

Original Article

Korean Word-Play for Infants: A Study on Play and Nurturing Care

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study focuses on Korean infant word-play, directed primarily at children under 12–15 months of age, as not merely play but a linguistic practice embodying the caregiver's nurturing care and their wish for the child's healthy growth. Accordingly, it examines what significance the physical movements accompanying Korean infant word-play hold for infants' physical development and healthy growth.

Materials and Methods: The traditional Korean infant word-plays "Joeamjoeam," "Gonjigonji," "Jjakjjakkung," "Gondugondu," "Seommaseomma," "Burabura," and "Doridori" are forms of play that combine brief vocalizations with physical movements, characterized by the caregiver naturally eliciting the child's movements. This study classified these word-plays into hand movements, lower-body movements, and neck movements, and examined their medical and traditional Korean medical (Korean medicine) significance.

Results: Hand-movement word-plays were associated with fine motor development, tactile stimulation of the hands, and hand-eye coordination. Lower-body-movement word-plays were linked to lower-limb muscle strength, balance, the experience of uprightness, and preparation for walking. Neck-movement word-plays were related to use of the neck muscles, head control, craniocervical movement, and stabilization of the vocal organs. From the perspective of Korean medicine, these can be interpreted in terms of stimulation of major acupoints—including Laogong (PC8), Yongquan (KI1), Kunlun (BL60), and the densely clustered acupoints of the posterior neck region—and the circulation of qi and blood.

Conclusion: Korean word-play for infants can therefore be understood not simply as playful language but as a practice of nurturing care that supports and wishes for infants' physical development and healthy growth. This study is significant in illuminating the health-oriented character embedded in traditional infant word-play and the value of Korea's traditional childrearing culture.

Keywords Korean word-play for infants, nurturing care, infants, physical development, traditional childrearing

INTRODUCTION

In Korea, there is a tradition of word-play directed at infants before they walk independently, typically before 12 to 15 months of age. This word-play consists of vocalizations that caregivers produce while guiding the infant through specific movements, and it is more than a simple play language or a means of eliciting

interest. Word-play can be understood as a form of everyday play language that supports physical development and cognitive development, by encouraging the infant to naturally move the hands, head, neck, torso, and legs. (Cho (2023)¹ argued that Korean speech-play carries significant meaning, as it allows children to acquire language and build physical strength simultaneously through play.) Joeamjoeam (also joemjoem) (According to the Standard Korean Language Dictionary, joemjoem is listed as an abbreviated form of joeamjoeam; because joemjoem is widely used in actual practice, it is presented alongside the full form here. Hereafter, the term is unified as joeamjoeam in accordance with the Standard Korean Language Dictionary.), gonjigonji, jjakjjakkung, gondugondu, seommaseomma, burabura, and doridori (Prior studies have also presented various infant word-plays such as jinnabi and

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hwolhwol; however, to clearly delimit the scope of this study, only word-plays registered as headwords or related entries in the Standard Korean Language Dictionary were selected for analysis. Word-plays whose dictionary meanings could not be confirmed were accordingly excluded from analysis.) belong to this category of word-play; each consists of a short vocalization combined with a simple physical movement, performed either by the caregiver for the infant or elicited from the infant through imitation. Among the movements accompanying these word-plays, joeamjoeam stimulates the sensation and movement of the hand through the repeated clenching and opening of the fist, while doridori can be seen as a game that supports circulation in the neck and head by having the infant turn the head from side to side. Likewise, seommaseomma gives the infant an experience of standing upright and finding balance, and is thus related to the development of the lower body and sense of balance. In this way, traditional Korean infant word-play, which combines vocalization and movement to stimulate the infant's body, can be interpreted in connection with a traditional awareness of infant growth and health. Furthermore, the Donguibogam [Principles and Practice of Eastern Medicine], in its Miscellaneous Disorders chapter (雜病篇), Volume 11, Pediatrics (小兒) section, separately presents a "Method for Protecting Infants" (小兒保護法)² (The Donguibogam is a medical text compiled in 1610 by Heo Jun, a court physician of the Joseon dynasty, synthesizing medical texts from both China and Joseon; the relevant material can be accessed through the Korean Medicine Classics Database, operated by the Korea Institute of Oriental Medicine. <https://mediclassics.kr/books/8/volume/19>). This shows that traditional medicine did not regard infant health merely in terms of treating illness, but recognized infants as beings requiring everyday protection and care. On this basis, word-play can be understood not simply as play, but as a form of word-play imbued with parents' wishes for their child's healthy growth—a characteristic of traditional Korean infant word-play rarely found in other countries or cultures.

