



Elke Schubert, Rainer Strick

Toy-free Kindergarten

**A Project to Prevent Addiction
for Children and with Children**

**Aktion Jugendschutz, Landesarbeitsstelle Bayern e.V.
Fasaneriestrasse 17, D-80636 München**

Addiction study group Weilheim-Schongau

In 1981, the addiction study group constituted itself out of various institutions situated in the Bavarian district Weilheim-Schongau, such as Public Health Office, Youth Welfare Office, kindergarten facilities, schools, police, psychosocial advisory office, Herzogsägmühler homes, relatives of addicts, etc. In 1989, this study group was restructured by the institutions involved and turned into a superior body responsible for various subgroups which are designed to work actively in different areas. It is the main task of the addiction study group to coordinate the responsibilities of the subgroups and to exchange and discuss information on individual activities. The study group sees itself as an open body, that is, any and all institutions and persons interested in this kind of work are welcome to participate; it does not have a budget of its own, but instead it is the responsibility of the subgroups to finance projects and other programmes (out of public funds, by way of finding sponsors, etc.). The power of management rests with the Health Office Weilheim, with the study group convening usually three times a year.

To date, following subgroups have been established: kindergarten sector, schools, youth and leisure time, corporate enterprises, and self-help groups. These groups aim at working out concepts for addiction prevention in their individual field of responsibility and they design, carry out and accompany projects, are responsible for public relations and educate multipliers.

Aktion Jugendschutz, Landesarbeitsstelle Bayern e.V. (Bavarian Initiative for the Protection of Adolescents)

The *Aktion Jugendschutz, Landesarbeitsstelle Bayern e.V.*, is a free association of unions, institutions, and public figures representing the interests of children and adolescents. Apart from publishing a periodical called *proJugend*, the Aktion Jugendschutz offers information and work materials, counsel and continuing education for multipliers at schools, youth welfare work services in the context of addiction prevention, prevention of violence as well as juvenile media protection/media pedagogics. Aktion Jugendschutz is sponsored with funds from the Bavarian State Ministry for Employment and Social Order, Family, Women, and Health.

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1. Preface

Addiction prevention has been a major topic in the work of the Aktion Jugendschutz, Landesarbeitsstelle Bayern e.V., for many years. Meanwhile, in the area of addiction prevention, the notion has gained ground to start preventive measures as early as possible and go on with them continuously. In 1992, the *Institut für Therapieforschung* (IFT; Institute for Therapeutic Research) worked out an expertise for primary prevention of substances' abuse commissioned by the *Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung* (BzgA; Federal Office for Health Information). Most of the studies reviewed clearly showed positive results as to prophylactic measures based on the promotion of life skills with respect to preventing or postponing the onset of consumption and long-term abusive behaviour. Since life skills such as strengthening a person's communicative capacities or self-confidence need to be promoted from early childhood on, it goes without saying that addiction prevention has to commence at a very early age. Apart from kindergarten and school facilities, the family remains one of the first and, for many years, most important areas to begin unfolding preventive measures.

The Aktion Jugendschutz decided to publish a documentation dealing with a project called „Toy-free kindergarten“ because we consider it to be a remarkable and innovative one in the realm of addiction prevention. It addresses both children as well as parents and educators. We are particularly thankful to the educators of the municipal kindergarten at Penzberg who aided in bringing this project into shape and pioneered in putting it to practice. We hope that this brochure helps to further spread the idea so that the project is also realized in other regions.

Elisabeth Seifert
Administrative Official for Addiction Prevention

2. Addiction prevention at kindergarten facilities

During the past few years the basic understanding concerning primary measures against addiction has eventually changed in such a way that now priority is given to fostering people's health instead of preventing addiction-related problems or diseases. This is what we call prevention on a drug-unspecific basis. Moreover, it has become commonplace that „health“ cannot be reduced to simply mean nonpresence of disease, but has to be defined in a much more concise way. In its Ottawa Charter, the WHO thus explicitly includes the whole environmental milieu in order to define prevention and health care measures: *„To reach a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, an individual or group must be able to identify and to realize aspirations, to satisfy needs, and to change or cope with the environment. [...] Health promotion supports personal and social development through providing information, education for health and enhancing life skills.“* If we take a look at the objectives underlying this kind of health promotion understanding, objectives which may be summarized under the term promotion of life skills, it becomes obvious that this understanding can neither be limited to people who have to cope with addiction problems, nor is it possible to apply it only to those who have reached the age of adults or adolescents. For the above-mentioned objectives should, in the same vein, be already part of early childhood.

If, however, children are to be patronized in such a way that they are able to realize their wishes and hopes as well as improve their social competences and life skills, we also have to ask ourselves what, in today's childhood, may infringe upon these or which deficits the person suffers from in this area and what he or she has, with respect to earliest childhood, never been able to learn – provided we want to proceed from an adult addict.

Before dealing with topics such as kindergarten/primary addiction prevention, let us first trace back the development of an adult alcoholic to his childhood at kindergarten. For an alcoholic, trying during withdrawal treatment to abstain from drinking without experiencing a relapse, has to face an essential and difficult task, namely to uncover and work on potential causes which might be the reason for his addiction.

