

# 23 Encountering an Uneasy Child

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## Introduction

Childrearing has been a topic of constant debate in Finland during the last few years. The basic contradiction in the debate has been between a child-centred and an adult-centred ideal. However, the discussion on the ideals seems to be on a general level without much interface to the nuances of everyday life. In our research project we seek to ascertain how adults and children create a common understanding. Our data consists of ethnographic case descriptions and tape recordings of everyday interaction at home and in a day-care centre.

This chapter focuses on the interaction in a day-care centre. In Finland the day-care centre<sup>1</sup> has become an important part of everyday life for families with small children since usually both parents work outside the home. Because children spend many hours a day in the centres, the workers often become very important and intimate adults for them.

Our task is to examine *how the narrative identities of a child, who acts in an uneasy way, are constructed through the kindergarten teacher – child interaction*. Theoretically this kind of task is based on the tradition of social constructionism (eg. Gergen, 1994; Burr, 1995), which emphasises the importance of participants' situational acts in creating social reality, including the understanding of a participant's identities. We are not studying identity as a static but as a dynamic phenomenon. Our methods are adapted from the tradition of social psychological discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Suoninen, 1999). However, the type of data that we use is more typical in the tradition of ethnography.

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<sup>1</sup> The history of the day-care centre starts from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when women started to go to work outside the home. Initially day-care centres were meant for families whose social and economic situation was poor. In the 1960s the day-care centre service became more important as most women started to work. Nowadays the legislation guarantees the service for all children below school age. Preschool education, for six year olds, has also usually been arranged in day-care centres. The education of day-care nurses is organised in two levels in Finland. The lower of these is college level, where day-care nurses are educated and the higher level education is given at the universities, where day-care teachers are educated. In our data extracts the adult is a day-care teacher with a university level education.

We try to demonstrate the construction of narrative identities by analysing two data extracts taken from a longer ethnographic case description.<sup>2</sup> In both episodes there is a tension between an adult and a child who acts in a very uneasy way. However, the contexts of the episodes are different. In the first extract the whole pre-school group is present while in the second episode only the “uneasy child” and a kindergarten teacher.

The way of analysing the episodes in the data extracts is based on an idea to take the perspective of the participants in the course of interaction. This means in practise trying to empathise into every moment of interaction: how the situation opens up to the participants, what kinds of dilemmas they have to face when trying to respond to each other’s activities and how they jointly construct the social reality, especially the narrative role of the child.

### **Analysis**

The first of our two illustrative episodes starts after *Matti*, a boy of six, has arrived in a day-care centre later than other children. It appears that he wants to play with Lego-bricks. *Leena*, who is a day nursery teacher in the centre, tries to get Matti to understand that it is not an appropriate time to play, because everybody else, a group of 20 children, is waiting for pre-school to start. The adult has to ask Matti several times to come and join the others. Finally he comes but he is clearly demonstrating bad temper.

#### *Extract 1: A Pre-School Situation*

- 1 Matti: This place stinks! I can’t sit here because it stinks.
- 2 Leena: Sit in your own place and tell me what is wrong.
- 3 Matti: (Stops at the door and points to a girl next to him.) She stinks!
- 4 Leena: You are deliberately disturbing. There is no bad smell here. Come on and sit in your own place.  
(Other children look weirdly at Matti.)
- 5 Leena: You are plainly disturbing our work with what you are doing.
- 6 Matti: My head is aching. (Gets up and runs around the children.)
- 7 Leena: At school you can’t act like that. You can’t run around the classroom during lessons.
- 8 Matti: My head is aching. (Opens the door and hits his head on the door.)
- 9 Leena: And that clearly helps your headache!  
(Other children are sitting in their own places and agreeing with the kindergarten teacher’s irony.)
- 10 Matti: Then I’m going home! (Angry tone of voice.)

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<sup>2</sup> The data extracts are taken from ethnographic data corpus collected by Arja Lundán especially for the purposes of her doctoral dissertation.

- 11 Leena: Now you stop disturbing the others, is that clear! You have the same rules as the others.

The kindergarten teacher (Leena) seems to have a lot of difficulties in encountering the uneasy child (Matti) in a pre-school situation. Matti does not communicate his restlessness by directly refusing, eg. by uttering: “No, I won’t come”. Instead he gives a series of accounts for his unwillingness to come into the room in which the pre-school is taking place. The series of accounts include “This place stinks! I can’t sit here because it stinks” (line 1), “she stinks!” (line 3) and “my head is aching” (lines 6 and 8). These three accounts may seem rather similar turns of talk that function as an excuse for the refusal to join the others. However, the wordings of the accounts differ a lot.