Traditional Korean childrearing culture has placed importance on the child's healthy growth from the prenatal period onward. A representative example is the annotated Taegyosingi [New Treatise on Prenatal Education] and Taegyosingi Eonhae [Vernacular Translation of the New Treatise on Prenatal Education], which describe in concrete terms the influence of the prenatal environment on the child's development.³ (Written by the Joseon-era female Confucian scholar Lady Sajudang and rendered into the Korean vernacular by her son Yu Hui, this work has since been extended and reinterpreted across generations through prefaces, postscripts, memorial inscriptions (碑銘), and variant editions (異本) contributed by Sajudang's descendants and Confucian scholars nationwide. Regarded as "Korea's first treatise on prenatal education (胎教)," it exists as an annotated translation and study of the Taegyosingi and Taegyosingi Eonhae.) This recognition of the importance of the child's health from the prenatal period

continued into infancy after birth, and is likewise reflected in traditional infant word-play. A representative example is the tradition of infant play known as dandongsiphun (檀童十訓). Dandongsiphun refers to a body of traditional Korean infant play in which the caregiver performs certain physical movements together with the infant while repeating particular words or songs; related literature also refers to it as dandongchigisipgyehun (檀童治基十戒訓). Dandongsiphun is characterized by translating abstract moral teachings and childrearing values into a form of sensory and physical play that the infant can experience. The educational meaning inherent in dandongsiphun can also be interpreted in terms of self-understanding and independence, harmony with others, a moral life, and respect for humanity and nature. For example, seommaseomma, a game in which the infant is guided to stand with the caregiver's support, is understood as symbolizing independence and growth, while jjakjjakkung, in which the two hands are brought together, is interpreted as expressing mutual accord and harmony. However, this symbolic meaning is significant not in the sense that the infant cognitively understands the moral or philosophical content embedded in the play, but in that the caregiver imbues the play with cultural and educational meaning while wishing for the infant's health and desirable growth. Dandongsiphun can therefore be understood as more than simple physical play: it is a cultural practice that, through the interaction between caregiver and infant, conveys the childrearing values of traditional Korean society and the wish for the child's growth (Kim & Park, 2011, pp. 233–253; Lee & Lee, 2019, pp. 445–455).^{4,5}

This study posits that traditional Korean infant word-play is not merely a play element intended to entertain, but a form of play language that combines repetitive physical movement with parents' wishes for the child's health, and it draws attention to the way this word-play has induced the development of infants' physical functions and sensory stimulation. On this basis, this study examines the movements accompanying each word-play and, by presenting how these movements may be interpreted from a medical perspective, aims to suggest the positive effects of infant word-play.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

As this is a literature-based study that does not involve direct human participants or survey data, it was exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Physical play in infancy can be understood as an important educational experience that promotes not only physical development but also cognitive, emotional, and social development. Yang and Lee (2007)⁶ found that physical activity and play contribute not only to relieving infants' stress but also to promoting physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and linguistic development, and to cultivating the ability to understand the surrounding world and empathize with others. Jung and Min (2022)⁷ further argued that physical play provides infants with opportunities to experience a variety of gross- and fine-motor movements within the natural context of play.

Table 1. Traditional Korean Infant Word-Play and Physical Movements (The description of each movement presented in the table is based on definitions registered in the Standard Korean Language Dictionary.)