In most cases, the addict has to go back into childhood in order to realize patterns of behaviour which can be observed at different occasions over and over again: inadequate self-confidence; lack of setting boundaries; abnormal need of harmony; fear of confrontation; inadequate capacity to criticise oneself and others; fear of loss of love; smoothing over of unpleasant situations by showing more often than not aggression/retreat behaviour; and fear of not being able to do, endure, or venture upon something. A feeling of weak life skills may, in the beginning, easily give rise to diffuse fear of life which could later turn into a concrete one. This results in escapes which often lead towards dependence or addiction. When we take alcoholism as an example, continuous drinking not only results in self-alienation and faulty self-assessment, but also in feelings of shame and guilt including all typical social consequences. Often it is only withdrawal treatment which consciously confronts the addict with the causes of his problems. Therapeutic treatment aims at enabling the person to cope with life's demands freed from addictive behaviour, maintaining a „sober and free mind“, i.e. without shifting towards another addiction. To do this it is absolutely necessary to deal with one's own self as well as with the social environment as these are interrelated. And, as the social anamnesis of alcoholics usually shows, this is something that in most cases was not patterned and learned in early childhood. We may assume that a person is less susceptible for any kind of addiction the higher her/his competence for integrating herself/himself into her/his own life (i.e., the greater the ability to reach, in accordance with her/his age, a mental, physical, and social balance).

While addict behaviour is primarily attributed to adults, beginnings of such behaviour may be found in any age group. Even adolescents can show tendencies to elude certain situations in life, e.g. by taking to drugs. In a world showing on the one side rapid progress in

technology/research, abundance, and egocentricity and on the other war, poverty, and lack of perspective, an adolescent often finds herself/himself in a personal life situation in which emotional, social, and financial issues frequently stand next to each other in an imbalanced way. In a society accepting success and having as measure for a meaningful life, the development of an individual personality which also takes into account inner values and competences as objectives in life will inevitably be neglected.

Many addict adults doing therapy where they face their course of life feel a desire for grasping their normal selves again, not to see and hear anything, to simply live and know who they are and what they are capable (and incapable) of, even if only for some time, and, being freed from the burden of their addiction, they long for more scope and time at their discretion. From these motives we may conclude that there is a greater chance to develop the required life skills depending on how early confidence-building experiences could be made helping to stabilize a person. This clearly means that from earliest childhood on such life skills must be fostered. Thus, a child needs confrontation with adults, other children, the environment, and with itself. With the child being accompanied by adults what figures most is confidence, but also that children, when granted enough time and space, know how to use these to develop social skills. But what they need in this context is their own rhythm and time, without adults immediately interfering and deciding at a time. By way of honest confirmation, appreciation, support, and company through adults, the skills of a small child still present are to be developed and fostered with priority and also according to the WHO guidelines.

Childhood in our society more often than not is determined by a lack of time really at the child's discretion and by permanent confrontation with products offered by consumer goods industries. As far as their economic importance is concerned, children never ever had such a spending power at their disposal. However, in contrast to this development towards an economic factor, a restriction of scope for children can be observed: streets, cars, traffic hazards, environmental pollution (especially in conurbations), and a meritocracy oriented more and more at profit and success – all these factors diminish private areas and caring consideration for children. Other elements impeding the normal development of children are increasing lack of social safety owing to an ever-increasing disintegration of family structures with no alternatives being offered, ousting and limitation of eventful possibilities for children to experience the world and their replacement by artificial second-hand realities. Also gaining in prevalence is a tendency in children to quickly getting rid of daily problems and frustrations by taking to vicarious forms of satisfaction, a trend which may be viewed as initial „practicing“ of addiction behaviour, especially so when this kind of conduct becomes the most natural thing in the world. And as for adults, aren't they only too willing to ward off dissatisfied children by offering them some kind of „consolation“?

To prevent misunderstandings: It is not our intention to try to remedy these „symptoms“ in our society by patronizing some kind of asceticism. We would rather ask how playing has changed and whether there might be a connection between addiction and the ousting of children's needs owing to above-mentioned factors. It is an essential need of children to play, and in doing so, they take possession of the world and develop their personal skills. However, as soon as playing is more and more influenced by finished products predetermining the game, while children's needs and their imaginative capacities play a subordinate role, it might be important to provide enough scope for children to be able to „grasp their normal selves again“ in order to make possible what was described at the beginning as promotion of life skills. While it is self-evident that many children insist upon this scope, preventive measures by intent not only address a particular group of endangered individuals in a narrower sense, but all (children) so that even those may be reached who were deprived of the possibility to develop above-mentioned skills.

In this context, Gisela Eschenbach writes in the 9/92 edition of a periodical called *Kita* that we may assume „that every individual runs the risk of becoming an addict, with the causes fostering addiction possessing cumulative effects in the course of the socialisation process. In each individual case these are to be found within a framework of conditions consisting of various factors which, in focussed form, point to the fact that to violate or frustrate a child’s needs turns into an influence fostering addiction, since it makes vicarious satisfactions essential (for survival). [...] Thus, it is the task of cause-oriented prevention to act as prophylactic by offering specific measures against undesirable developments. [...] In this process (unconscious) expectations towards the child are of enormous importance as well as the question what opportunity it has to test and live out own experiences.“

3. The project „Toy-free kindergarten“

3.1 History, planning, and organization

Following the foundation of the study group „kindergarten“ as subgroup of the addiction study group and after a few changes in the staff, it consisted of following active members: One male or female representative of the Bavarian Public Health Office and the District Youth Welfare Office, three female educators working in a kindergarten, as well as a female representative of the Aktion Jugendschutz Bayern. A few other facilities were interested in cooperating at a later time.

