obtain the opportunity to experience an intentional coupling to others' experiences and feelings, in that others' bodily gestures stream over and through our own body. Through this overlap of gestures occurs an intentional coupling or impregnation of gestures, which is especially true for children (Løkken, 2000; Merleau-Ponty, 1994). In this way, they understand each other through bodily perceiving and interpreting others' bodily expressions (Løkken, 2000). Our corporality is the fundamental motif of understanding human phenomena (Merleau-Ponty, 1994). Because our human bodies are similar in structure, we can identify and recognize others' bodily expressions and gestures as a shared recognition and therefore experience, at least in part, what others experience (Low, 1994). This is how Merleau-Ponty explains our ability to empathize with others' feelings and experiences, as an identification that involves a mutual recognizing of other as a being like one self, but still as another being, where empathy as a "with-in-experience" involves being attentively present in our own experiences (Low, 1994).

## **Methodology**

This study's intention was to closely examine descriptions of how empathy appears between three-year-olds, in the contexts of play and interaction, and it was designed within a phenomenological framework with the aim of examining a specific phenomenon within experiences (Van Manen, 2014). By listening to young children's voices by observing their bodily expressions, sounds and movements and to try to tune into and feel what they are feeling, phenomenological research might expand perspectives on children's experiences (Seland et al., 2015). Based on this, a micro-ethnographic study

was carried out in three different ECEC institutions, where the researcher was an observer of the children's indoor and outdoor free play time for a period of 6 months, 3-4 hours a day. This technique enables the researcher to be open, discovery oriented and inductive, as (Crotty, 1998) states and is a prerequisite to identifying how empathy degenerates in children's interactions. The qualitative data were collected through in-person observations, video observations and field notes from participation and dialogue with the children. By sharing the children's everyday lives over several months, I became familiarized with the children's relationships and interests and a naturalistic observer in their environment (Creswell, 2007).

The three ECEC's were chosen from a random selection of kindergartens that are collaborations with the ECEC-teacher education and located in different suburbs of a major city in Norway. The use of free play time, indoor and outdoor, was fairly similar across these kindergartens, totalling 3-4 hours a day, and a sample that gave the researcher an opportunity to observe the children's interactions in different organized groups. A detailed description of the research project and its aim, methodology and implications for the kindergartens was given both verbally and in writing to the directors, the preschool staff and the children's parents. Direct contact was established with the pedagogical leaders of the current departments.

**Participants:**

Name:	Lin e	Ov e	Susa n	Anna	Roge r	Bjør n	Ing a	Emm a	Vebjør n	Bjarn e	Els e	Joha n	Eve n	Liv e	Hann a	Olive r
Age:	2,6	2,8	3,3	3,4	3,4	3,5	3,5	3,6	3,6	3,7	3,7	3,7	3,8	3,9	3,10	3,11
ECEC:	A	A	C	B	C	C	A	C	B	B	A	B	A	B	C	C



ECEC A was divided into 4 departments, where I observed a group of 6 children aged 2.6-3.11 years old in their indoor play. From this visit, I have a total of 70 minutes of video recording shared in 19 cinematics, mostly taken of the peers Inga, Even, Else, Ove and Line while they were tumbling and playing in different rooms arranged for physical play. ECEC B was a larger unit with 7 departments of age-homogenous groups. I was there with the 3-year-olds, a total of 18 children further divided into three groups with customized daily activities, where I observed those who had time for free play. The 50-minute video recording from this visit consists of 9 cinematics of different play situations of Bjarne, Live, Vebjørn, Johan and Anna while they played in the kindergarten's multifunctional room. ECEC C was a large day care unit shared by separate age classes. There, I observed a group of 10 three-year-olds on the kindergarten's indoor and outdoor playgrounds, with 60 minutes of recording containing in 27 cinematics. In this group, I was mostly with Hanna, Oliver, Roger, Bjørn, Emma and Susan, who were fond of role play and tumbling. The children's names are fictitious.