Category of Movement	Word-Play Expression	Description of Movement
Hand-movement word-play	<i>Joeamjoeam</i>	Induces the infant to perform joeamjil, clenching and opening the hand.
Hand-movement word-play	<i>Gonjigonji</i>	Induces the infant to touch the index finger of the right hand to the left palm and lift it away, repeatedly.
Hand-movement word-play	<i>Jjakjjakkung</i>	Induces the infant to strike both palms together in a clap.
Lower-body-movement word-play	<i>Gondugondu</i>	Stands the young child upright on the palm while keeping rhythm.
Lower-body-movement word-play	<i>Seommaseomma</i>	Spoken by the adult as they release the child's hand, while the child learns to stand independently.
Lower-body-movement word-play	<i>Burabura</i>	Induces the child to alternately raise and lower the two legs.
Neck-movement word-play	<i>Doridori</i>	Induces the child to perform dorijil, shaking the head from side to side.

This body of research suggests that traditional Korean infant word-play, which combines vocalization with physical movement, naturally induces the infant's bodily movement and may be interpreted as a play activity that expresses a wish for the child's health. The infant word-plays examined in this study are joeamjoeam, gonjigonji, jjakjjakkung, gondugondu, seommaseomma, burabura, and doridori. Among the various infant word-plays found in prior sources, these were selected based on entries registered in the Standard Korean Language Dictionary.

In particular, traditional Korean infant word-plays, games such as joeamjoeam, gonjigonji, and jjakjjakkung involve clenching and opening the hand, moving the fingers and palm, or clapping. Dinehart and Manfra (2013)⁸ found that fine motor skills in the preschool years are an important variable predicting later academic achievement, noting in particular the importance of fine motor abilities related to the use of writing implements. This study supports the understanding that traditional infant word-play, which induces repetitive hand movements, can be understood as a play experience that supports infants' fine motor development and bodily control. Early experience in infancy is also closely related to brain development. Kim and Lee (2017)⁹ explained that the brain grows rapidly between two and three years of age, and that early experiences during this period form the basis of brain structure through the formation and strengthening of connections between nerve cells. Such early experiences continue to exert an influence on overall development thereafter, including health, personality, behavior, and academic ability. Accordingly, traditional word-play activities that occur through early interaction with caregivers can be viewed as meaningful experiences that stimulate the infant's senses and movement and thereby support brain development.

Word-play involving the lower body is related to the infant's experience of upright posture. Fragaszy et al. (2024)¹⁰ held that the acquisition of upright posture serves as a starting point for

the development of infants' spatial perception and object-recognition abilities. From this perspective, seommaseomma, in which the caregiver stands the infant upright, and gondugondu, in which the infant is placed on the caregiver's palm to find balance, can be interpreted as traditional games that help the infant stand upright and experience balance. This shows that traditional infant word-play was a developmental form of play that induced the infant's bodily movement and sensory experience.

Taken together, the prior studies reviewed above show that infant word-play is not merely play, but may exert a meaningful influence on infants' physical development, fine motor development, brain development, and emotional stability through repetitive movement.

Traditional Korean infant word-play consists of vocalizations produced while inducing specific physical movements in the child, and is characterized by the simultaneous occurrence of speech, play, and bodily movement. This infant word-play can be classified, according to the body part involved, into hand-based play, lower-body-based play, and neck-based play.

Hand-based word-plays include joeamjoeam, gonjigonji, and jjakjjakkung. Joeamjoeam is a vocalization instructing the infant to perform joeamjil (clenching and opening the fist), and is a word-play that induces the infant to clench and open the hand. Gonjigonji is a vocalization instructing the infant to touch the index finger of the right hand to the palm of the left hand and then lift it away, repeatedly. Jjakjjakkung refers to an infant's playful clapping to entertain adults by striking both palms together.

Lower-body-based word-plays include gondugondu, seommaseomma, and burabura. Gondugondu is a vocalization made while standing the young child upright on the palm and keeping rhythm. Seommaseomma is a vocalization uttered by an

adult as they release the child's hand, at the moment the child is learning to stand independently. Burabura is a vocalization instructing the child to alternately raise and lower the two legs.

