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The Forum

# Guarded Play: Multi-Tasking in Parent-Child Interactions

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This brief analysis utilizes a CA perspective to deepen our understanding of the ways in which participants in interactions are able to handle more than one activity simultaneously. Many of the studies on multi-tasking, as Good (2009) noted, address this from a cognitive science perspective (e.g. Salvucci, 2005; Salvucci, Taatgen, & Kushleyeva, 2006), focusing on the brain's ability to attend to several tasks at once. According to this work, we humans do a less than stellar job at balancing more than one thing at a time. In fact, with each task we add to the mix, our performance suffers that much more. As a social scientist, I find these conclusions enlightening and worthy of further study. As a mother, I chuckle, because even as I write this, my ear is bent to my daughter doing homework and the dinner that is on the stove, and I have gotten up from my workstation twice to wipe the bedroom wall clean of all traces of marker from my son's dirty hands. Since at the end of the day, every member of my family is fed, cleaned, and accounted for, I proclaim that I do my job successfully. Thus, I agree wholeheartedly with the argument (Good, 2009) that by looking at the *social action* of multi-tasking as it happens in real time, as it happens so many nights in the lives of families, we might complicate the notion that it is something that humans simply cannot do well.

Given that the family is an inherently social construct, and "the original site for everyday discourse" (Kendall, 2007, p. 3), analyzing the verbal and non-verbal multi-tasking behavior as it manifests in naturally-occurring interactions could demonstrate not only how parents multitask, but also how parents *do being a multi-tasker* at a given moment, and how other interlocutors orient to such behavior. In order to investigate this *doing* in the moment-by-moment unfolding of the activity, it is helpful to employ the intricate analysis inherent in the CA framework. By applying the line-by-line close read upon which CA insists, I attempt to explicate exactly how and when a mother parses her verbal and non-verbal resources in order to accomplish the tasks necessary in order to care for her two children who, in this moment, have competing needs.

The data were taken from a videotaped corpus collected in my home over the course of several months during the spring, summer, and fall of 2011. The children, 6-year old 'O' and 2-year old 'S,' take their nightly bath together, supervised by myself, 'C,' the mother. It might be helpful to note that 'O' is in first grade. 'S' is cared for at home, and at the time of this recording, was just learning to speak. Often, I am the only one who understands what he says.

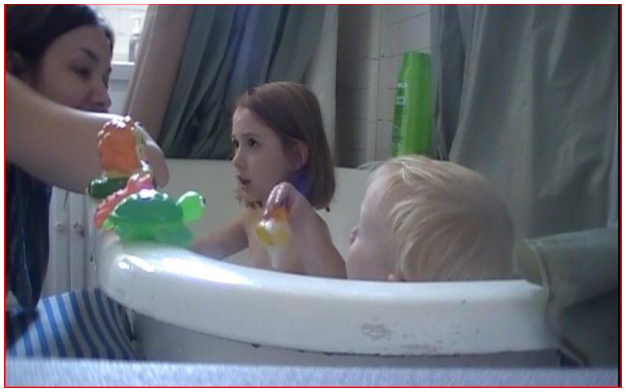
After viewing the data several times, I was struck by the amount of verbal and non-verbal interactional work I engage in as I simultaneously or sequentially attend to children who require monitoring as they bathe, but also desire a playmate. Thus, I transcribed one such moment. Pertinent non-verbal behavior is described in italics within double parentheses. I then explore in-depth the turns at talk, addressing one way in which I constantly shift my body and allocate my verbal and non-verbal resources, in order to fulfill the competing needs of the children.

