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THE CITY THAT BECAME HOME: CONSIDERATIONS ON FREE AND SPONTANEOUS PLAY DURING THE 2020 SOCIAL ISOLATION PERIOD

A CIDADE QUE VIROU CASA: CONSIDERAÇÕES SOBRE O BRINCAR LIVRE E ESPONTÂNEO DURANTE O PERÍODO DE ISOLAMENTO SOCIAL DE 2020

LA CIUDAD QUE SE CONVIRTIÓ EN CASA: CONSIDERACIONES SOBRE EL JUEGO LIBRE Y ESPONTÁNEO DURANTE EL PERÍODO DE AISLAMIENTO SOCIAL 2020

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Abstract: In March 2020, we were on the streets of cities observing the free and spontaneous play of children in different spaces, when we were surprised by the global pandemic of the novel coronavirus. Various measures of isolation and social distancing were implemented. In this new scenario, we started to ask ourselves what free and spontaneous play would be like inside the homes of isolated families. Through a phenomenological perspective, we started to look for ways to remotely understand the lived-experience of children with the help of their guardians. We

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followed 55 isolated families for four months. We realized that investigating play during social isolation was a certain re-approximation to a phenomenon that already happened regularly inside homes, but during the pandemic, play expanded its timeframe and suffered fewer restrictions to objects and rooms. Dialogs with authors from the area provoked revelations about how metaphorical aspects of different rooms manifested in children through their free and spontaneous play.

Keywords: Free play. Spontaneous play. Phenomenology. Leisure.

1 INTRODUCTION[1]

> I think the backyard where we played is bigger than a city. We only discover this after we grow up. We discover that a thing's size is measured through the intimacy we have with it. One could say the same thing happens with love. So, the pebbles in our backyard are always bigger than any other rocks in the world. And the only reason is the intimacy we know them by. (BARROS, 2015, p. 124)

From 2018 to 2019 we carried out field research observing free and spontaneous play in large urban centers[2]. The observations and analysis performed during 2018 focused on refining the methodology developed by the project The Territory of Play,[3] and it gave rise to both the documentary *Miradas* (MEIRELLES; ECKSCHMIDT, 2019), and the publication of the same name (OLIVAL *et al*., 2019). Both chronicled the outings made by this group of researchers during this period, and with an emphasis on phenomenology to understand the dialogue free play promotes between children and world. After this step of advancing our use of the methodology- carried out and systematized during our field research, in which each of the researchers did four months of weekly observations — we began to design the research to be developed in 2020, intending to observe children's spontaneous (SIMON; KUNZ, 2014)[4] free play in urban areas.

In 2019, a series of meetings were held to define the places of observation, and to discuss publications about the way children relate to cities. We faced appalling data that revealed a "pandemic of low physical activity" (MENDONÇA, 2019), in which children spent 90% of their time indoors (EPA, 2015); on average around five hours per day in front of screens (BRASILEIROS..., 2016) and less than one hour per day outside (ALIANÇA PELA INFÂNCIA, 2016). In fact, in the field observations carried out up to that point, we had perceived how, in general, a city, the public policies, adults, health care services, and quality of life, failed to prioritize space and time for free play for an array of childhoods. (FRIEDMANN, 2020; LAROSSA, 2003). Several scouting

1 Coletivo de pesquisadores do Projeto Território do Brincar.

2 "By 'free and spontaneous play' we mean the involvement of children in activities they have the freedom to create, end, lead and change; therefore, activities not directed by adults." (SAURA, 2013a, p.163)

3 The Territory of Play is a project dedicated to listening, exchanging knowledge, documenting, and disseminating the culture of childhoods. Since 2012, it has done field research registering children's free play in a variety of realities, creating an array of cultural products like books, films, and podcasts. The group of researchers structures the research that comes before the release of products, applying scientific methodology and material analysis. See. https://territoryofplay.com/

4 "The use of terms like 'free' and 'spontaneous' refers to movement not only without borders and/or outside, but which are, primarily, characterized by the individual expressions of each person. (SIMON; KUNZ, 2014, p. 378).

trips were made to initiate our planned work, and then the COVID-19 pandemic took us entirely by surprise.