Neck-based word-play includes doridori. Doridori is a vocalization instructing the child to perform dorijil(shaking the head), and is a word-play that induces the child to move the head from side to side.

In this way, traditional Korean infant word-play combines vocalization and physical movement, naturally leading the child to move various parts of the body, including the hands, legs, and neck. This chapter has introduced the types and basic movements of this infant word-play; the following chapter examines the health-related significance of each play movement from a medical perspective.

RESULT

Traditional Korean infant word-play is a form of play that combines vocalization with physical movement, naturally moving various parts of the child's body, including the hands, feet, legs, and neck. From a medical perspective, the repetitive bodily movement induced through word-play is related to the development of the infant's gross and fine motor skills, sensory stimulation, motor control, and hand-eye coordination. Furthermore, because bodily health is maintained through the circulation of qi and blood and the harmonious functioning of the internal organs, the palms, soles, neck, and knees can be understood as sites where major meridians and acupoints are distributed.

However, the expression "acupoint stimulation" as used in this study does not imply that the movements involved in infant word-play produce the same intensity, depth, or physiological effects as acupuncture or acupressure performed in clinical practice. Clinical acupuncture applies a defined stimulus by inserting a needle into the skin, subcutaneous tissue, or muscle layer, and acupressure likewise applies a set pressure and duration to a specific site. In infant word-play, by contrast, the stimulation arises from the infant's own movement or the caregiver's assistance and is a relatively weak, intermittent mechanical stimulus whose intensity and duration are not standardized. Such movement may therefore provide general tactile, pressure, and proprioceptive input to the mechanoreceptors and sensory nerves distributed in the skin, subcutaneous tissue, muscles, and joints; however, whether this is sufficient to elicit a clinically functional response through a specific acupoint or meridian cannot be determined from the currently available data, and further research is needed. This study accordingly limits its Korean-medicine interpretation to the spatial association between the body region involved in each movement and the corresponding acupoint's location, rather than asserting a clinical therapeutic effect.

Accordingly, traditional infant word-play can be interpreted, beyond mere play, as a form of health-oriented word-play that

stimulates and moves the child's body, thereby supporting gross and fine motor development, the circulation of qi and blood, sensory activation, and bodily control (The Donguibogam likewise explains the theory of the body's internal organs, symptoms, and acupuncture based on this traditional medical view of the body. Accordingly, the palms, soles, neck, and knees can be interpreted as sites where major meridians and acupoints are distributed.).

First, hand-based word-plays include joeamjoeam, gonjigonji, and jjakjjakkung. Joeamjoeam is a word-play that induces the child to clench and open the hand. In the process of clenching the hand, the central region of the palm is naturally stimulated, and according to Korean medicine, this movement may provide indirect mechanical and sensory stimulation to the Laogong (PC8) acupoint located in this area. Laogong, a point belonging to the Pericardium meridian, is discussed in relation to warmth of the palm and mental and physical calm. Lee et al. (2017)¹¹ noted that stimulating Laogong may help improve stomach function and relieve tension. Joeamjoeam can therefore be seen as a game that, by repeatedly moving the child's palm and fingers, stimulates the meridians of the hand and supports the circulation of qi and blood and sensory activation.

Gonjigonji is a word-play in which the child repeatedly touches the index finger of one hand to the palm of the other and then lifts it away. This movement is significant in Korean medicine in that it directly stimulates the palm. In particular, compared to joeamjoeam, it may provide relatively more direct tactile and pressure stimulation around the Laogong area. This contact has the potential to activate the cutaneous mechanoreceptors and sensory nerves of the palm and to allow the infant to experience bodily sensation in the palm and fingers. Because the palm is a region highly sensitive to external stimulation, gonjigonji can be seen as a game that activates the child's hand sensation and supports a sense of internal bodily stability. Research on infant massage has reported that tactile and pressure stimulation increases vagal activity, and that this increase in vagal activity may be related to increased gastrointestinal motility and weight gain (Diego et al., 2005).¹²