The study group met or meets every 3 to 4 weeks, regularly presenting its findings in the addiction study group. The project itself had emerged from the notion to take a closer look at the children’s consumer habits to find an approach how to do addiction prevention work with children. For obvious reasons, one of the most popular consumer articles of children, namely toys, were the best „object“ to begin with. In view of the wealth of offerings, the consumer orientation at kindergarten facilities as well as at home, the observable boredom despite or because of superabundance, the lack of perseverance, and quick frustration, the project aims at recreating scope for playing as well as fantasy and creativity and thus self-affirmation and self-assurance.

During the many work sessions preceding the project, following frame-work conditions and structures developed:

- With the kindergarten comprising a total of 5 groups, any and all toys shall be removed from 2 groups over a period of 3 months.
- Regular practical advice is designed to support educators.
- The whole project shall be accompanied by scientific research and evaluation, with the results to be summarized in a documentation.
- The educators shall write down their observations in structured and unstructured listing schemes.
- Parents and grandparents are to be part of the project course.
- The plan is to organize 3 parent-educator meetings during the project in order to familiarize the parents with the concept of addiction prevention and to learn about the children’s reactions outside the kindergarten.
- Grandparents shall be invited together with their grandchildren and tell about their own childhood.
- Include parents even further into project by using questionnaires.
- Produce a video documentation of this project.

3.2. Toy-free kindergarten – four years later

The project „toy-free kindergarten“ has been going on now for 4 years. Therefore we would like to show how the work dealing with the project has changed before we talk about the project itself. In the municipal kindergarten Penzberg where three toy-free months have become a permanent institution and in other facilities as well, the first long-term effects may be studied which indicate that the positive effects are finding stable ground in the children. A scientific study on this topic is also available by now (see Further reading).

Subsequent to the publication of our brochure called „*Spielzeugfreier Kindergarten*“ in November 1993, we were surprised by the lively response we received, partly also due to various articles published in professional magazines. This issue represents the 7th German edition, with 23,000 copies having been mailed meanwhile and a constant demand for new copies. We have a waiting list for people asking us to give lectures which in most cases we cannot satisfy due to the fact that we work full-time (we were, however, able to offer some multiplier trainings).

Despite this kind of positive response, and although we feel encouraged to continue to look for unconventional approaches to addiction prevention, we also came across some questions and reflections: Do we, in our consumption society, take for granted that we are glutted with consumer articles to such an extent that it comes as a sensation when this situation is changed for a (limited) period of time by providing time and space for children „to grasp their normal selves again“? Do we have to offer so little to children that we have to compensate for this lack more and more by purchasable goods? Are factors such as rush, the search for permanent kicks, for the sensational in life or the pressure to always be required to function effectively representing an essential part even in small children’s lives, given the fact that it seems to be quite unusual to take one’s time, to do nothing, to allow for „leisure“ and boredom?

And it is not a new idea either that our consumer and growth-oriented society with its permanent addiction for more consumption, for the most terrific, spectacular, and latest thrill, might lead into a dead end by not only destroying our environment but mankind itself. Why, then, this big surprise, once conclusions are drawn and realized in a practical context with children? After all, there are signals coming from various walks of life showing that there is enhanced reflection concerning this subject such as a recent article in the economics section (!) of a Swiss newspaper containing following statement: „*We realize that our affluent society not only pollutes the environment, but also contributes to psychological disorders in many people. For some, consumption has become an end in itself, drug addiction is consumption craze in its extremest form.*“ (Tagesanzeiger, Zurich, July 25, 1994) It goes without saying that we had to deal with occasional protest and critical opinions, when, e.g., the interrelationship of the project with preventive goals was ignored or our approach considered as provocative. Maybe because children are not always wanted to have willpower of their own and showing it, too.

We learnt from the responses and letters we received that many institutions in other districts, cities, and federal states of Germany consider taking up our preventive approach or have carried it out already. It is also clear that the desired local professional support and guidance for the project is often missing. Owing to this deficit, guidelines developed by us describing the realization of the project as well as a video documentation are available by contacting Aktion Jugendschutz Bayern.

The cooperation with various other kindergarten facilities as well as reports and feedback we received provided essential clues for the practical realization of the project.

As a general rule, the team should be willing to painstakingly prepare for the project and really deal with it. This implies to take one's time and integrate the project into one's own pedagogic approach. Apart from that controversial points of view in the team need to be accepted. Attendance by an external specialist is important, particularly so when carrying out the project for the first time. As far as cooperation with parents is concerned, it is decisive to inform parents from the very beginning and elucidate the underlying pedagogic concept. Preparatory considerations should also take into account strong public effects as well as the corresponding echo in the media.

Four years of experience also leave their marks on conceptual structures. It became evident that in a kindergarten integrating the project into its regular course of the year, the number of parent-educator meetings can be reduced because many parents received detailed information in earlier years so that the concept of prevention is „well-grounded“ in the parents' minds by way of the effects of publicity – a discovery we are very happy about! Discussions about the project during parent-educator meetings were characterized by a more relaxed and less controversial atmosphere. Due to a parents' initiative the Penzberg kindergarten introduced an interesting modification: Since the issue consumption gains special importance before Christmas, the project is carried out during this period.

However, despite the project's success and its propagation we should not expect pedagogic miracles. It is an approach for addiction prevention which may help children to strengthen their personalities, get to know their strengths and weaknesses and live with them. It does, however, not help to solve all their problems. Moreover, this approach should not prohibit us from continuing to look for other solutions how to shape the social environment of children so that they, showing such a variety of personalities, are able to realize their opportunities and needs. Above all, however, it is necessary to invest more fantasy in other areas such as in schools and find out how to get closer to these objectives, i.e., to continue finding more „mosaic pieces“ for (addiction) prevention.