After each of the three accounts the kindergarten teacher has to choose, in a somewhat changed context, how she interprets the account as an interactional initiative. The first account, “This place stinks! I can’t sit here because it stinks”, could be understood as bad behaviour, which calls for a reprimand or giving orders, *or* it could, equally, be understood as some kind of signal of personal problems, which calls for help or discussion. Leena chooses to combine these two options by giving an order (“Sit in your own place”) *and* communicating that Matti may need some help (“tell me what is wrong”).

Matti’s next account, “she stinks!” (line 3), is a more difficult statement for the kindergarten teacher because it sets up a strong tension between Matti and the girl that he is insulting. This account could still be understood as some kind of indicator about a personal problem that calls for help, but the kindergarten teacher chooses a different line of response. She combines three elements: an accusation (“You are deliberately disturbing”), a counterclaim (“There is no bad smell here”) and an order (“Come on and sit in your own place”). Note that she avoids using personally stigmatising words (like you are *always* disturbing intentionally) or other kind reminiscing of any past conflicts that could be seen to hint at Matti’s whole personality.

This line of response, however, does not alleviate the tension between the participants. Actually, Matti’s isolation from the other participants becomes even worse than before. This is clearly seen when Leena’s turns continue as accusations (lines 5 and 11), orders (lines 7 and 11) and even as irony (line 9: “And that clearly helps your headache!”). This increase of tension is also present in Matti’s turning into himself “My head is aching” (lines 6 and 8) and his threatening about “going home!” (line 10) as well as his non-verbal action (gets up and runs around the children and opens the door and hits his head on the door).

Thus encountering the uneasy child seems most difficult in a situation in which a group of children is present. This is especially true in situations which aim at organised activities. This activity type is clearly present at the end of the extract where the kindergarten teacher insists, “You have the same rules as the

others". This order is formally directed at Matti, but the relevant audience includes the whole group of pre-school pupils. Consequently, the possibilities of a successful dialogue between the kindergarten teacher and the uneasy child are slight. If this kind of group situation is the most usual context of encountering social or personal problems, there is a risk of 'pathologising' the personality of uneasy children. *The narrative identity which strengthens in such interactional processes is certainly that of "the bad guy" who disturbs and insults the others, acts in a senseless way and is totally different from the others.*

In our next extract the context is very different. The child and the adult are the same as in Extract 1. Although the situation has now changed there still is a conflict between Matti and Leena. Matti has had his afternoon nap and has again disturbed the other children, and then Leena has ordered him to come out of the room and get dressed.

*Extract 2: A Private Situation*

- 1 Leena: Hurry up with your dressing!
- 2 Matti: (Loiters and imitates the adult.) "Hurry up with your dressing!"
- 3 Matti: You are a fool! I'm going to shoot you some day!
- 4 Leena: Why do you, when you are angry, threaten to shoot?
- 5 Matti: You can't stop me! Even policemen can't stop me! (Swears roughly and then starts to use milder phrases like turd, piss and shit and in the end he starts to laugh.)
- 6 Leena: (Walks kindly towards the child and grabs his shoulders softly but firmly.)
- 7 Leena: Why do you keep threatening like this? It's no use. After all, we are your friends and we care about you.
- 8 Matti: (Doesn't answer but starts to ask other things.) Where is my other sock?
- 9 Leena: It is there on the shelf, I can give it to you. But seriously, why are you always threatening to shoot?
- 10 Matti: It (the sock) has gone to the other shelf. (Shows the shelf of another child.)
- 11 Leena: Yes, you're right, (gives the sock to the child) here it is, but did you hear the question?
- 12 Matti: (A silent moment. Matti puts the sock on.) I don't know.
- 13 Leena: You are a smart and nice boy. We like you, but your behaviour is not nice. We don't like that at all.
- 14 Matti: Help me to dress, will you?
- 15 Leena: I trust you, you're doing fine. Try yourself first and I help you then ... (She stays near and helps every now and then.)

In this extract people are talking privately, so the adult has more time and discursive space to concentrate on the uneasy behaviour of the child. After

Leena's request to hurry up, Matti starts (line 2) to act in an irritating way by loitering and ironically imitating the adult. In spite of putting his clothes on, which was the original aim in the situation, Matti's irony draws the interactional setting towards a very different activity, quarrelling. Matti amplifies this invitation to quarrel by saying "You are a fool. I'm going to shoot you some day" (line 3). Leena, however, does not join in the quarrelling (eg. by a counterargument), instead she just asks the reasons for threatening (line 4: "Why, when you are angry, do you threaten to shoot?"). Note that she does not put her message in the form of a direct statement or accusation but uses a question form. In addition, she includes in her question a brief preliminary account ("Why, *when you are angry*, do you threaten to shoot?") that limits down the scope of arguable activity. The question format and a preliminary account are working as "delicacy markers" (Suoninen, 1999a) which may soften the discussion about difficult issues and "save face" (Goffman, 1955) for a person under a pressure.