### **Sources of data:**

The observations were naturalistic, non-participatory inspections of the children's play in the ECECs indoor and outdoor playrooms (Patton, 2005). The total data of this study consist of 60 hours of observations and field notes of descriptive events and reflections during the data collection. Fifteen hours of the observations were recorded with a Sony Handycam, held close to the children so that their facial expressions and body language could be read clearly. The everyday field notes were used to describe the context of the observations, such as time, place, type of play, past events and interfering factors such as

other children, adults and the researcher's presence in the room. Gradually, the video observations became more structured and concentrated on the interaction situations where the children's self-initiated empathic expression appeared and where the staff was not directly involved. These situations occurred mostly in the children's negotiations and conflicts, which brought out a variety of emotional expressions, and became the data for further analysis. After a time, a saturation point was reached where further observations most likely would not present any additional examples of empathic expressions. The video material was reduced to a total of 2 hours consisting of 55 cinematics where the video clips were structured in different empathetic expressions and actions and transcribed as descriptively as possible by the researcher. This article presents findings from 7 selected clips, chosen as representative examples of the phenomenon in the way they show a spectrum of the children's facial and bodily empathic expressions and actions while interpreting their peers' emotional states.

### **Data analysis**

This study had a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to the children's interpersonal interaction relationships and how they expressed empathy in their free play and interactions. On the basis of corporal phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty & Smith, 1962) and in line with the concept of *affect attunement*—how we may share an experience of our inner state with another human being (Stern, Hofer, Haft, & Dore, 1985)—it is possible to develop an understanding of children's experiences through their bodily expressions and facial gestures. The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis method, developed by (J. Smith; J. A. Smith, Larkin, & Flowers, 2009), was used as a framework to structure inductive analysis, in which a reflective attitude towards the phenomenon

was maintained by keeping the researchers' pre-understanding "deliberately at bay" (Van Manen, 2014). The researchers' own experienced emotions and experiences during the observations were for that reason attended by using the second column, called "my research body", where immediate feelings and thoughts in the situation were enshrined (Løkken, 2012). In the next step, preliminary aspects and subtopics arose as associations by reading the transcriptions again. In this third column, I wrote down my thoughts about what the children's actions might be, which became some limited and themed descriptions of what occurred in the events. Further on, in column four, I asked conceptual questions about these preliminary aspects and subthemes. Those open and inquisitive questions sought an understanding of the meaning behind the children's expressions and to contribute to a reflexive attitude to the researchers' assumptions. The fifth column contained unifying descriptions of the meaning units that appeared through the preliminary emerging themes. These were compared, and a thematic meaning structure emerged, consisting of two main groups called *empathetic being* and *empathetic doing* with several sub-categories. In the last and sixth column, the empirically based descriptions of the children's bodily empathic expressions and actions were pasted in. The empirically based descriptions of the various events were then condensed into shorter descriptions for use as examples in this article (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

### **Ethical considerations**

Observation as a method requires critical reflection, and there are some ethical issues to consider when researching children's experiences and feelings (Lund, Helgeland, & Bobo Kovac, 2015). Participation was voluntary, and the project was approved by Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) and satisfied the NSD's privacy requirements.

Informed consent was given by the children's parents stating that video recordings could be made. No list of the participants was established, and all the data material will be deleted when the project is concluded. To protect the identity and confidentiality of the children, pseudonyms are used in this article. The video observations were taken with respect and sensitivity towards the children, and the camera was switched off when the children's expressions indicated reluctance or discomfort (Løkken, 2012). In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument, which means that other possible descriptions and interpretations could be both possible and relevant (Patton, 2005). Truth may be construed and institutionalized according to whom the observer is, and the researcher is in interaction with the surrounding world and a part of the context. To help improve my self-understanding when assessing the children's empathetic expressions, I have used research associates and project mentors. Although the generalizability of the presented findings is limited, it is still possible to enable naturalistic generalization through recognition of the experiences of the phenomenon (Stake & Trumbull, 1982).

## **Findings and discussion**

The findings are categorized into two main groups of expressions, *empathetic being* and *empathetic doing*, where the group *being* shows different facial and bodily intersubjective expressions and the group *doing* shows different empathetic actions, accommodating their peers' emotional state. Within these two main groups, the different meaning units will be presented as condensed descriptions of the video clips and discussed in turn within corporal phenomenological terminology and theories of intersubjectivity and empathy.

## **Main group 1: Empathetic being**

### *Intonation expressions*

This group includes various bodily and facial expressions of a child's intonation in others' feelings and different bodily expressions of discomfort as a "with-in experience" in others' distress. The video recordings show that the children express empathy by physical presence in coming closer or sitting next to their peer and through the characteristic way they look into the peer's face. Especially the way their faces express openness and attentiveness through their glances has been crucial for interpreting these behaviours as empathetically motivated. The facial gestures are characterized by open eyes, relaxed face muscles and slightly open mouths, and the child is quiet for a brief moment while glancing at the other, as if they are listening to the other's face, before they move or do anything further. This type of expression appears in situations when they are seeking to understand their peers' feelings in negotiations that have ended badly and can indicate an empathetic curiosity about others' experiences. Assessing whether these expressions are empathetically motivated lies in the analysis of these facial and bodily expressions, seen in the context of the events. I interpret this as an empathetic way of being, based on curiosity about and interest in how others are doing.