3.3 Course of a „toy-free day“

In essence, the whole project was carried out as described under the principles of section 3.1. We would like to point out once again that **any and all** toys had been removed from the play room, i.e., also materials such as crayons, paper, scissors, tools, etc. were no longer available. Only the furniture was left in the room. The children had been informed about this toy-free period in detailed conversations. While some groups put their toys into an adjacent room together with their educators, others found their rooms empty at the beginning of the project. At the children's request and after mutual consent, required materials and tools could be used, but no toys.

When describing the project we would prefer not to give concrete outlines of events and playing at kindergarten facilities so as not to „provide“ ideas which then could be imitated or reproduced. Playing instructions or the like would both contradict the situational approach which has been adopted by this kindergarten as well as the concept of the project designed to foster creativity, imagination, and self-confidence of the children involved.

Nevertheless we would like to briefly sketch a day during the project to make the experiences gained more transparent. As usual the children came to kindergarten between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. With only a few children of the group being present, conversations on recent events, also with educators, were very popular. With more and more children arriving, the desire for activities and playing became stronger. Often, concrete ideas for playing were born from

„unsystematic“ activities of the children. These included both role plays and working with materials or even explicit „construction projects“. For example, in the facility’s garden a wigwam was built. Jointly, the children thought about what was necessary for this project and talked to the educators which could be of assistance in organizing the materials. Due to the kindergarten’s location there was no problem in making an excursion to the woods where branches could be collected. Inspired by the genuineness of their idea, the children even managed to transport big and heavy branches back to the kindergarten. Then it took several days for the wigwam to be completed, with boys and girls likewise participating in the building activities. The wigwam was starting point for other playing ideas, e.g., the children made Indian clothes from leather remnants, and from these remnants originated a mobile. Help from the educators was only wanted for organizing materials and organizing and handling of tools, when it came to realizing new ideas. But some educators did indeed have problems not to interfere with the playing by making suggestions themselves or to „rationalize“ what they considered to be „awkward“ proceeding on the children’s part.

3.4 Educators’ observations, reflections, and questions

The educators did additional work during the project by providing structured and unstructured listing schemes, minutes, and reflections on their own behaviour. For example, they described the children’s conduct when on their own and together as well as the way in which they handled the new situation. Also, conversations with parents and grandparents were evaluated. Thus it is possible to document course, atmosphere, pros and cons as well as future perspectives of the project.

The educators observed the following: Before the project was initiated, the daily activities were clearly characterized by a more hectic atmosphere, more disagreement, and more romping around, less togetherness and more competition amongst the children. What could still be observed was the so-called „fidgety Monday“, with the children letting off steam, however, in a more specific manner (e.g., pillow fights). For breakfast, the small round of 2-3 children had grown to a group of 10-15; they came together to eat, talk, watch, and to just being there. Thus the meal had developed into an important meeting place without interference on the educators’ part. Apart from that conversations and relaxing in the snuggling corner had become very popular, with very few unisex groups of boys and girls being formed. Everyone seemed to determine her/his own rhythm: the shy ones stood aside even a little longer than usual (hitherto many had hidden behind their toys), then came to join the group, or were fetched by the others to participate in playing. Ideas for kindergarten-made handicrafts emerged, were picked up by others, completed, and, if necessary, the children consulted their educators. Things could happen slowly and considerately as there was enough time and space for imagination and creativity. What could hardly be observed any more was the duress caused by lack of time and achievement-orientation, factors which had been so prevalent during playing before the project. The children were found to be more creative, well-balanced, and self-confident with no toys to play with. They learnt how to hold one’s own and to trust their own capacities.

Their conduct showed that they, due to enhanced self-confidence, were able to act independently and to realize their boundaries.

As far as manners with their peers were concerned, this meant that the children learnt how to accept and respect themselves and other children, to say „yes“ and „no“, as well as to realize their own skills and those of others and use them jointly.

During the project playing together, joint conversations, and joint realization of ideas took up the most space. Questions like „What do we need to build a tent, ... where do we get timber from, ... I am sad because my friend is sick, ... what will happen if we do not have toys

anymore, ... what do you miss, ... what did you like best, ... would you like to play with toys again ...?“ are just some of the statements. Other questions were „Do we really need this or that, ... what could we use instead?“

When playing outside, nature had become the most important „playmate“. At home, also parents profited as they were inspired by their children „to take a closer look“.

Cooperation with parents was intensified by holding three parent-educator meetings. The parents were able to take on and transfer the idea of addiction prevention at the kindergarten, and they were self-critical about their own addictive behaviour. They strengthened confidence in their children and in their creativity and skills. Only a few parents were afraid that preparation for school was not sufficient enough and wanted their children to receive more achievement-oriented instruction and support by their educators.

A new element was to include the grandparents who were thus able to remember their own childhood and plays to hand on to their grandchildren. This meant enrichment for both sides. How did the educators fare during the project? When planning and starting the project, they were anxious about not being able to endure the children's, parents', and also their own boredom and frustration. They felt insecure about how to carry out the project and were afraid that it might be difficult to cope with more work (no one knew how much more) and with the challenge to do something new without being able to draw from some kind of experience gained before.