In all countries, social isolation was the most important guideline to stop the spread of COVID-19, and, in Brazil, more than 50% of families followed, for at least some months, the social distancing guidelines that were imposed during this period (AQUINO *et al*., 2020). Suddenly, families went back inside their homes. In this new scenario, we began to ask ourselves how free, spontaneous play would occur in the homes of isolated families. Thus, using phenomenology, we created ways to remotely research the lived experience of children, through intermediary adult eyes. In this case, we are talking about a phenomenological approach that brings play closer to the way leisure is studied in Brazil, due to its casual nature whose end is itself. (BRUHNS, 2007; SAURA, 2013a, 2013b; SAURA; MEIRELLES; ECKSCHMIDT, 2015).

It is important to note that there were many studies that investigated childhoods during the pandemic, notably in areas such as Health, Education and Clinical Psychology. For example, focusing on its invisibility (PASTORE, 2020); its relation to screen time and schools (GUIZO; MARCELLO; MULLER, 2020); about mental and physical health (LINHARES; ENUMO, 2020); about abuse and domestic violence (LEVANDOWSKI *et al*, 2021); about intensive use of the internet and its associated risks (DESLANDES; COUTINHO, 2020), which were supported by public policy and city rights research (CARVALHO; GOUVEA, 2019).

In our case, as in other occasions, (HORNETT, 2016; MATTOS *et al*., 2020; MEIRELLES, 2015; SAURA; ECKSCHMIDT; ZIMMERMANN, 2019), we attempt to take a closer look at the phenomenon of free and spontaneous play. Phenomenological research addresses free play as a dialogue of being-in-the-world, (SURDI; MELO; KUNZ, 2015), so we were always attentive to what the families told us about the lived experience of playing, intensified by the closeness brought on by the pandemic. The results were surprising. We present here, in addition to the process of how this research was carried out, the relationships that the children established, through free and spontaneous play, with different rooms in the home.

2 FREE PLAY AND THE RESEARCH PROCESS - IN REMOTE MODE

> The living room was now turned into a huge cabin. It's been three days since I've been able to sit on the couch, because it's lined with cloth he uses to build his cabin. It's fine, I don't mind much about the couch. Let him have his cabin there. (statement from an interviewed mother).

Since 2000, Reeks and Meirelles (2017) have carried out long-term field-research incursions that investigate free and spontaneous play in different contexts. They look for what makes play pulse: the embodied experience in relation to space and time; the relationships established among children, their living bodies, and the living world. [5] (ANDRIEU, 2015). In fact, phenomenology seeks to grasp the lived experience, to return to the things themselves, a look at essences. (KUNZ, 2019).

5 "Our living body feels the world, before we are aware of what we call the phenomenology of the lived body." (ANDRIEU, 2015, p.6)

It's a processual and open look, directed at space-time perception and dialogical relationships with things in the world. (NÓBREGA; CAMINHA, 2019). Inspired by great authors such as Bachelard (1998), Goethe (2012) e Merleau-Ponty (1994), we consider the notability of free activities, which, according to Husserl,

> Let the imagination flow and open possibilities for children to do things their way, which may be different than how things are normally done, allowing for children to discover new ways of moving to expand their horizons of skills in their worlds. (SIMON; KUNZ, 2014, p. 378)

Over the years, we have been exercising an attentive form of observation, that involves meticulous description, and looks to identify sweeping themes and recurrences. (SAURA, MEIRELLES, 2015). These observations are processed in the experience, in the bodily experience of the researcher, which is why it's been so important to work together. Because when we group our perceptions together, we find these across-the-board themes and expand our subjectivities (SAURA; ZIMMERMANN, 2021), our intercorporealities (NÓBREGA, 2016), following the Goethian lead in which "only the interest of many, directed at a single point, is capable of producing something excellent" (GOETHE, 2012, p. 57).

We seek in the singular experience of each one - from the suspension of judgment and the description of an experience - an approximation with the essences. Also, what resonates, reverberates and excites (BACHELARD, 2001; ECKSCHMIDT, 2021; LAMEIRÃO, 2007), or what we call recurrences. (SAURA; MEIRELLES, 2015). In this respect, we identified in the accounts of each mother, father, aunt or grandmother, what manifested strongly across the board, the overlapping topics that enthused us, the different angles and layers of free and spontaneous play that unveil in front of us.