This clip shows how Inga absorbs Even's feelings after a disagreement about how their dolls should sleep in the carriage:

Inga leans her body closer to Even's, who is crying. She gazes at him, as if she wants to have a close look into his feelings. After a while, her glance falls slowly down through his torso and hands while he sobs quietly.

Inga's facial gestures express a targeting interest in Even's experience. He is upset because she did not let him have his doll in the carriage, and Inga is now trying to perceive his feelings experienced in this situation. Her empathetic curiosity leads her to come close to his body and face so she can sense his emotions and in this manner take part in his experience.

### ***Empathetic curiosity***

The video recordings show further examples of this empathetic curiosity. A clip from the outdoor playground illustrates how Hanna urgently moves closer to see how Bjørn is doing after he slides and lands with a thud:

Hanna rushes closer on tiptoe and stretches down her head to get a close look at his face. With a worried expression, she lays her hand calmly on her chest and exhales deeply.

Another clip shows how Bjarne takes part in Vebjørn's experience when Vebjørn is feeling unfairly treated after the boys start to scuffle about throwing some ice cubes:

Bjarne remains quiet and gazes at Vebjørn's face. His body relaxes slightly while he listens for Vebjørn's sobbing to subside.

These observations indicate that the inherent empathetic curiosity about others' feelings drives children to come closer for bodily absorption and to partake of others' feelings and experiences through attentiveness and alertness. Crucial for interpreting this are the empirically described data of the children's facial and bodily gestures, which apparently illustrate an attentiveness to others' feelings and curiosity about how their peers are doing. Furthermore, that this is driven by an empathic underlying motive is also

evident in the fact that they typically take a brief moment before taking any further action, almost as though they first partake of the others' experiences before accommodating them.

When assessing young children's empathic expressions, it is important to reflect on what empathy is. Is it a tool, an instrument, or a way of listening and a condition of humanness? Is it empathy only when it evokes a response or action, or is empathy a continuous process? As this study reveals, is three-year-olds' empathy mostly expressed as a way of *being*, such as an embodied "with-in experience" in others' feelings, that can be interpreted by their facial and bodily expressions while they are taking part in their peers' feelings? Stern (1985a) states that humans perceive bodily mood patterns and feelings through physical behaviour and signals and that young children use this affective attunement as a form of relation. This participation creates a sense of sharing and an understanding of others' intentions and feelings where the recognition of "how" comes before understanding the "what" and "why" (Stern, 2010). Children's moods and intentions take form as bodily expressions and facial gestures, and this form of metacommunication is crucial for understanding each other. The video observations show that they use this type of physicality to navigate their input in the interaction and that this affective attunement is an ongoing interpretation and a necessity to maintain their interaction. This bodily participation in another's mental life creates a sense of mindreading and the ability to take part in the other's intentions and feelings. "We experience the other *as if* we were executing the same action or feeling the same emotion" (Stern, 2005, p. 80), and this primary intersubjectivity gives us the opportunity to recognize others' feelings and the capacity to empathize with their lived subjective

experience (Stern, 2005). Stern's (2009) perspective on intersubjectivity includes both an understanding of what is going on in another person's mind and an empathic immersion in the other's experience, which in human interactions take place simultaneously. The analysis of this study's video observations indicates that the three-year-olds interpret each other's embodied feelings before they understand each other's intentions. Especially in situations where negotiations have gone wrong, the recordings show that they through bodily emotional expressions interpret their peers' feelings and by recognizing and identifying them manage to understand their intentions. This finding is an important contribution to the discussion of the relationship between role taking and empathy and whether affects prime cognition or result from it (Strayer, 1987). That children's inherent ability to empathize with others' feelings precedes their cognitive understanding of another's mind can be explained through what Merleau-Ponty (1994) notes about the human prereflective body. Based on his idea, consciousness is bodily communicated where we can experience, at least in part, what others experience through our perceptions. Furthermore, because our bodies are structured in a similar way, we can recognize the other as a being like ourselves, who can experience and suffer like ourselves, and it is from this basis that empathy emerges (Low, 1994).