Since addiction prevention is rarely addressed in a kindergarten, the educators first had to deal with concepts and objectives of prevention and constantly reflect upon these during the course of the project. Owing to the unfamiliar situation they were under enhanced duress „to justify themselves“, while at the same time they were much more prepared to talk to colleagues and parents. However, it was a gratifying and instructive experience to feel joy about the project, to be involved and to reflect and deal with one's own self, with the children and parents – an experience that became more and more pronounced during the project.

„Before the project started, we often felt under pressure to fulfill the children's needs and to make suggestions, give advice, etc.; meanwhile we are also learning from the children, namely to wait and see, think something over, and let things happen. This also means not to put oneself under constant pressure to be permanently active and busy, but to realize how important it is to feel to do nothing, experience 'boredom' and contemplation.“ „Apart from that we realized that most children are very well able to endure frustration without covering these up with consumer articles (i.e. practice addictive behaviour) offered by adults because we, the grown-ups, might have problems ourselves in dealing with frustrations of this kind.“

Observing the children

„... in the beginning and up to about four weeks after the project had started, the children were satisfied with the materials at hand. They used blankets, chairs, and tables to build camps and caves in which they used to sit and talk to each other. In the course of time the caves developed into houses (table) which grew to become buildings with a top balcony. For this they used empty crates, sometimes one atop the other, which were arranged on the tables to form a square. In the doll's corner they continued to play family, jungle book, and vampires. Before long, the role-playing became more „sophisticated“ and imaginative. For example, five children built a mill in the construction corner which had been empty hitherto. It was a complicated, but thought-out structure. The children used chairs, empty crates, drawers, and, for grain and flour, blankets and fabrics in the matching colour. After the holidays the pre-school children (three boys and a girl) felt annoyed and not being challenged enough. After a conversation they came up with the idea to make the desired elements themselves. The next day, they brought along pieces of wood! A saw was at hand in the kindergarten. Even 20 days after they started, they're still enjoying the project. The finished

elements are thoroughly kept in a box and will be used for playing as soon as the work is completed. W., up to that time a shy, overly adapted child, has started to thrive since then. Also at home he „worked“ a lot using pieces of wood and tools. He brought along a saw and clamp from home. Apart from that he was able to explain to the others how to use the tools. Ever since, W. has completely changed: he is radiant with happiness every now and then and expresses his opinion in a friendly but determined manner. Remark: While in the beginning only three boys sawed the elements, after some two weeks also four or five-year-olds joined in, both boys and girls, to greatly enjoy this activity.“

„In the first three weeks we sat with the children every day and talked to them about the day, gathered suggestions, and they decided finally to simply „go out“. After that period one child wanted to play outside, and they decided unanimously to do „bogy man“. To the present day they are organizing this play themselves.“

When asked how they liked this experience, they responded, „fine“, ... the room is not so cramped any more, ... less things to tidy up, ... more space to play, ... can play better. One child said it was a pity that no dishes were available any more; another said that these were superfluous since sufficient other things were available (it used the small drawers from the dolls' corner as plates and cups and elaborately folded cloths to napkins).

It is a remarkable fact that children who came to kindergarten only reluctantly enjoy coming much more since the „project without toys“ started. Using tables and chairs, they build some kind of „enclosure“ in which they just sit wearing a satisfied look on their face. During a conversation at the end of the project except for five children all the others preferred not to use toys any more, „Much more fun.“

Observing one's own (educators') behaviour

„... we realized ourselves what it means when it is boring and bear up with the situation without hiding behind bureaucratic activities, handicrafts, preparations etc. ... we were there at the children's disposal, only for them, and they did not need us! ... they asked us to be their guests, came to us for snuggling up or to simply 'chat' a little bit ... while we could not see a performance any more, we realized that the children enthusiastically got involved with the new situation ... Meanwhile we had to face the fact that the children absolutely need scope to play so as to realize their own ideas ... we think that as soon as they can live out their drive to play, their thirst for knowledge also gets its proper place. What we found was that this phase was a nice one full of new experiences which we would not want to miss. And we are somewhat proud of ourselves having stuck up to the few resistant parents, and we would like to thank those who appreciated our efforts.

Recurrent educators' question, „How do I deal with the children during the project?“

It is advantageous for educators involved in this project to be also practically familiar with the situational approach in the kindergarten. This approach makes it easier to deal with the „toy-free phase“ during which the situation is primarily determined and played by the children. This means for educators to also explore and reflect the internal motivation, feelings and thoughts of the children, apart from their individual behaviour and development, their way of expressing their wishes as well their actions. Following questions might come up:

What does the child want to express with its behaviour?
What psychological mechanisms cause this behaviour?
How are these mechanisms working?

Do these enable the child to reach its objectives?
If not, what alternatives in behaviour does the child have?
How can I support these or, if need be, work these out?

To answer these questions, a kind of detachment connected with confidence in the child is required as well as a trusting reach out towards the child so as to offer a particular individual help for it to be able „to grasp its own self“. For further clarification the eight principles formulated by the play therapist AXLINE might be adapted to the project situation. The term therapist is replaced by the term educator, with the meaning of the relationship to the child, however, being fully applicable.

The eight principles:

The educators

.. shall enter into a warm and friendly relationship with the child resulting as quickly as possible in a good contact

.. accept the child totally as it is

.. build their relationship upon an atmosphere of letting the child have its way so that it feels free and easy to express any and all feelings

.. are attentive with respect to the feelings the child wants to express. They try to realize them and to reflect them upon the child in such a way that it may gain insight into its behaviour

.. respect the skills of the child to cope independently with its problems as soon as it is given the opportunity to do so. The responsibility to take a choice on its personal behaviour as well as the onset of internal changes are the child's business

.. do not attempt to influence actions or conversations of the child. The child leads the way, the educators follow.