The first families we selected belonged to our existing group of contacts, and these families referred others, in a snowballing effect, (BIERNACK; WALFORD, 1981) until we achieved a level of diversity that began to include contacts with foreign families. Our goal with this sample set was to guarantee a level of diversity among the families– different from each other in their intersectionalities and specificities –trying to identify sweeping themes of spontaneous play within differences that are often structural. We intentionally sought out family groups with different attributes. This included a balance in self-reported familial backgrounds and socioeconomic diversity. We also paid attention to the children's general characteristics: some with a type of disability; Some with zero, one, two, three or more siblings. In this sample, 30 children are 0-6 year-olds, and 33 are 7-12 year-olds. However, we only interviewed families with children in social isolation that reside in large urban centers.

When we reached the desired level of diversity, we created research presentation materials, signature of consent forms, and authorization/release forms to use images for scientific research purposes, and for cultural distribution. Being under the administration of Alana Institute- a non-profit that works in defense of children's rights and their comprehensive development- the research followed the technical norms set by the Brazilian National Health Council's Committee for Research Ethics. Norms and policies that protect children and adolescents by ensuring that no activity

or action carried out by the Institute's programs, platforms and projects causes harm to children, adolescents or adults participating in any of its initiatives.[6]

After deciding on the families, we scheduled the interviews, which were based on two loosely structured questionnaires. We considered the interviews as the main resource for data collection while our study was being run remotely. We made initial contact with each one of the families, and arranged remote interviews at the beginning and end of the four-month period, asking the same questions each time. The questionnaire consisted of open questions, in line with the scope of phenomenological research, and the questions- 10 in total- asked the interviewees to describe the space of their respective homes during isolation, as well as the places, objects, materials and play observed in each space. We also dedicated time to listen to the times of day, rhythms, and routines of the children; about which games were played most frequently; and with which family members they played with during isolation. Likewise, inquiries were made about the children's physical activities and expressiveness.

The interviews, which lasted 90 minutes on average, were carried out via web meeting platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, or even WhatsApp, and were recorded and transcribed. The interviewees often went beyond just answering questions, as both parties were enthusiastic to talk about children's activities, narratives, and gestures. (ECKSCHMIDT, 2021). From March-to-June 2020, the families we interviewed sent us images of these moments of free and spontaneous play. These images, included in the analysis, constitute an important source of data, [7]since our ability to visit the families and observe/record them ourselves was interrupted. The second interview, which was carried out near the end of the study, repeated the same questions from the beginning of the four-month period and was also a useful conversation about the effects of time. The families will remain anonymous, referencing the data in general terms, such as "mother", "father", "daughter", "son". Due to the way that some of their words moved us, and as examples, we share some of their quotes throughout this work.

The analysis's framework respects the methodology: suspending judgment about what is natural. We considered what we saw to be reliable. Underlying themes were defined when evidence manifested clearly and could be categorically shown, generating enthusiastic consensus with the researchers (ECKSCHMIDT, 2021; HORNETT, 2021; MATTOS, 2020). Interviews and audiovisual images were analyzed in whole and in parts, broken down and detailed. The research group held meetings every other week during the information gathering period; and weekly, during the material analysis period- sharing impressions, themes, literature and sentiments. There were 16 meetings in total that were also recorded and transcribed.

And slowly, step by step, interview after interview, image after image, evidence emerged showing how, what, and where children were playing at home during the initial period of social isolation in 2020.

6 Available at: https://alana.org.br/. Acess on: Oct 23, 2022.

7 The medium-length documentary, "Play at Home", was inspired by these images. Click: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hTzF0MV9oQ&list=PL1IlaKMcWzeycqVVuf6GmNcc9QtGdDffi

3 LIVING ROOM, BACKYARD AND KITCHEN: THE INVITATION TO ACT ON THE THINGS OF THE WORLD

> She runs, picks up speed, and the hallway ends in the living room, so she does some flips and lands on the sofa. Recently she called us to see: she jumps three times, lands on her feet, and tells us she's become an acrobat. She moves around a lot, jumping on furniture and climbing up doorframes. (testimony from an interviewed mother)

We spoke to families who inhabit a variety of living spaces, such as houses, apartments, squatter settlements, shelters, communities, and even shared housing. Included in the sample were black, brown, white, hetero, gay, and indigenous families; divorced, single-parent, both parents present and with extended relatives, such as aunts or grandmothers. Of the 55 families interviewed, we spoke with forty-two mothers and six fathers, one grandmother, one aunt, one shelter manager and one coordinator of a hospital project; 3 couples responded jointly. The sample also includes families living outside of Brazil, namely: South Africa, Germany, Belgium, The United States, India, England, Italy, Malawi, Mozambique, Peru and Switzerl.

