



Norwegian Directorate  
for Education and Training

# Children's well-being – adults' responsibility

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PREVENTING BULLYING  
STARTS IN KINDERGARTEN

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# Preface



Almost all Norwegian children attend kindergarten before they start school, and many young children spend much of their early years in the company of you who work in kindergartens. You build relationships with the children and do a job that has an impact on the lives of each and every one of them. You play an important role as carers for these children, as they learn while playing, and play while learning. The onus is on you to create a caring and nurturing environment which is safe and encourages them to develop and explore the world.

Interacting with others is crucial to a child's development and learning. Kindergarten children should be given ample opportunity to express themselves and to develop together with others in a safe setting. This guide aims to provide pointers to staff as to how to support the children's social development and how to work to create a good psychosocial environment that prevents bullying and offensive behaviour. I hope that you will find the guide useful and that it will help provide inspiration in your day-to-day work. I sincerely believe that able staff who work purposefully and systematically together can help give the children a safe, good and happy childhood in the kindergarten environment.

I should like to wish you all the best as you go about performing one of the core tasks of kindergarten staff.

Dag Thomas Gisholt  
Director







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# 1. Contents and purpose of this guide

According to the *Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens*, kindergartens should provide children with a care and learning environment that is in the best interest of the child. In the context of kindergartens, care refers both to the relationships between staff and children and to the care that the children show for each other. Allowing children to receive and show care is fundamental to developing social skills, and it plays an important role in a lifelong learning perspective.

The framework plan states that kindergartens [...] *have a responsibility in society for the early prevention of discrimination and bullying*. It also concludes that [...] *social competence is very important as a means of preventing the development of problem behaviour such as discrimination and bullying*. The children should feel that they are in a safe environment while in kindergarten. They should gain life experience in interaction with others, and they should develop their social competence. This guide is therefore first and foremost about how we can create a good psychosocial environment in which the children can develop in safe surroundings with challenges adapted to suit each individual child. A core part of the guide is the section on how the adults should go about supporting the children as they become part of kindergarten life, build relationships with each other, interact with each other, play and establish friendships.

Parents say they are largely satisfied with the service provided by kindergartens. However, when asking the children themselves how they find life in kindergarten, some of them say they do not enjoy the experience, or that they are being teased or harassed. Boys are more likely than girls to find the kindergarten experience negative (Nordahl 2012). Situations sometimes arise that some children find unpleasant or difficult. For

example, kindergarten children will sometimes fall out while they play, and they may become involved in conflicts over roles during play. They sometimes find that they are not allowed to take part in the play or that they are excluded from the group. These can be reasons for a child to feel upset and unhappy or teased, harassed or excluded. The interpretation of each individual child of such everyday episodes and incidents is essential. Staff need to be aware of these aspects and to take them seriously. One of the main objectives of this guide is looking at how staff can observe the children and the interaction between them and how staff can make a positive contribution to the children's interaction during play, for example. Rather than set out hard and fast rules, the guide aims to offer support to staff as they go about their work. It provides suggestions and advice and gives specific examples.

Kindergartens should ensure that the children are safe and protect them from physical and emotional harm. Staff should look after the children, create an inclusive environment, and work to ensure that today's kindergarten children do not feel harassed or go on to harass others tomorrow. The framework plan states: *The seeds of inconsiderate behaviour, bullying and lack of empathy may be found in violations to the child's self-esteem*. Kindergartens should promote positive behaviours and work to ensure that negative patterns of interaction do not develop or take root.

The children's primary needs at kindergarten are care, security, respect and a sense of belonging. Staff should work together to help meet the children's basic needs. Children can benefit greatly from attending kindergartens of a high quality in relation to issues such as social competence and friendships, for example. The benefits increase as the quality increases. No one person is able to create a good kindergarten all by himself or



herself. It is crucial to the children's development and well-being that all staff, referred to in this guide as staff or adults, make a contribution and work together to develop a kindergarten of a high standard.

The framework plan highlights the impact of the attitudes that the adults convey as well as their knowledge and ability to understand and educate children. The plan offers both a contemporary and a future perspective. By working on attitudes and taking concrete action in partnership with the children's homes, kindergarten staff can create a safe, inclusive and stimulating environment that prevents bullying. This guide looks at different ways of approaching this challenge. Reflecting on and assessing our practices in collaboration with others, making adjustments and working with purpose are essential requirements if we are to increase the quality of the work being carried out in kindergartens. The tasks described in the section "Suggestions for reflection and collaboration" are intended as a starting point and an inspiration in this process.