In essence, the last two principles, seen in the project's context:

The educators

.. do not try to speed up the play situation. It is a path in these three months without toys which has to be followed slowly, step by step.

Boundaries are only set whenever they are required in order to base the play in the world of reality and to make clear to the child that it also has some kind of responsibility for the relationship existing between the other children, the educators, and for all materials in the realm of the kindergarten and its environment.

This „child-centred“ attitude, which is quite different from a result and achievement-oriented one as it cannot be measured, has to be part of the evaluation when the educators are reflecting the day. However, the evaluations show that changes as to roles, playing together, idiosyncracies, etc., become visible.

It is in this observant situation, which requires educators to keep themselves in the background (a task difficult to fulfill at times) – that is by way of an accompanying, wait-and-see attitude of the adults –, that the child is given a chance to experience its sense of time, its

courage and hesitation and to make use of these according to its motivation. As soon as a desire for a specific object occurs, such as for a pair of scissors (which before the project started could simply be taken because it was there), the object now turns into a commodity for scrutinization: what for? What could be used or done instead etc.? Other children are included in the process. In this case, a child had the idea to tear the paper, and the other one accepted the notion. This is a small example how a „problem“ can be dealt with and how solutions can be found in a playful manner. Often educators come across questions such as „Shall I set boundaries or not? What to do with the shy ones? When do I help? Do I immediately interfere with aggressive children?“ By keeping themselves in the background in a responsible manner, it has become obvious for educators that a shift of rules and roles occurs, provided they do not interfere too early. That is to say almost any child finds its place according to its life rhythm. If this does not happen, the educators' presence and their verbalisation of the child's situation is very helpful. Thus, being an „outsider“ could be experienced as something pleasant by a child: „it is nice to simply watch“, or as painful: „sometimes the others are quite boisterous, so that I am afraid to play with them“, etc. Very important for children and educators are the joint conversations which should take place in a relaxed atmosphere, for example in the snuggling corner, even if these are predetermined by the educators. This a place for gathering experiences, for talking about pleasant and upsetting events, which is a good and „stress-relieving“ contribution to the daily activities at the kindergarten.

Reference:

Kreuzer, Karl-Josef (ed.): Spielpädagogik, 4, Schwann Handbuch

3.5 Parent-educator meetings

Prior to the first parent-educator meeting, parents received information via mail, notice board, and orally.

First parent- educator meeting before project started:

- A) Familiarization with work group of our addiction study group (staff and its background as well as its intention),
- B) Information as to underlying concept of toy-free kindergarten (contents, duration, course, and objectives),
- C) Sensitization for psychological, mental, and physical development of kindergarten children with respect to their individual age as well as influences exerted upon them by their individual social environment, and
- D) Discussion.

Evaluation: It became obvious that the parents were open-minded and understanding as far as A and C were concerned, while B was met with scepticism and curiosity and thought to be difficult to imagine for the time being. Due to the hypothetical approach and the fact that this project could not be compared with similar programmes of this kind carried out at other kindergarten facilities, questions arose which could not be answered by the initiators in a satisfying way either. Initial concerns of parents about possible reactions of the children such as aversion, ... not to want to go to kindergarten anymore, ... quarreling at home, ... frustration owing to lack of toys, ... boredom, ... were defused by other parents suggesting „Let's just wait and see ... let's rely upon our children...!“

It was a gratifying and new experience for the educators to be offered assistance by some parents in case of unforeseen problems.

Second parent-educator meeting

Presentation of the film *Spielen anderswo* (available from Katholische Medienzentrale Bamberg, phone: 0951/59507) with comparison of film contents and current concept. Discussion between parents and educators of experiences gained to date as well as effects on children and families. Announcement and discussion of forthcoming meeting „grandparents/grandchildren“ at kindergarten.

Evaluation: Parents show visible open-mindedness towards each other and towards educators. Confidence in children and acceptance of project had decisively risen. Objectives of the notion of prevention at kindergarten were also discussed outside, that is, with friends and other interested persons, and reflections were made on how to introduce this notion into the kindergarten.

Third parent-educator meeting

Performance of video on kindergarten children during the course of the project. Discussion on questionnaires answered by parents.

During parent-educator meetings concerning similar projects it turned out that there were (few) parents who, due to the unfamiliar situation for their children, felt so insecure that it was important for them to be offered advice and help by us or the educators. What had triggered the problems for these parents was that due to the new situation the „difficulties“ the children had with groups became even more visible, since these had been present anyway, but were „lurking“ behind toys. Now, a position of outsidership clearly showed in their children which was hidden before the project had started, causing trouble for the parents: As soon as a child dissociated from the group using a toy, this was not defined as outsidership, but being outside the group activities without toys caused considerable stress especially as far as the parents of such children were concerned. However, the educators reported the children to have less difficulties themselves with this kind of role and the associated frustration tolerance than their parents did and suggested to grant enough time for the children to integrate themselves into the group activities. Some parents also expressed their concerns whether this was actually a greater problem with the adults who have a tendency to interfere immediately without providing enough time for the children to define and resolve their situation themselves. Another problem for parents might be that children during the project develop their own will to a greater extent and try to have it their own way (a tendency which is in fact in harmony with addiction prevention, but perhaps not so desirable for those parents who consider this kind of behaviour to be rather aggressive). In this context it was important to offer help and counsel for those parents who felt insecure owing to the situation.