### ***Bodily discomfort***

Some of the other observations show different examples of the children's bodily discomfort when peers express pain or hurt feelings. This empathic displeasure is expressed through bodily unrest, such as restless pacing, tiptoeing or louder and more uncommitted play. These video recordings also show such facial gestures as flickering



eyes, furrowed eyebrows and clenched lips. These worried expressions appear in situations when someone is hurt or feels unfairly treated.

This clip shows Live's bodily distress when Johan rolls down the stairs on the outdoor playground and cries loudly:

Live wanders restlessly around, her shoulders drawn up and her arms hanging stiffly. After a moment she stops close by Johan; her eyes are flickering while she kicks her foot restlessly on the ground and looks at him with a worried expression on her face.

Another clip shows how Line and Ove express bodily discomfort while they are playing with the garage and one of the girls in the play-tent nearby is harassed by the others:

Line trips restlessly and trembling to the door and sneaks carefully out. Through the door's window, we can see her face with a suffering expression while she peeks in with a nervous glance and furrowed eyebrows.

The same clip also illustrates Ove's distress while the girls continue to yell at the vulnerable girl and later how their play becomes affected by this unpleasant situation:

Ove shrugs his shoulders and grasps feverishly at his car. Then, he rises quickly, remains standing with failing knees and quickly exhales before he starts to walk quietly towards the tent.

Ove withdraws to the garage again after attempting to open the tent to see what is occurring, whereupon the girls yell at him as well.

Line returns inside with a tense body and creeps down on her knees beside Ove.

They begin to play again; however, the atmosphere somehow becomes more intense and noisy while the girls in the play-tent yell demeaning comments at the harassed girl.

I link this distress that both of them express in this situation as an inherent immersion in the vulnerable girl's experience of being harassed. The basis of the interpretation of this distress as an empathetic triggered reaction lies in the way their bodies express stress and restlessness and what further occurs when Ove tries to do something to help the victimized girl. He crawls across the floor and carefully opens the play-tent but withdraws nervously again as the girls howl "No!!" This action indicates that he empathizes with the girl and somehow wants to protect her. I link this affective empathetic discomfort that these three-year-olds express here to an embodied "with-in experience" in others' bodily experience. Young children's feelings are largely bodily sensations and for that reason are also their empathy embodied. Three-year-olds are capable of empathizing with a range of increasingly complex emotions (Hoffman, 1994).

Both observations and field notes describe situations where the children express bodily discomfort and restlessness when their peers are feeling pain, sadness, unfairly treated and loss of self-esteem. The video clips show unlike facial and bodily gestures that indicate bodily unrest while recognizing others' pain and physical discomfort. This finding indicates that the three-year-olds' inherent empathy largely degenerates bodily, expressed through physical agitation alone or with subsequent empathetic actions. According to (Hoffman, 2007), empathic distress refers to the involuntary forceful experiencing of another person's painful emotional state, elicited by expressive cues that

directly reflect others' feelings. He notes that this arousal mode of empathy can operate alone or in any combination and is important to address to channel empathy into appropriate actions (Hoffman, 2008). This empathetic distress includes both an affective and a cognitive component, where the cognitive sense of others drives the empathy development from these empathetic affects into increasingly complex forms (Hoffman, 2007). The affective component of empathy has a special relationship to the regulation of aggression, where empathy is presumed to affect aggression through inhibition, interpretation and adaptation (Bukowski & Abecassis, 2007; Feshbach, 1984). From this point of view, one can imagine that appreciating the children's bodily discomfort as an empathetic expression and helping them identify their feelings and how they are triggered will support their self-regulation skills and ability to identify others' needs, which will be an important precursor for their further empathic development and increase their social functioning in play and interaction with peers.

### **Main group 2: Empathetic doings**

This main group of findings' *empathetic doing* is composed of empathetic actions driven by an intention to do something nice for another person. The analysis of the video observations reveals that the children use these *doings* after a short moment of observing and perceiving their peer's expression as a subsequent interpretation of the other's emotional state. The most domain actions are funny antics and clowning, apologies through physical contact and play invitations, and appear in the wake of various incidents where one of the children is sad, hurt, or in despair at not being understood. The similarity of these actions is that the embodied empathetic expressions can be observed

before the spoken words, meaning that the empathetic *doings* are preceded by the verbal communication.

### ***Funny behaviour***

A recurring finding in the data is that the children often use clownery and funny antics to make peers happy again after the peers have been disappointed or despairing about something. The context of these events is physically active play or tumbling, and the funny physical expressions assumed for that reason are used as a form of bodily communication to make their peer feel happy again. This type of empathic expression seems to be driven by a desire to make their peer smile and laugh, as a pleasure they want to both give and take part in.