*How I Perform the Juggling Act*

In the case to be examined, I operate as both playmate and caregiver. As the sequence begins, O is sitting in the bath, explaining to me that she scraped her hand at school. S is seated next to her, playing with animal toys, and naming animals as he handles the toys. I am kneeling at the tub's edge, a few inches away from the children and directly facing them. My body

positioning is such that I am directly across from O. Yet, I can easily make eye contact, touch, and or communicate with both of them, a position I use to my advantage when both children bid for my attention (see Image 1):

**Image 1: Line 22**



| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 01 | O: | ow [OW:::! ((*winces and grimaces*))] |
| 02 | S: | [da:::: ] |
| 03 | | (.) |
| 04 | S: | °da::° °d[a::::::::° ] |
| 05→ | C: | [((*turns head towards S*))-↑do::g] |
| 06 | | (0.6) |
| 07 | O: | [(unintelligible) ] |
| 08 | S: | [Oh no a dog [A DA DA ]DO:::G ] |
| 09→ | C: | [((*looks at S*)) {((*looks at O*))-°OK°} ] |
| 10 | | (0.4) |
| 11 | C: | listen you'll have to keep it out of the tub if you're that concerned about it |
| 12 | | because there really is no mark on it I think you'll be OK= |
| 13 | O: | =No there was there's spike things on it [(there was like a little mark) ] |
| 14 | C: | [{Spike things?-((*leaning in*))}]= |
| 15 | O: | =yeah= |
| 16 | C: | =oh I see a teeny little scrape. |
| 17 | | (.) |
| 18 | C: | Y[es (there's a little bit of skin) ] |
| 19 | S: | [{((*picking up duck*))-uh-oh} oh no] A DA! (A DA A DA A DA) |
| 20 | O: | N- noo when it's dry [(you can see what it looks like) ] |
| 21 | S: | [{((*turning towards C*))-UH OH OH NO A DA A DA A] |
| 22→ | C: | {((*turns towards S*))-Oh the duck} |
| 23→ | | {(.)-((C *turns back towards O*))} |
| 24→ | C: | [Yes.] |
| 25 | O: | [and ] it's scrapin' and (continues) |

In this excerpt, I do the complex interactional work of showing my involvement in two exchanges simultaneously (Tannen, 2007). In line 5, I attend to S's repeated assertion that he is holding a toy dog, saying the word 'dog,' which S produces as 'da.' S then replies in line 7 by

saying the word correctly. During this time, O is muttering and whining about her slightly injured hand. I have been showing my involvement nonverbally from line 1 onwards, as my body is positioned such that I am directly across from O. I signals my involvement verbally in line 9 with advice on how to care for it. At the same time that I talk to O, I look at S, who is still playing with his toys. In line 12, I echo the phrase 'spike things,' which O speaks about in line 11, further demonstrating my interest in the words O is uttering, albeit with the downgrade that I see a "teeny little scrape" (line 16). As we continue our conversation about O's injury, I repeat twice that I do not believe the injury to be serious (lines 12, 17). Meanwhile, S has become fascinated with a duck and expresses this, a move that I have largely ignored. However, S becomes more insistent that I pay attention to his duck; he restarts his "uh oh oh no" phrase in line 21, and moves closer to me. At this point, I turn towards him and verbally echo his "duck," and then reorient myself physically and verbally back to O with an agreement marker, "yes" (line 24), presumably to her unintelligible statement in line 20.

I shift my body and her gaze several times within this interactional spate in order to divide my attention between O and S. Since neither child seems to need urgent care, I do not need to prioritize one child's needs over another. Instead, I engage in a sort juggling act, simultaneously caring for two children. What I uncover, then, is my meshing S's play into O's troubles-telling. Like an orchestra conductor cuing separate instrumental sections, I weave my gaze, body, and words into S's and O's separate activities such that each child receives equal attention. As S's restart in line 21 reveals, the splitting of attention does not always evolve smoothly. Nevertheless, I successfully respond to S's naming game, keeping the play intact, while expressing some sympathy for O and for her hand. Such juggling allows me to parse my time and attention such that several tasks can be handled within a limited time frame. Through this allocation, I remain both caregiver and playmate at all times.

Utilizing a CA framework provides us with the tools to complicate the assertion that multi-tasking results in decreased performance. In fact, through the nuanced exploration of verbal and non-verbal conduct that lies at the heart of a CA analysis—or in other words, through looking at *how* the tackling of several activities at once gets done-- we arrive at the tentative conclusion that multi-tasking is a social act as well as a cognitive phenomenon. From an interactional standpoint, it is something humans do successfully, probably many times in a day. The interactional accomplishment of multi-tasking, I believe, merits further study.

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