

Bringing out the Best in the Whole Child in a Day Care Setting

Marie Wahlberg, Sweden

Marie Wahlberg is a teacher, pedagogue, and mental trainer with a special interest in pre-school children. She developed and tested an innovative program for young children in a Swedish daycare center. She is the author of the book ZAPP which outlines the details of her work with children.

Email marie@lifedesign.cc
website www.lifedesign.cc

Abstract

My mission was to create a place for children and parents and teachers where everybody has a good feeling in their stomach when they arrived at the day care center and when they left for the day. After one year of hard, fun work I was nearly there. In this article I share a mental training program which I successfully introduced to children aged 3-6 at a children's daycare center in Sweden. I was free to do and create whatever I felt would be of most value for these children. For the first time in my life I had an opportunity to take all my thoughts about what children really need to learn in preschool, what they need to practice so they can manage well in life, and turn them into reality. An overview of the journey I followed is the focus of this paper.

The first time I came to “Barnens Dagis”, a children's daycare center, there was chaos, a sort of calm chaos, but still chaos. All the full time staff had quit at that time because of some disagreements with the parent group. The year was 1995. I had been working with children in my community since 1981 and I was really tired and frustrated with it. I rarely felt that my work made the difference I had hoped to make for the children. It just wasn't enough, no matter how hard I worked. Early in 1995 I had started an education program to become a Mental Trainer at the Scandinavian school of leadership. This was the step that was going to forever change my life and my attitude towards my profession as a teacher

(pedagogue), though I didn't know it yet. This educational experience made me reflect on what I had been doing in my work situation, what I really wanted to do and led me to applying for a new job as a preschool manager. I started on my 35th birthday, the 13th of November 1995.

The challenge with this job was to build a totally new concept. My workmates and I were free to do and create whatever we wanted for these children. I now had an opportunity to take all my thoughts about what children really need to learn in preschool, what they need to practice so they can manage well in life, and turn them into reality! I was in heaven. It was exactly what I was

longing for. I felt happy as an architect who just got an assignment to create his/hers dream house and a promise that the house would be built exactly like the plan (right from the blueprint).

There were three different parts that I wanted to build into the concept. There was the social skills - how I work together with myself and others. The Mental skills – how I think about myself and others and how I think about my possibilities. And the learning skills – what is my best way of learning and remembering and acting on the new acquisition of skills.

I was convinced that all three parts were necessary to create a childcare centered on the “whole child” perspective.

The tradition I had been working in had put a lot of effort in working with the social skills but almost nothing on the mental skills.

During my education in mental training it had become clear to me how important it is to understand the power of thoughts, and to recognize how thoughts influence in our well being. I felt like I had discovered the last piece of the puzzle, the one that had been lost for many years, that was necessary to make the puzzle complete. The importance of teaching the children about self-esteem, goal setting, attitude and self-control had become so obvious to me.

We decided to start from the beginning with Mental Training by systematically teaching the children physical and mental relaxation. The first goal was to teach them to lower their own body tension and in that way take the first step towards our bigger goal of making the children feel good and function well with themselves and with others. We designed a room at the preschool with a very high a level of coziness. A cozy corner with

the help of soft pillows, little mats or mattresses, soft blankets, a disco globe and a CD player and music for relaxation, classic music and exercises from my course in Mental training adapted to make appropriate for 3-6 year old children. Every day we had relaxation, massage and a nice rest in the afternoon. Very quickly The children very quickly began to long for this moment, especially those kids who where very physically active and very restless. This became their most cherished moment in the day!

The next natural step was to start training the kids in positive thinking about themselves. The goal was systematic training of self-esteem in a playful and fun way. Some of this was centered around reinforcing the solid ground each of us is standing on - the picture I have of myself and whom I am. We added positive thoughts during the relaxation, positive thoughts about themselves and about the rest of the day. The children left the relaxation sessions with a smile on their faces and with a good feeling inside. We could actually feel the positive atmosphere and knew that we were on the right path towards our long-term goal.

The first step with the children was in its place. The first change we focused on with ourselves (as educators) was to change our own attitude towards each other, the children and the parents. We worked a lot with developing a common language for what was Ok to say and do in front of the children in order to strengthen there self esteem. It was easy to take away a lot of things we used to say and do, that we noticed were not very good for the children to hear and see. We started to train ourselves to appreciate and praise ourselves, each other, and the children out loud, and as often as we could. It resulted in an immediate positive effect.!

We were surprised by the quick response this “little” change led to. The children started to behave differently and much positively towards each other. We were surprised, even though we worked with children, how fast they learned and accepted new and positive ideas.

We started a friendship theme that influenced everything we did with the children. They made their own friendship posters and decided together how they wanted to behave towards each other. They talked about what skills a really good friend had and what he or she did that made them such a good friend. The children really enjoyed the project. We talked, drew, and wrote down everything we talked about and actually filled the walls with the children’s words and pictures of good friendship.

The pictures worked as reminder of how we wanted to act towards each other. After a while the kids started to live their proclamation in an amazing way. They began to remind each other, and us as well, about what we had agreed on. They were discussing and arguing about the best way to be a friend. I remind you these children ranged in age from three to six. Even the youngest children enjoyed our cooperative work in shaping a positive environment that was growing in front of our eyes. At this moment we realized that we were building a new culture, a culture to grow in and to feel good in.