An example of this is when Even becomes aware that Else has become afraid for real in their scary-funny play with a crocodile puppet:

He raises the puppet, which starts to bite and tug Even's hair. "Au...Aoo" he says in an awkward voice while the crocodile attacks him in a grotesque way. " Oh.. it's eating my hair..oho.." he yells while he jumps around and drops to the floor in front of Else. Her scared face changes to a smile, and she chuckles.

As this incident shows, being funny is something that immediately makes one's peers laugh. I link Even's funny actions in this context, meant to reverse Else's fear so she can feel safe again after being truly scared. After some months' observations, I obtain an impression that these peers truly care for each other and prefer joyful physical play. Based on this, I interpret this action to be empathically motivated, with the intention to delight Else so they could resume their playful interaction.

Vebjørn is using nearly the same strategy to make Bjarne happy after a conflict about some ice cubes:

Vebjørn twists his rear end and sticks his tongue out and idly licks his ice cube.

Then, he jumps and starts to dance and laugh “Duttidutti duuuu” with a drooling smile at Bjarne, who wipes away his tears and brightens.

In this play, both boys are selfish and pushy and for that reason not aware of each other's intentions. By eliciting a smile, Vebjørn performs here an empathetic act that also confirms their relationship. This clowning behaviour indicates an intention to make Bjarne happy again after Bjarne has felt upset. The observations show that when the children use humour, an immediate happy satisfaction appears on the recipient's face, which in turn also gives an acknowledged response to the contributor. This type of empathic action seems to be motivated by a desire both to make the other happy and as a way of showing that the actor cares about the peer. A glance coupled with laughter can be an expression of “we are something together”, which Stern (2004) describes as special present moments of intersubjectivity. He states that such moments are necessary for understanding each other and are a foundation for common lived experiences and togetherness that can move relationships to a deeper level of intersubjectivity. As these video clips reveal, these present moments occur when the children grasp the others' intentions, thoughts and feelings and become an implicit relational nonverbalized knowing. A mutually shared experience can be grasped without having to be verbalized, thereby becoming part of the implicit knowledge of the relationship, as noted by Stern (Stern, 2004). Further on, this intersubjective communication involves the mutual interpretation of others' embodied minds that says “I feel that you feel that I feel” (Stern,

2004), p.75) and a second step that is apparently reiterative that shows “I know that you know that I know what you are feeling” (Stern, 2004, p. 81). These findings indicate that three-year-olds use this two-way intersubjectivity by creating present moments through humour for common joy and as confirmation of their relationship. This intersubjective experiencing creates a sense of sharing others’ intentions and feelings and in these contexts aims to accommodate their peers’ feelings, an empathetically motivated acknowledgement of the others’ hurt feelings.

### *Apologizing through physical contact*

This video observation shows Johan apologizing to Bjørn through bodily proximity after accidentally bumping a block on Bjørn’s head:

Johan closes his eyes, falls down on his knees and grabs around Bjørn while he rubs his face deeply into Bjørn’s stomach and makes a cosy noise while hugging.

I find this act to be a genuinely chosen empathetic action to apologize when Bjørn is hurt by Johan’s boldness, and by pressing his face into Bjørn’s body, he expresses his empathy through reverence. Young children are more likely to read each other’s affective sharing of feelings and understand each other’s bodily rather than verbal expressions (Løkken, 2000; Merleau-Ponty, 1994). In precarious or physically distressing situations, as here when Bjørn is crying loudly, I observe that the children’s empathy-related responses often comprise physical contact and in this way express affection intonation through nonverbal communication that shows “I am with you in what you are experiencing right now” (Stern, 1985a).

### *Play invitations*

The video recordings also show different examples of play invitations used as empathetic actions after someone has been upset or hurt. Often these invitations are extensions of other empathetic expressions and based on the context appear to be motivated out of a desire to share such joyful experiences as play can offer.

This video clip from a trip to the neighbourhood playground illustrates how Oliver tries to descend a pole slowly but loses his grip and slides down just as Hanna is passing:

Hanne paces closer and bows down to have a look; after a brief moment, she notices his tears. She gives him a subtle hint to come closer for an embrace.

After a warm hug, she chuckles and shakes him, and they both run back to the slide holding hands.