Right away, it was evident that before the pandemic, regardless of their many differences, each family's daily routine was governed by external activities, and, therefore, the family nucleus was only able to converge at the end of the day or on weekends.

> Before the pandemic, her daily routine was exhausting. She woke up very early, and left with me when I went to work so I could drop her off at school. She stayed all day at school, and I picked her up on my way home from work, around 6PM. (testimony of an interviewed mother)

It was rare for families to have meals together during the week, something which happened regularly during the pandemic. Especially during the first month of the pandemic, we noticed a certain relief on the children's part that their external activities stopped, as explicit by the testimony of several children's caregivers. This data is corroborated by other studies during the same period of social isolation. (PERROTA; CRUZ, 2021).

Another indisputable finding is that, despite the diversity of dwellings - one-floor homes, multi-floor homes, group homes, one-two-three- or more-room homes, *airbnbs*, apartments, or settlements - the children, as they had more time available, completely took over their living spaces. Thus, they show us how play keeps the physical presence of the body at the center of relationships with the world and with others (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1994). Reports like this were frequent: "My daughter plays throughout the entire house (laughing). It gets a little crazy. There are days when I say: 'Sweety, let's pick up all of the things that flung all around the house, right?'" (testimony of an interviewed mother)

As we went down the list of questions, and heard more detailed descriptions of spaces and games, we began to notice a pattern behind the intense relationships children formed with different kinds of rooms. For example, the living room, a collective space, often became center stage for certain types of play in each family's home. A number of children transformed their living rooms, moved furniture around, hung

sheets or towels, brought in chairs and mattresses, giving an impression of disorder. An environment that is normally neatly arranged became chaotic and messy, yet was an ideal place for children's theater, songs and other creations. And the play there often recruited other family members and included board games, puzzles and models that would remain strewn about the floor. If the house were a city, certainly the living room would be the central meeting space, the public square, if you will. It's a larger space that serves as a cross-roads and invites encounters with diversity, expanding frontiers and subjectivities. (BACHELARD, 1990; HISSA; NOGUEIRA, 2013).

For the purposes of this research, our definition of "backyard" has become as diverse as the families we interviewed: a range of different environments that share the common trait of having access to the sky, usually with no ceiling. Considering that many children who live in urban centers don't have a backyard at home, and that during social isolation spaces became smaller due to restrictions, (BORGES; MARQUES, 2020) the idea of a backyard brings diversity. To a child, any space that's open to the sky could be a backyard, as it is perceived as an extension to the house, or as a special place in the sun.

> I used to use the veranda to store boxes, and it was a place we didn't often use. But because we were spending more time at home, I began changing things around, especially on the veranda. I wound up buying a thick, straw mat online to make the space more welcoming for play, because she loves to dance and do somersaults. Now the veranda has been put to good use. I bought plants, because she likes to care for them, and now we have more contact with nature here in the apartment. (testimony of an interviewed mother)

Contact with nature, such as plants, water and soil, dominated reports and descriptions of backyard play. Their were also numerous accounts of playing with pets, whose participation in the Family was redefined during the pandemic: they became more central to the lives of children and families, highlighted by increased affection, as cited by other studies (HOY-GERLACH; RAUKTIS; NEWHILL, 2020; NAGENDRAPPA *et al*., 2020; RATSCHEN *et al*., 2020).