The next step was to start working with the children’s emotions in a more conscious way. Our goal was for the children to know about:

MY OWN FEELINGS – my different feelings and how they feel in me.

OTHERS FEELINGS – what feelings do others have and how do they feel.

RESPONSIBILITY AND CONSEQUENCES- when I do this - this happens. Do I want that to happen?

ATTITUDE AND COMMUNICATION – What do I want or think and how can I communicate to get it across or express it ?

DIFFERENT TOOLS FOR SOLUTIONS IN A CONFLICT OR PROBLEM – how to replace a negative behavior with a more positive one and creating more positive strategies.

As the start of this part of our work all our staff went to an educational workshop on Emotional intelligence. We wanted to be at the same level or on the same page when we started our work in this area with the children. As a result of this educational session we became very motivated and eager to start working in this area with the children.

The first step to work with my own feelings, we solved this by creating cards with symbols of all the feelings on it. Very simple symbol cards, with one card in one color, for each feeling expressed by a face. Not unlike the SMILEY faces. The children started their day with picking a card that best expressed how they felt at that moment. If they wanted to they could talk about the feeling and why they had it, but it was totally voluntarily. During the day they could get another feeling and change their card if they liked to. We had all the cards in a basket and the children could put them beside their own names on a big white board. That way they become aware of how they felt during the day and even practiced expressing their feelings in words. The children could see all the other children’s different feelings during the day and they talked a lot about it with each other. This automatically led us into the second step - others feelings.

Through using the cards the children learned to listen to each other and understand how different we could feel in the same situation. They learned that different things woke up different feelings within different persons. They discovered that we didn't get angry over same things, or happy, calm or sad for the same reasons. We were all different. This was the biggest insight in the group since we started our work. They started to get curious, and wanted to find out more about each other. This led to a new kind of respect for the individual within the group. It was amazing to see! We didn't have to say anything, it just happened.

One morning one child said to a little boy, who just got to the day care center, "John is in a bad mood right now so you better not disturb him". The other children already knew about John, but this new boy had not yet heard. Sometimes it was child himself/herself who said to his/ her friends: please leave me alone, I am not very happy right now and need a moment for myself. There is a very strong power in these words coming from a 4-year-old. We could see how the children enjoyed their own power to gain respect for who they were or what they were experiencing at that moment. To be able to tell the world people around them, this is me right now and this is what I need from you at this moment, was a totally new experience for most of them.

At this point in our day care center, I could really notice that the group started to function really well together, with less conflicts and definitely a lot more fun! They also began to feel more satisfied with themselves.

Every day, they were told by us and by their friends about good things they did and the nice skills they had developed. Every day we had a moment of touch through massage and they had learned how to relax their body

and their thoughts. They quickly learned to enjoy this moment.

They had learned to say good things to themselves about who they were and what their day was going to be like. They also knew a lot about their own feelings and their friends feelings, and knew what to do with them. At this time they also started to use their new skills at home, which led to a request from the parents to learn more about our work at the center.

The children who often got themselves into trouble with their friends had lots of opportunities to make good use of what they learned. We taught them to start thinking in a new way and to consider - what will happen if I do this? Do I want this to happen? What are the consequences? Can I handle the consequences?

The children listened to each other when they shared how they felt and reacted and in different conflict situations. They learned which child was sad because of certain things and who was angry for other reasons. The children who acted on impulse didn't really seem to understand why everybody gets so upset over it, or why a friend hits back. Sometimes they got very offended and they didn't really connect their own act with the result. When they started to understand the connection between their action and another person's reaction, it made a very big change for several children in our group. Suddenly they understood how things were connected. When I do this-that will probably happened-do I really want that? If not? What do I do then? And here we enter the last step in social-emotional development- I need to find and use some new good solutions for my old problems and conflicts to change my results in my relationships.

We started to create a number of new strategies for each child and we did it together with the group. It was really exciting to hear all good solutions that the children helped each other with. They had simple and smart ideas. I laughed at all hours we had been sitting in meetings, talking about certain special children and their problems, never thinking of the brilliant idea of simply asking the children what they thought about it. The children now very often find the best way for them or their friends to solve a problem.

The children in our group learned very quickly how to help each other move to successful solutions. It has been really gratifying to see this group of children use the simple tools we created together.

We let the children try many different things, and helped them to succeed in what they did and learn from every experience.

Our daily message to every child was: You can do it!

You are great just by being you! We really like you the way you are!

This is fun!

My mission was to create a place for children and parents and teachers where everybody has a good feeling in their stomach when they arrived at the day care center and

when they left for the day. After one year of hard, fun work I was nearly there.

Of course there were still problems and conflicts, they are a natural part of life, but we handled them much better now and did find win-win solutions. Through our positive efforts a very strong feeling of trust was created. No one was afraid to speak out and no one needed to defend their opinion. It was ok to think differently, we all different.

After two years of running our program, our first group of children left for school. Quite soon we got feedback from the teachers who wondered what we had done with these children. They were different from other children in some special ways. They were very good friends, they were natural and very positive leaders and they always had a lots of good solutions to suggest when there were any problems or conflicts in their new classes.

This was our reward! And our proof of success! The work at this preschool ended for me when my family moved to Spain for a year in June 2002 but the work I did there together with my workmates, the children and their parents, is still alive through my book “ZAPP,” which I wrote to document what we did and make it available to anyone interested.

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