Jjakjjakkung is a game in which the child claps by striking both palms together. This clapping motion stimulates both palms simultaneously and has the effect of repeatedly tapping the acupoints and meridians distributed across the palms. In Korean medicine, the hand is understood as a region where numerous meridians originate or pass through, and the motion of striking the palms together is thought to promote the circulation of qi and blood in both hands and to awaken bodily vitality. Jjakjjakkung can therefore be interpreted as a health-oriented game that, through stimulation of the palms, facilitates the flow of qi and blood and activates the child's bodily responses. Moreover, because the caregiver induces the behavior by demonstrating it—clapping both hands together—the infant who observes this achieves great significance as an elementary process toward the developmental task of hand-eye coordination. For an infant, the achievement of eye-hand coordination can be said to constitute the formation of a cognitive unit, or schema (Bahn et al., 2010,

p. 90¹³). According to Piaget's theory of the sensorimotor stage, intelligence in infancy emerges, prior to linguistic or conceptual thought, in the form of practical adaptation through sensation and movement. (According to Piaget (1954),¹⁴ sensorimotor intelligence pursues only practical adaptation; whereas sensorimotor intelligence aims at success or utility, conceptual thought advances toward knowledge governed by norms of truth.) Accordingly, the hand-eye coordination, imitation, and repetitive hand movements that occur in the jjakjjakkung game go beyond mere physical exercise and are related to the formation of sensorimotor schemas, which can be interpreted as an activity that promotes early cognitive development (Piaget, 1952/1936; Piaget, 1954/1937).^{14,15}

Lower-body-based word-plays include gondugondu, seommaseomma, and burabura. Gondugondu is a vocalization made while standing the child upright on the adult's palm and keeping rhythm. Standing on the adult's hand, the child applies force through the tips of the feet in order to find balance independently. This tension then extends from the calf through the thigh to the core muscles that support the spine. Furthermore, according to the official developmental screening guidebook provided by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)¹⁶ (The official website of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) is www.aap.org, which provides the "Bright Futures" guidelines actually used by American pediatricians during Well-Child Care Visits.), applying force through the toes strongly stimulates the intrinsic muscles—small muscles within the toes and the inner sole of the foot—and this process helps prevent flat feet in infants and supports the healthy formation of the foot arch, which absorbs shock during walking. Gondugondu can therefore be seen as a word-play that supports the core muscles and helps form a healthy foot arch, with an effect of preventing flat feet.

Seommaseomma is a vocalization uttered by the adult as they release the child's hand, at the moment the child is learning to stand independently. This game gives the child an experience of supporting the body with the soles of the feet and finding balance. In Korean medicine, the foot is regarded as an important region where the body's vital energy gathers downward and circulates back upward; Yongquan (KI1), located at the center of the sole, is known as the starting point of the Kidney meridian and is discussed in Korean medicine in relation to vitality, growth, stability, and the energy of the lower body. In addition, Kunlun (BL60), near the ankle, is understood as an acupoint related to the movement of the lower limbs, lower back, and spine (Lee, 2017).¹¹ The classical Korean medical text Donguibogam describes eojihaengji (語遲行遲), that is, delayed speech and delayed walking (The original passage in the Donguibogam reads: “凡小兒行遲, 齒遲, 解顱, 五軟, 鶴膝, 睛白, 多愁, 皆因稟受腎氣不足, 宜以六味地黃丸, 加鹿茸補之, 或用調元散. 《回春》”) This may be rendered as: “In children, delayed walking (行遲), delayed teething (齒遲), non-closure of the fontanelle (解顱), the five kinds of flaccidity