> In December, when we got a puppy, we never imagined that all of this would happen, but he interacts with the dog a lot, playing together. The kids created a game of tag with him. And now, with the pandemic, the dog helps the kids' well-being, since it provides a lot of companionship for them. (testimony from an interviewed mother)

The kitchen, on the other hand, acted like a living laboratory that proportioned collaboration - a "let's-do-it-together attitude" - (SAURA, 2008, ZIMMERMANN; SAURA, 2020), - a learning guided more through body-language and gestures than with words. Kneading, peeling, choping, dicing, mixing, frying all transformed different ingredients. In the kitchen, the fascination that children feel while watching adults transform the world was a recurring theme. "I didn't know that my dad could cook!" one awe-struck child chimed in while we were interviewing her mother. Adults set new examples for how to use their hands, various utensils, and appliances. (SAURA; MEIRELLES, 2015). "She really had fun helping me use the mixer. I didn't even have space to store a mixer, but I wound up buying one anyway during the pandemic," (testimony of an interviewed mother). These experiences are frequently insightful; they

awaken enchantment and ontological curiosity because they relate to the humanity we grow into through our own embodied experiences (BACHELARD, 2008; MERLEAU-PONTY, 1980). Children also enjoyed a sense of independence in the kitchen. “Don’t forget I’m the one who makes the juice for lunch?”, a mother quoted her son. Busy hands in the kitchen evoke the affirmative feelings of “I am able”, “I know how to make it”, that reminded us of Merleau-Ponty’s “I can” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1994). We noticed how all of this nourished an internal fulfillment in the children that not even brocoli, seemingly, could substitute. Lastly, it’s important to mention that the kitchen regulated the families’ quotidian rhythms during the pandemic. Families mentioned how mealtimes aligned with the children’s needs, instilled order and cadence into their daily lives.

Three months after our first contact with the families, we did follow-up interviews to find out what had changed regarding the children’s behaviors and spontaneous play. Reports varied greatly, as some saw a growing fluidity in play while others saw increased boredom and inertia. Screen time had become a major force in the children’s universes.[8] These factors aggregated with a sense of loneliness caused by the absence of social interactions with peers, especially for children with no siblings - a feeling mentioned with painful frequency in several follow-up interviews.

As a final and more generally recurring result, we noticed that our initial questionnaire sparked families to rethink their conceptions about play:

> I think that the first questionnaire, your study, in my view, in our life, encouraged us to look at their playtime as something fun and healthy instead of thinking that they’re just suffering through the pandemic. (testimony of an interviewed mother)

> One thing I found interesting, which came from an insight I had after the first interview, was how we let them play longer, how we left the place messy longer, like leaving everything scattered around the house. Normally, at the end of the day we’d have a moment to clean up ‘Ok, playtime’s over, time to put everything away’. And now we let them play longer and leave the mess as well. (testimony of an interviewed mother)

Living rooms, backyards, kitchens and their associated objects helped create memories during the pandemic (PERROTA; CRUZ, 2021): memories impregnated with the aromas and flavors of daily family meals; puzzles and fierce disputes brought on by board games; creative and free movements in the backyard; or living-room performances, put on for all to see. We experienced, lived through, and accompanied different difficulties during the pandemic, but families pointed out that talking about play was akin to talking about life, health, movement, overcoming, and perseverance. Throughout the bulk of their statements, we confirmed how much free and spontaneous play - when invited and encouraged to come alive in the body- was influenced by the space the children were in and the objects they found to play with. Irrefutably, each room was changed with a child’s presence, inviting them to action. Likewise, objects

8 The “Projeto Território do Brincar” presents, at the end of each research period, their results in cultural research products. In the case of this research, a series of podcasts were made, in addition to the medium-length film “Brincar em Casa”, which are available on mainstream audio platforms. Regarding screen time, we made an entire podcast episode about this topic: https://territoriodobrincar.com.br/nossas-reportagens/territorio-do-brincar-lanca-documentario-brincar-em-casa/ . Access on: Oct 24, 2022.

and furniture played their own roles as well. Toys always figured in with supporting roles, yet anything seemed free-game to the attentive children. The homes, these living spaces, (BACHELARD, 1990), independent of their size or number of rooms, welcomed the children and seemed to listen to their needs. Like it or not, a new day dawned, and suddenly the house became a home.