Even if the kindergarten teacher's soft line of responding (to the insults by the boy) does not alleviate the tension, she consistently keeps to her line of friendly questioning (lines 7, 9 and 13). It is, however, very interesting what kinds of elements she adds to her repeated questions about the reasons for threatening to shoot. While the first question analysed above included some delicacy markers, the other questions are combined more openly with some additional elements. There are two types of additional elements: those that are *constructing the boy in a positive light* (lines 7 and 13) and those that *concern the other activity, dressing* (lines 9, 11 and 15). The additional elements appear to be essential in creating a basis for co-operation between the participants.

Constructing the boy in a positive light ("After all, we are your friends and we care about you" and "You are a smart and nice boy. We like you") clearly serves the function of inviting the uneasy boy to co-operate. *The combination of a positive and a critical element is possible because the elements operate on different levels: the positive element on a general level (eg. we like you) and the critical element on a level of concrete situation action (eg. we do not like your behaviour).* In other words, the adult skilfully makes a difference between the *stable presence* of a boy and his *situational behaviour*. However, to be plausible the use of the positive statements requires that the participants have jointly experienced something positive in the past. In addition, the positive statement requires that there is 'situational space' for the positive talk. In other words, *the earlier common history between participants gives resources to construct positive identities for the uneasy child if there are not too many conflicting activities, which was the case in the group situation in extract one.*

The other 'additional' element of the kindergarten teacher's why-questions discussed dressing, which may seem a self evident part of the discussion since the original task of putting on clothes is unavoidable. However, looking more closely, we can realise that when Matti starts the discussion about dressing by

asking (on line 8) “Where is my sock?”, the kindergarten teacher’s answer is not self evident. She could answer, eg. “Don’t change the subject. Let’s discuss the issue of threatening first”. Another option for her could have been to give up discussing the difficult issue and concentrate only on the dressing. She chooses, however, a combination of these two options by answering: “It is there on the shelf, I can give it to you. *But seriously*, why are you always threatening to shoot?” (line 9). She also repeats similar combinations of answer and question in her next turn of talk (line 11). Thus the fact that there are two activities at work simultaneously – processing on the misbehaving *and* putting clothes on – is not a problem for the kindergarten teacher in this private situation. On the contrary, she *succeeds in using the side-activity of dressing as a resource for the more difficult job of discussing the boy’s misbehaving*.

The success is visible first when Matti answers (line 12) the question about the sense of his behaviour. The answer “I don’t know” may seem unimportant, because it does not give any reasons for his behaviour. However, dialogically it is an important answer, because Matti is finally giving some kind of response to the question the kindergarten teacher has repeated many times. After Matti’s answer the conversation seems to continue smoothly and without any problems between the participants. In a nice way, *a declaration of war changes to a concrete request for help and cosy co-operation. The discussion has created for Matti a discursive space in which he has been able to change his narrative role from a ‘rogue’ to an ‘ally’*. Such situations may well be essential in providing an uneasy child with the basis for the narrative identity of a normal co-operative child.

## **Discussion**

When comparing the group situation and the private discussion it is interesting to consider which kinds of elements are possible in the kindergarten teacher’s turns. We present some interpretations in a list format:

- *In a group situation* it seems very difficult to construct a child who behaves in an uneasy way in a positive light because of a variety of simultaneous conflicting activities.
- *In a personal encounter*, on the other hand, the kindergarten teacher can use some useful resources as a device to encourage the child. Those resources include:
  - (1) a better opportunity to listen to a single child;
  - (2) a common history as a resource to give some positive feedback to a child;

- (3) an opportunity to take a practical 'side-activity' as a resource to maintain some kind of co-operation.
- As a *practical implication*, it seems important to have sufficient personnel in kindergartens to make personal discussions possible if we aim at giving 'uneasy' children opportunities to construct themselves as normal co-operative children. There may also be a need to rethink some aspects of the kindergartens' *organisation* and the *education* of staff.
  - Possibly there are some similarities between kindergartens and other arenas of childrearing, eg. families and schools (a need for personal encounters in addition to group situations). Therefore it is useful to consider if there are enough personal encounters between an "uneasy child" and a dialogically oriented adult in any of the main arenas of socialisation.

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