(五軟), crane-knee (鶴膝), whiteness of the eyes (睛白), and excessive fretfulness all arise from an innate insufficiency of kidney qi (腎氣). It is appropriate to supplement with Liuwei Dihuang Wan (六味地黃丸) with deer antler velvet added, or to use Tiaoyuan San (調元散). — Huichun (回春)”). Both are said to result from an innate insufficiency of kidney qi (腎氣). (In Korean medicine, kidney qi (腎氣) refers to the functional energy of the kidney (腎), and is understood as a concept related to the infant's growth and development, the formation of bones and teeth, lower-body strength, and the development of walking. A deficiency of kidney qi can therefore be interpreted as a weakened state of the energy that supports the infant's growth and development.) Yongquan is the pathway of this kidney (腎). In sum, seommaseomma can be interpreted as a game that, through the child's experience of pressing the sole of the foot against the ground, strengthens the energy of the lower body and helps the child find bodily balance (According to Kim et al. (2024)¹⁷, stimulation of Yongquan has been shown to stimulate the muscle spindles and nerve fibers essential to balance and bipedal locomotion, and such stimulation may enhance sensory feedback, thereby improving cognitive function and balance control.).

Burabura is a word-play in which the child alternately raises and lowers the two legs. This alternating leg movement induces movement throughout the lower limbs, including the knees, thighs, and calves. In Korean medicine, movement of the lower limbs can be interpreted in relation to spleen–stomach function, kidney function, and the circulation of qi and blood. In particular, acupoints associated with the Stomach meridian, such as Liangqiu (ST34), are distributed around the knee, and these areas may be naturally stimulated in the course of moving the legs. Burabura can therefore be seen as a game that supports the circulation of qi and blood in the lower limbs, facilitates movement of the knees and legs, and promotes whole-body relaxation and vitality.

Among neck-based word-plays is "Doridori." "Doridori" is a word-play that induces the infant to shake the head from side to side. The neck is the part connecting the head and the torso; Doridori may be involved in the early development of balance and spatial perception through stimulation of the vestibular apparatus of the inner ear during head rotation, and it induces balanced movement of the cervical spine, thereby supporting cervical alignment, and promotes the circulation of qi and blood through stimulation of the densely clustered acupoints in the posterior neck region. "Doridori" is also connected to the strength required for head control. The ability to hold up the head goes beyond simply supporting the head and is related to subsequent vocalization and language development. Infant vocalization is tied not only to the vocal organs but to movement of the body as a whole. Duda-Goławski et al. (2025)¹⁸ found that theoretical frameworks such as the Frame-then-Content model indicate that rhythmic jaw movement provides a motor scaffold

Table 2. Summary of the Medical Approach to Traditional Korean Word-Play

Movement	Word-Play	Medical Approach
Hand	<i>Joeamjoeam</i>	The repeated clenching and opening of the hand promotes fine motor development and sensory function in the hand, supporting grasping ability and motor control. In Korean medicine, this repeated motion is associated with indirect mechanical stimulation around the Laogong (PC8) acupoint at the center of the palm, and is considered significant for circulating qi and blood, relieving tension, and activating sensation.
Hand	<i>Gonjigonji</i>	Through touching the index finger to the palm and lifting it away, supports hand–eye coordination, fine finger movement, and the development of hand sensation. In Korean medicine, this can be interpreted, through stimulation of Laogong and the surrounding Pericardium meridian, as activating hand sensation and calming mind and body.
Hand	<i>Jjakjjakkung</i>	Through the motion of striking both palms together, involves hand–eye coordination, bimanual use, imitation, and repetitive hand movement, and is related to early sensorimotor and cognitive development. In Korean medicine, this can be seen as a game that stimulates the acupoints and meridians of both palms, supporting the circulation of qi and blood and bodily vitality.
Lower Body	<i>Gondugondu</i>	In the process of standing the child upright, the feet, legs, hips, and torso work together, supporting the development of lower-limb strength, balance, and postural control. This process also stimulates the muscles of the toes and the inner sole of the foot, contributing to the formation of a healthy foot arch and the prevention of flat feet. In Korean medicine, this is understood as supporting lower-body energy and bodily balance through indirect stimulation of Yongquan in the sole and Kunlun at the ankle.
Lower Body	<i>Seommaseomma</i>	Through the child’s experience of supporting the body with the soles of the feet and finding balance, supports standing, balance, lower-limb strength, and the development of postural control during the walking stage. In Korean medicine, this is interpreted, in connection with stimulation of Yongquan in the sole, as strengthening lower-body energy and forming bodily balance.
Lower Body	<i>Burabura</i>	By alternately moving the two legs, induces movement throughout the lower limbs—knees, thighs, and calves—and supports preparation for standing and walking. In Korean medicine, this carries significance for the circulation of qi and blood, whole-body relaxation, and the promotion of vitality, through stimulation of the lower-limb meridians and Liangqiu near the knee.
Neck	<i>Doridori</i>	Through the motion of shaking the head from side to side, supports vestibular stimulation, cervical alignment, and head-control ability. In Korean medicine, this motion is associated with the circulation of qi and blood through stimulation of the densely clustered acupoints in the posterior neck region, and is considered significant for relaxing the meridians around the neck and supporting circulation in the head and neck.