4 THE INTIMACY OF PLAYING "ALONE-ALONE"

> I noticed that during the quarantine her imagination and speech developed a lot. She started talking with her toys, her dolls, and came up with stories that she'd tell in a whisper. (testimony of an interviewed father)

Rooms in the home, allied with their objects, nourished different types of play, and in that sense: aspirations and yearnings. (BACHELARD, 2001). Beds, mattresses, and couches offered sheltered coziness, but during extended periods stuck inside, they also encouraged jumps, tumbles, flips, falls, and other explosive gestures. Tables, bunk beds, roofs, and stairs fed ideas to climb up and down, and even provided support for children to hang from dubious heights. (DURAND, 2002). Bachelard, like Merleau-Ponty, helps us look at play in an instigating way: for the author, worldly things, created from natural materials incarnated in a physical environment, are considered as a stimulant for movement and imagination: "The world is my source of provocation. I understand the world because I surprise it with my incisive forces, my directed forces" (BACHELARD, 1998, p. 166). Through this lens we see that household objects are sometimes challenging, sometimes welcoming. These material polarities are highlighted in Bachelardian (BACHELARD,1990) and Goethean (GOETHE, 2012) phenomenological studies. Bachelard's poetic image phenomenology has already been highlighted in previous publications regarding the ways it contributes to both pedagogy, and to the area of physical activity, sport and leisure. (SAURA; ECKSCHMIDT; ZIMMERMANN, 2019; SAURA; ZIMMERMANN, 2019). In this case, phenomenological reductions often lead us to claims addressed by Bachelard. Among the different possible intentions, we highlight intimate- or innermost- play, as we discuss a period in which free play suffered restrictions of movement and a lack of interactions with other children.

Certainly a prominent expression of playing alone was the creation of play cabins, forts, and houses. This is a common theme in nearly all childhoods, easily observable in different realities (SAURA; MEIRELLES, 2015), and the current research contained interviews and images demonstrating its reoccurrence, especially during the first months of social isolation. In the middle of such uncertainty, children from different parts of the world sought play time within sheet walls and cardboard, playing in smaller, cozier places. Caregiver testimony reflects the idea of a nest, tailor made to the size of the child's body. Creating these shelters suggests that children were seeking protection in general, and, in some cases, more specifically protection from the strangeness outside:

> My daughter seemed to be always looking for a hiding place in the house. Drawers, dark places between the furniture, and under the sofa awoke her fascination and sometimes butterflies in her stomach. Her stuffed animals, named Caco, Bacon and Pepe were always well tucked away in baskets,

> backpacks, or wrapped up in sheets. She built nests within nests. A project that was never quite finished, but only because she was always looking for new possibilities for inhabiting, and this brought another dimension to our house during this period. (testimony of an interviewed mother)

In oneself, in quiet, the silence. The nook. The hideout. Bachelard said that "a child's solitude is more secret than that of an adult" (BACHELARD, 1988, p. 103). We learned with the children to recognize these spaces of warmth and intimacy the philosopher is referring to. We could see how these spaces became necessary in the ontological insistence of playing alone. This type of play finds its place of expression especially in bedrooms, where entering and closing the door often is all it takes to "be alone." "Alone-alone" was an expression a father used to describe how his daughter played in the room. Even though many of the families involved in this research didn't necessarily have a dedicated space for a child's bedroom- as some families had to share their space, such as one room studios- the children always found a spot to play in solitude, whether under the table, between bookshelves, under bunk beds and even inside closets. A trademark characteristic of this play is that there is no room for adults:

> She quickly runs up to her room, shuts the door, sits on the floor, and organizes her play: focusing intently. Once everything is organized, the fun begins. We overhear all the characters' voices. When we enter her room to put something away or see how she's doing, she stops everything and stares at us until we leave. Then she resumes the game. All of her attention is focused on her play. (testimony of an interviewed father)

It's notable that when parents and caregivers describe the little they're able to observe of this type of play, they consistently use diminutive word modifications. Their kids use diminutive toys like Lols, Pollys, Playmobils, Legos, small houses, tiny guns, little cars, as well as stuffed animals, Pokemon cards, and action figures. In fact, time and time again, playing alone in the room was almost exclusively with tiny toys. In their exercises of solitude (BACHELARD, 1988), the children fabricate entire worlds with their toys. (PIORSKI, 2016). We heard how they carefully arranged each piece in its place, making cities, planets and forests. We noticed that the organization phase is not part of pre-play, but constitutes play in-and-of-itself. But eventually the characters do come to life, with their own voices and narratives. "I just kept hearing these noises being made, these little dolls belong to her universe. It seems like there are a lot of fights or conflicts in there." (testimony of an interviewed mother)