Hanna gives Oliver, after closely looking into his face to identify his feelings, a hearty hug before later inviting him to play through funny bodily expressions, as an extension of the empathic action in this situation. Oliver accepts this offer immediately through his happy body language and as a confirmation back to Hanna's empathic action. After interpreting these and similar events in my field work, I became aware of the value play invitations have for someone who is hurt and alone. The observations show that three-year-olds have the capabilities to identify this feeling and thus understand what their peers need. To be *in* play is a characteristic lived experience, and sharing this pleasant moment is perhaps the best thing a person can do when their peer is not feeling well.

Several other video clips show different examples of play signals, as invitations to play together in situations where someone is unhappy:

Bjørn comes bouncing up to Susan, who is sad and upset after they have had a quarrel about the big car. He jumps towards her with alternating legs and shaking head while laughing. She responds with a smile and tiptoes after him back to the play kitchen.

Emma extends towards John with a mischievous face and strange noises.

Roger`s face changes from a sad expression to a happy smile. In this way their play is reestablished, now like jumping bears.

In both situations, the children use the play signal by being physically funny, first to induce their peer to stop crying and later as an invitation to play. After being with these three-year-olds to observe their empathetic expressions, I interpret these play invitations as highly empathetic actions, used as a united gesture to show affiliation and devotion. The causality for linking these play signals as empathetically motivated lies in the events in which the child first perceives the other`s bodily expression, responds with a subsequent action and then follows up with an invitation to play. I link these acts done out of a “with-in experience” and an identification of what the other might need. Children have an inner-motivated urge to play and out of this they also know what their peers prefer. Play has an intrinsic value and is the children`s place for meaningful communication through physical and verbal expressions that allow them to receive, understand and obtain affirmation of their own bodily consciousness and self-perception through affects attunement and the responses that the participants` intersubjectivity offers (Lindsey & Colwell, 2013; Russ & Niec, 2011; Stern, 2005). In play, children can



customize the content, matter and form and adapt the challenges in the way they want them. Creating mastery experiences, in which children can recognize and experience their contributions as important constituents of ongoing relationships, is essential for development and allows children to live new adventures and life experiences (Stern, 2010). Stern (2004) claims that when people move synchronously or in temporal coordination, they are participating in an aspect of others' experience. They are partially living from the other's centre. Offering one's disappointed or hurt peer this type of experience is from this point of view a highly empathetically motivated gift, which must be acknowledged in the kindergartens' educational work in supporting children's empathy development.

### **Concluding remarks**

This study's aim was to identify three-year-olds' self-initiated empathic expressions in play and interaction relationships. According to the empirical findings, the children's empathy-related responses are largely expressed as facial and bodily intersubjective expressions, contextually adapted and aimed at accommodating their peers' feelings and confirming their relationship. For this purpose, the observations indicate that three-year-olds' empathy is expressed as actions, after a brief moment of bodily perceiving and identifying their peers' emotional state, by using funny behaviour and the play signal to elicit a smile and pleasure and as an invitation to share further joyful experiences. These findings highlight that children's inherent empathy appears as an implicit way of being, a form of attentiveness and curiosity above others' feelings, rather than explicit prosocial actions. In this matter, empathy becomes a medium that enables them to understand others' experiences and a prerequisite for maintaining

reciprocity in play and interactions. Based on knowledge of play and its impact on children's lives, one might consider these play invitations highly empathetic actions brought out of an implicit relational and unconscious knowing and motivated by a desire to create an intersubjective world with present moments (Stern, 2004; Stern, 2009).

Young children's social life is largely through bodily interaction where they understand each other's affective sharing of feelings and intentions through bodily rather than verbal expressions (Løkken, 2000). Additionally, understanding children as competent and emphasizing a more relational perspective on their conducted actions as entangled and inseparable from the context also entails a reconstruction of a standard of social competence (Franck & Nilsen, 2015). This study emphasizes this embodied unconscious intersubjective knowledge as an inherent and underlying empathic interest in and curiosity about others' feelings, which must be acknowledged as an important foundation for supporting children's empathic development. This suggests that to support children's empathy, the kindergartens' educational work must stimulate children's ability to empathize within other feelings, based on an understanding of the body's phenomenology and the acquisition of body-related knowledge, and must be integrated in the children's play as their most important social learning arena. Through the facilitation of social fantasy play and physical tumbling, young children will have opportunities to harvest important social and bodily perceptual experiences in interpreting others' feelings and intentions. Understanding the pedagogical role of practitioners in this manner requires more attention.

Further studies seeking an understanding of children's empathetic actions might benefit from including children's voices to obtain knowledge of what they comprehend as good empathic actions within interaction relationships.

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