3.6 Evaluation of questionnaires for parents

Question 1:

What was your reaction when you first heard about our project „toy-free kindergarten“?

Answers:

Most parents were surprised or even astounded to learn that a subject like addiction prevention was tackled in a kindergarten and that there were plans for such an institution to do without prefabricated toys. Reactions ranged from scepticism and disapproval to curiosity, interest, and enthusiasm.

Quotations:

„My first reaction was the assumption, well, my child won't be keen on going there anymore, as she will be bored without toys.“ „Incredulousness that the project can be carried out in that form without children and educators losing fun in kindergarten.“

Question 2:

How did you find the information presented about the project?

Answers:

Most parents commended the detailed information on the project („clear“, „convincing“, ...) and felt their own considerations to be confirmed while they wanted the aspects of addiction prevention to be further emphasized.

Quotation:

„The level of information was good and interesting, but subsequent to this element of surprise many questions do not come to one's mind before one quietly sits and ponders.“

Question 3:

Did you talk at home, with your children, etc.?

Answers:

In almost all families there were discussions about the project or the absence of toys (31 of 35 answers positive).

Quotations:

„F. is now telling us much more about the kindergarten than before („We are playing so nicely with each other“ ...).“ „Pretty soon there won't be any toys left, what are you going to do then?“
Answer: „Playing with the other children!“ „My child showed no doubts or objections at all!“

Question 4a:

Do you think that this toy-free period in the kindergarten had effects on your children when playing and being active at home?

Answers:

21 parents answered „yes“, 12 „no“, and 2 had no answer.

Quotations:

„Yes, for example, I had to bring back empty boxes from shopping so that he could make something out of them at home (...). I had to keep anything that looked usable, e.g. cardboard rolls, yogurt cups etc.; he always took care that I did not throw away anything he might be able to use.“ „Also at home, we almost do not use toys any more.“ „I have not heard my daughter using the word 'boring' for quite a long time.“ „... perceives the world much more consciously, pays attention to the 'small' things, is more creative.“ „T., after every so-called 'toy-day', used to tell us about the fabulous toys the others had and that he also wanted these very badly. This is no longer so.“ „... what has become much more important is the contact with our neighbours' children, more often role-playing.“ „Capacity to concentrate has risen, going to bed has become easier ...“

Question 4b:

Effects in the attitude towards brothers and sisters, playmates?

Answers:

16 parents: yes. 12 parents: no. No answer: 2 parents

Quotations:

„Friends are more important than toys.“ „Contact with the other sex has become simpler, prior to the project they used to play almost exclusively with playmates of the same sex, now this is not so important.“ „... is making me really satisfied to see my children enjoying a beautiful flower or a particularly colourful butterfly.“ „No more quarrels because of ‘my’ toys and ‘yours’.“ „Also the youngest children are allowed to join the playing. Now it is possible for four or six children to play, without quarreling.“

Question 5:

What do you want for the future of your children?

Quotations:

„I want my child to receive mental stimulation from this project so that later on, at times of boredom, it does not have to take to vicarious forms of satisfaction.“ „That it is able to have its own way, its own opinions, and that it doesn’t take to drugs, etc.“ „More handicrafting at the kindergarten, more music. Prepare kindergarten children for school.“ „... more locations where children simply can help themselves.“ „Children are allowed to be as they are and will also do what they want to do without being forced into some kind of programmes.“ „I want a self-confident child which is able to cope with the problems it has to face. I want it to be in a position to set goals for itself.“

Question 6:

Did the project encourage you in your personal life to deal with this kind of topic?

Answers:

30 parents: yes. 3 parents: no. No answer: 2 parents.

Quotations:

„Yes, in particular with my elder son whom I tended to offer something as soon as I realized him to show even the slightest signs of dissatisfaction. It is a great relief to me to tell myself again and again that he has to learn to deal with his frustrations and that as his mother I am not responsible to take away this frustration from him so that he can develop in a positive and cheerful manner (which did not work anyway).“ „I want to try to tell my children that one does not have to have everything all the time.“ „There was a lot of discussion amongst mothers whether most of the toys should be removed also at home (together with the children!).“ „Oh yes, very much so! We talked to grandparents and parents about that. And everybody had some story to tell about his youth, about the games they used to play 60 or 70 years ago. (...) Our children were all ears.“ „We talked about it with our friends and acquaintances.“ „Yes, I thought about my own ‘intense inclinations’ (as yet far from being signs for addictedness). (...) I try to convey to my children that personal creativity and imagination makes us happy and content and that we do not need everything we see around us and then want to possess.“ „... a more critical attitude toward making presents ...“ „Yes, since the project can easily be transposed to the world of adults.“

Question 7:

What else comes to your mind when you think about the project?

Answer:

28 parents wanted the project to continue also in the next year or that in general the number of toys at the kindergarten be greatly reduced. Most answers express gratitude and admiration for the kindergarten's staff involvement and courage. Parents also mentioned, however, occasional problems children had in this unfamiliar situation.