During this type of play, one overhears orders, requests, sounds of battle, fights, and collisions. Other types of play involve putting a baby to bed, or having afternoon tea with dolls posing as friends. The scene gains voice, and the play gains life and energy. Alone in the room, a child speaks and listens to his-or-herself. The child listens to the dialogues and symbolic narratives which simultaneously consist of both sound and silence, creator and created. Following Merleau-Ponty's line of thought, the experience is "something that acts within us when we act, as if we were acted on at the very moment in which we are agents" (CHAUÍ, 2002, p.166). The body may move less, as the child is usually in a squatted position, concentrating intently, but one notices that the hands move rapidly - in sync with the imaginative activity. To inhabit the world, as children do, is to not see it as a "world apart," but to live it as

part of ourselves, akin to what Merleau-Ponty says when we recognize world-body interweaving. We witness how, in the nook of a room, the world and things of life grow to the size of their imaginations (ZIMMERMANN; SAURA, 2019). Bachelard, who explored the daydreams of lone children in his phenomenology of the poetic image (SAURA; ZIMMERMANN, 2019) reminds us that "the miniature is one of the refugees of greatness" (BACHELARD, 1990, p. 164). In fact, we see how children condense the world into their tiny items. But above all, how this world also expands. One mother mentioned: "they sound like amazing movie scripts". And Bachelard states: "the better and more skillful I am at shrinking the world, the more I'm able to possess it. But, in doing so, I need to understand that in small things, values are condensed and enriched" (BACHELARD, 1990, p. 159).

During the day, families reported that play regularly consisted of playing with small toys and creating cozy spaces, especially in the bedroom. At night, however, another type of play, which often united the aforementioned daytime aspects took over: storytelling. Families snuggled together to read books to kids, tell traditional tales, or invent new ones. Older children would often read longer stories. During the silence of exploring a story or in happiness of playing alone, a child experiences a natural daydream of solitude, a daydream that shouldn't be confused with that of a sulking child. In this happy solitude, the dreaming child connects to the cosmic daydream, the one that unites us to the world (BACHELARD, 1988, p. 105).

Whether a story is read or told, it's in stillness that we hear it. Invariably, before bedtime. Imaginations of book illustrations or shadows projected on the wall, expand to a larger repertoire of moving images. Classic stories, like dramas, tragedies and their unbearable endings, with heroes, battles and conquests. Here, ambiguities and polarities condense images of humankind's formation. Read or narrated by the children themselves during playtime, these images seem to be our first lesson in humanity. "Time that matters is equal to the time you daydream." (BACHELARD, 1988, p. 104). In the same way Merleau-Ponty claims perception comes before rationality, for Bachelard, "images come before experience" (1990, p.45), since sensibility, which images and perception compose, "is precisely that which, without leaving its place, can effect more than one person" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1991, p.15).

Even though adults were forbidden from the bedroom during playtime, siblings, older or younger, were allowed to join in. In the bedroom, huddled in imaginative and narrative lore, from playing with toys to storytelling, siblings became partners in creation, and this was intensified by pandemic conditions. They joined together in building values of connection (BACHELARD, 1988). Many families told of how siblings, on their own accord, decided to share rooms with one another. And, when possible, even in the same bed, amidst whispers, plans and dreams.

And so the world calms down, and is set to pause. In cozy places like parents' beds or with siblings, trust is delivered. A "cosmic" trust, of "a calm nest in our old house" (BACHELARD, 1990, p. 68).

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

> What else? What did I forget? Tell me? (speaking to a child in the room) She said that I forgot to say that she likes to draw on the glass in the backyard. She loves drawing. (testimony of an interviewed mother)

> It is not enough to consider the house as an “object” on which we can make our judgments and daydreams. For a phenomenologist, a psychoanalyst, or a psychologist (these three points of view being named in the order of decreasing efficacy), it is not a question of describing houses, or enumerating their picturesque features and analyzing for which reasons they are comfortable. On the contrary, we must go beyond the problems of description -whether this description be objective or subjective, that is, whether it gives facts or impressions- in order to attain to the primary virtues, those that reveal an attachment that is native in some way to the primary function of inhabiting. A geographer or an ethnographer can give us descriptions of very varied types of dwellings. In each variety, the phenomenologist makes the effort needed to seize upon the germ of the essential, sure, immediate well-being it encloses. In every dwelling, even the richest, the first task of the phenomenologist is to find the original shell. (BACHELARD, 1990, p. 199).