for early vocalization. In addition, Barlow, Lund, Estep, and Kolta (2010)¹⁹ found that the development of the face and vocal tract enables speech sound production in infants. Accordingly, the development of the ability to hold up the head and control head movement helps form the foundation for stabilizing the vocal organs and producing speech sounds.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has examined, from a medical perspective, the health-oriented significance embedded in traditional Korean infant word-plays such as joeamjoeam, gonjigonji, jjakjjakkung, gondugondu, seommaseomma, burabura, and doridori. This

word-play is not merely a play language intended to entertain the child, but is combined with physical activity that naturally moves various parts of the body, including the hands, feet, legs, and neck. Traditional Korean infant word-play can therefore be understood as an everyday health-oriented form of play in which vocalization and bodily movement occur together.

From a medical perspective, traditional Korean infant word-play is closely related to the infant’s physical development. Joeamjoeam, gonjigonji, and jjakjjakkung, through the repetitive movement of the palm and fingers, are connected to fine motor development, stimulation of hand sensation, hand–eye coordination, sensorimotor development, and early cognitive development. Gondugondu, seommaseomma, and burabura can be seen as games that induce movement of the soles and legs,

cultivating lower-limb strength, balance, the experience of upright posture, and postural control related to preparation for walking. Doridori, by inducing movement of the neck and head, can be interpreted in relation to the use of neck muscles, head-control ability, movement of the head and neck, and, further, the stabilization of the vocal organs.

From the perspective of Korean medicine as well, this word-play carries health-oriented significance. The hand-based joeamjoeam, gonjigonji, and jjakjjakkung are related to the stimulation of hand meridians, including Laogong, while the lower-body-based gondugongdu, seommaseomma, and burabura can be interpreted in relation to Yongquan, Kunlun, the acupoints around the knee, and the circulation of qi and blood in the lower limbs. Doridori, through stimulation of the areas around Dazhui and Fengfu, carries significance for the relaxation of the meridians around the neck, circulation in the head and neck, and bodily control.

In this way, traditional Korean infant word-play, through repetitive bodily movement, may contribute to the development of the infant's gross and fine motor skills, sensory stimulation, sense of balance, and postural control, while simultaneously being interpretable, from the Korean medical view of the body, in terms of the stimulation of meridians and acupoints, the circulation of qi and blood, and bodily relaxation. This shows that our ancestors placed importance, from infancy onward, on the child's healthy growth and physical development, and passed down this wish within everyday play. In particular, traditional systems of infant education such as Dandongshiphun provide cultural grounds supporting the understanding that this word-play, within our culture, has served as a way of helping children grow in body and mind.

However, the medical interpretation presented in this study represents a perspective for examining the health-related significance of traditional infant word-play, and is not intended to empirically demonstrate the medical effects of each game. Nevertheless, the fact that traditional Korean infant word-play combines physical movement, sensory stimulation, and parent-child interaction into a single form of play language is noteworthy even in contemporary early childhood education. Should future research be conducted on the health effects and educational applicability of traditional infant word-play, the value inherent in Korea's distinctive culture of early childhood education may be revealed in still more concrete terms.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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