Quotations:

„For my daughter kindergarten means to enjoy the pleasures of playing with other children and toys. The abrupt absence of toys made her furious, sometimes also sad and downcast.“ „... I think that something like this should happen more often; all children should be allowed to experience that.“ „It helped me to cope with the ‘small addictions’ of the children at home.“ „For me, this is a very positive project, and I would like to see such active educators also in the future.“ „(...) For me it was terrific to see that a kindergarten which (...) was understaffed anyway took on even greater burden. Hats off to this achievement!“ „At the beginning of the project I had quite a few doubts that my daughter would want to continue to visit the kindergarten, at least I expected endless discussions with her. Now I am enthused about the fact that she is happy to go there. It is rare for her to come along and say ‘kindergarten is boring’. Nowadays, in contrast to the time before the project, she talks about what they did in kindergarten.“

„I would appreciate if this toy-free period was part of every kindergarten-year.“ „I think there are only good toys at the kindergarten from which the children learn, also for later times, for school. You take away a pair of scissors from the child, and it tears the things apart instead of cutting them. Then, at school they need to know how to handle them, otherwise they get bad marks.“ „I noticed that many parents and grandparents who suffered from a lack of toys (post-war period) tend to shower their children with toys.“ „My daughter suggested to throw away her toys as she would not have to put them away anymore!!“

4. Outlook

In unison, children, parents, grandparents, educators and the Youth Welfare Office representative as well as the Public Health Office member were enthusiastic about the project's success. To venture into the realization of a programme that has no direct precedent, a new kind of confidence between all parties involved, and the knowledge that „having nothing can mean quite a lot“ made everybody optimistic.

We felt encouraged to carry out similar projects also in the future and in other kindergarten facilities or to include elements of the project in day-to-day kindergarten activities. Workers at the Youth Welfare Office and Public Health Office are prepared to take into account and work on the parents' wish of familiarizing also primary schools with the notion of addiction prevention in addition to their usual approach.

5. Further Reading

referring to toy-free kindergarten:

Leitfaden zum „Spielzeugfreien Kindergarten“

Authors: Elke Schubert, Rainer Strick

Ed.: Aktion Jugendschutz, Landesarbeitsstelle Bayern e.V.

20 pages, Munich 1994, DM 1.30 plus postage

Contains information how to carry out this project, samples for parent letters and evaluation forms.

To order, write to: Aktion Jugendschutz, Landesarbeitsstelle Bayern e.V., Fasaneriestr.17, D-80636 München; Order number: 12021

Der „Spielzeugfreie Kindergarten“ . Ein Beitrag zur Lebenskompetenzförderung bei Kindern? Begleitstudie zur Suchtprävention im Kindergarten

Author: Anna Winner

Ed.: Aktion Jugendschutz, Landesarbeitsstelle Bayern e.V.

40 pages, Munich 1996, DM 8.-- plus postage

To order, write to: Aktion Jugendschutz, Landesarbeitsstelle Bayern e.V., Fasaneriestr. 17, D-80636 München; Order number: 12051

Video „Der Spielzeugfreie Kindergarten“. Ein Beitrag zur Suchtprävention

produced by COCO Filmproduktion GmbH, Munich 1996

by assignment of Aktion Jugendschutz, Landesarbeitsstelle Bayern e.V.

VHS, 29 min., DM 24.50 plus postage

To order, write to: Aktion Jugendschutz, Landesarbeitsstelle Bayern e.V., Fasaneriestr. 17, D-80636 München; Order number: 12041

referring to addiction prevention at kindergarten facilities:

Elternbroschüre – Kinder stark machen – zu stark für Drogen! Part 1, 2, 3

"Wir können viel dagegen tun, daß Kinder süchtig werden", 16 p. (part 1)

"Ich will mein Kind vor Drogen schützen", 14 p. (part 2)

"Suchtmittel, Behandlungsmöglichkeiten, Beratungsstellen", 14 p. (part 3)

Ed.: Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung, Köln,1993

Also available from: Aktion Jugendschutz, Landesarbeitsstelle Bayern e.V.; Order number: 11060

Was tun gegen Sucht

7 Vorschläge für Eltern und Erzieher. Ed.: Vorsorge-Initiative, Broschüre, 44 p., Frankfurt, 1993

Also available from: Aktion Jugendschutz, Landesarbeitsstelle Bayern e.V., Order number: 11070

Suchtvorbeugung im Vorschulalter

Eine Arbeitshilfe zur frühkindlichen Erziehung

Ed.: Kath. Landesarbeitsgemeinschaft Jugendschutz NRW, Broschüre 40 p., Münster 1991

Also available from: Aktion Jugendschutz, Landesarbeitsstelle Bayern e.V.; Order number: 12031

Warum Huckleberry Finn nicht süchtig wurde

Anstiftung gegen Sucht und Selbstzerstörung bei Kindern und Jugendlichen

Eckhard Schiffer, Beltz Quadriga, Weinheim 1993

Available from publisher or bookshops

Mäxchen, trau dich! Arbeitsmaterialien zur Suchtvorbeugung im Kindergarten

Ed. und available from: Aktion Jugendschutz, Landesarbeitsstelle Baden-Württemberg, Staffenbergstr. 44, D-70184 Stuttgart, and Landesstelle Jugendschutz Niedersachsen, Leisewitzstr. 26, D-30175 Hannover, Stuttgart, Hannover 1995

Kinder brauchen Zukunft

Materialien für den Kindergarten. Ganzheitlich orientierte Suchtprophylaxe als Hilfe zur Persönlichkeitsentfaltung von Kindern

Ed. and available from: Sozia Verlag Freiburg im Auftrag des Sozialministeriums Baden-Württemberg, Brombergstr. 17c, D-79102 Freiburg

To Have or to Be

Erich Fromm, 1976

Available in bookshops