In the end, we realized that investigating play during the pandemic was similar to investigating play that always happens inside the home. How and what the children were playing during social isolation show’s up in other periods. The difference lay in the timeframe and the abundant access children had to objects and rooms, which allowed them to create new relations with the world and on their own terms. In this paper, we offer what we consider the most notable results, but we would also like to emphasize that free and spontaneous play is a phenomenon in constant action, in permanent dialogue between body and world. Play did not cease–even in challenging times such as these. Play offered us input like a health regulating mechanism and through the way it allowed children to interact with the world through its pulsing vitality and resilience. For the caregivers who spoke with us, as well as for us researchers, spontaneous play has been a phenomenon with fluid characteristics that reveals and hides itself. A thought-provoking phenomenon- in which in the triad of phenomenologically observing, scrutinizing, and describing- cannot wrap things up in a single research study or clipping. Nor would it be possible to come to any final conclusions. We advanced with this research, and now we reach a new stage. Families are carefully trying leave isolation and go into external environments. In this first phase, play, through the phenomenological lens, allowed us to see that space, materials, and time are essential variables for the quality of free and spontaneous play, expanding or shrinking its possibilities. These variables can contribute to reflections about this phenomenon in school spaces, during physical activities or during leisure time. Above all, they offer reflections about our natural inclinations for physical movement so that we can expand the spaces we offer for children to play; ensuring access to a wide variety of toys and materials; and that time for play is extended, perhaps enhancing our knowledge about childhood and ourselves.

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Resumo: Em março de 2020 estávamos nas ruas das cidades observando o brincar livre e espontâneo de crianças em espaços diversos, quando fomos surpreendidos pela pandemia global do novo coronavírus. Medidas variadas de isolamento social foram implementadas. Neste cenário, passamos a indagar sobre como estaria o brincar livre e espontâneo dentro das residências de famílias isoladas. Por meio do olhar fenomenológico, passamos a buscar formas de nos aproximarmos da experiência vivida das crianças de maneira remota e por intermédio de seus responsáveis. Dialogamos com 55 famílias em quatro meses. Percebemos que investigar o brincar durante o isolamento social é investigar um fenômeno que acontece dentro de casa em outros momentos, porém no período de isolamento, com tempos mais amplos e com menos restrições de acesso a objetos e cômodos. Em diálogo com autores da área, evidenciam-se provocações que diferentes cômodos engendraram nas crianças a partir do brincar livre e espontâneo.

Palavras-chave: Free play. Spontaneous play. Phenomenology. Leisure.

Resumen: En marzo de 2020 estábamos en las calles de las ciudades observando el juego libre y espontáneo de los niños en diferentes espacios, cuando nos sorprendió la pandemia global del nuevo coronavirus. Se implementaron diversas medidas de aislamiento y distanciamiento social. En este escenario, comenzamos a preguntarnos cómo sería el juego libre y espontáneo dentro de las residencias de familias aisladas. A través de la mirada fenomenológica, comenzamos a buscar formas de acercarnos a la experiencia vivida de los niños de forma remota y a través de sus responsables. Dialogamos con 55 familias a lo largo de cuatro meses. Nos dimos cuenta de que investigar el juego durante el aislamiento social correspondía a investigar un fenómeno que ocurre dentro de las casas en otros momentos, sin embargo, en el periodo de aislamiento, con tiempos más largos y con menos restricciones de acceso a objetos y habitaciones. En diálogo con autores de ese campo, se evidencian las provocaciones que los distintos espacios de la casa generaron en los niños a partir del juego libre y espontáneo.

Palabras clave: Juego libre. Juego espontáneo. Fenomenología. Ocio.

CONFLITO DE INTERESSES

Os autores declararam que não existe nenhum conflito de interesses neste trabalho.

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ÉTICA DE PESQUISA

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SOBRE O INSTITUTO ALANA

Trata-se de uma organização de impacto socioambiental que promove o direito e o desenvolvimento integral da criança e fomenta novas formas de bem viver. Seu Instituto – uma organização da sociedade civil, sem fins lucrativos – nasceu com a

missão de “honrar a criança”. O Instituto conta hoje com programas próprios e com parceiros, que buscam a garantia de condições para a vivência plena da infância e é mantido pelos rendimentos de um fundo patrimonial desde 2013. https://alana.org.br/

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