### Kindergartens have a duty to prevent bullying, but what exactly constitutes bullying?

**There are various definitions of bullying, but some of the characteristics used to describe it are that**

- it involves negative, physical or emotional acts committed by one or more people against another
- the person being teased, harassed or excluded is an easy target as part of a social group that he or she did not voluntarily choose to join
- there is an imbalance in the dynamics of power, making it difficult for the person to defend himself or herself

**Some also suggest that**

- the actions must take place with a certain frequency and over time
- the actions are planned or malevolent





*When I meet a child I meet a human being.*

Anne-Cath Vestly





## 2. Creating a good psychosocial environment

### **Staff should build relationships with the children**

Starting kindergarten is a major transition for many children. Staff should help the children become familiar with the new social context. It is important that staff spend time building good relationships with each and every child. The adults need to look after each individual child, and they must be patient with everyone. Young children require consistency, stability, protection and security in close relationship with others. Kindergarten staff should therefore provide affectionate, sensitive and stimulating care to the children. Good experiences gained from stable relationships strengthen the child's self-image, increase the child's well-being and assist in the positive development of the child. Making the child feel secure and looked after is the best starting point for learning and mastering. Working on the relationships between adults and children and between the children themselves is key to developing and sustaining a good psychosocial kindergarten environment for the children. Staff should treat every child as the focal point of its own life, entitled to its own experiential world and to having a say in its own everyday life (Bae 2009). Staff should show respect for each individual child while working actively to allow all the children to experience a sense of belonging in a positive social environment.

### **Preventing bullying starts in kindergarten**

Bullying is an infringement of the individual and could be seen as a breach of the right to be respected and feel safe. Kindergarten is an important arena for rooting out offensive behaviours. Staff should provide a supportive presence while the children establish relationships, take part in interaction and acquire and further develop skills that make the interaction between them safe and positive. The children's social development process should take place with the help of empathic, participating adults with good relationships skills. Staff should acknowledge the children's experiences as they interact

with others, they should help them reflect on these experiences, and they should support the children's change and development processes. The aim is to create a secure and good psychosocial kindergarten environment that prevents undesirable patterns from developing or taking root over time. A kindergarten that makes an effort to create a good psychosocial environment also helps prevent discrimination and bullying.

### **A systematic and long-term approach is effective**

The owner and head teacher of the kindergarten must put the psychosocial environment high on the agenda. Staff should use their combined expertise and professional judgement when planning and undertaking work to support the children's social development and to create a good psychosocial kindergarten environment. The efforts to create an inclusive environment with good patterns of interaction can be aimed at individual children, groups of children or at the entire kindergarten environment. This work requires everyone to make a continual effort over time. The head teacher plays a key role in managing the process. In order to ensure a systematic and long-term approach, it is important to highlight the work in the kindergarten's plans. Staff should evaluate the work at regular intervals.

### **Children need the presence of adults**

Staff members' attitudes towards children as fellow human beings are expressed through their appreciative interaction with the children. Children need to be seen, heard and validated. Attention from competent, affectionate, participating adults is crucial to children's well-being in kindergarten. The way in which the adult responds to and validates the child is a key factor in how the child feels about itself. The quality of the interaction between adult and child is highly significant. Staff should organise day-to-day care and everyday routines so that they become positive experiences for each child. The



adult should share in the joy of the child's achievements together with the child. Kim aged one and Anna aged four have many everyday achievements to be proud of, and it is important to validate the child's own, unique experiences. A participating adult should take seriously what the child has to offer and continue to build on it together with the child before encouraging the child to broaden its horizons and to enhance its opportunities to excel.

#### **Adults are ethical role models for the children**

Fundamental values in a kindergarten include fellowship, care, shared responsibility, solidarity, tolerance, respect, equality and the right to be different. As role models, all staff have a particular responsibility to live by and promulgate the kindergarten's core values. They should support and show regard for each child while also creating a safe yet challenging environment that encourages friendships and active participation in the group. Staff should show in practice that they treat the children with respect and tolerance. They should demonstrate how each and every child is valuable and entitled to its own opinions. This way the adults become important role models for the children. Children discover early on that they all look different and that they behave and act differently. They often wonder why this is and will sometimes observe other children intensely, make comments or ask questions. Adults must validate the children's discoveries and be open about the differences. They should talk to the children about what concerns them and give concrete answers that are appropriate to the child's age and maturity. This makes it easier for the child to understand, and it lays the foundations for developing ethical awareness and its own ethical attitudes. As role models for the children, it is important that the adults are conscious of their own behaviour. The degree to which staff members respect each other and the children is expressed by the way in which they relate to and treat each other. Children see, hear and pick up on more than adults sometimes think. Staff must therefore be very conscious about what they say and how they speak to each other when they are in the presence of children. Good role models do not make disparaging comments to or about others, be it children, parents or colleagues. They practise empathic behaviour.

#### **There is a big difference between laughing at and laughing with a child**

Children are naturally sensitive to the way in which adults behave towards them and talk about them. For example, if an adult repeatedly mentions a certain name whenever a conflict occurs, the child being mentioned could find itself labelled as impossible or unvalued. For some children this could lead to their adopting this image of themselves, too. For the children observing it, it could lead to their adopting some of the attitudes that they can sense. This may result in the child in question being considered a less attractive playmate or friend. It is therefore unacceptable to make derogatory comments about or to children or to characterise them. Ridicule and irony fall into the same category. They can harm a child's self-image and make kindergarten an unsafe and unpleasant environment for the child. It can also be very harmful to the group environment as a whole.

#### **Children want to influence their own lives**

Adults must be responsive to the communication signals that the child gives. They must interpret them and create interaction and dialogue with the child on his or her terms. Being met with understanding when expressing an intention, either verbally or with body language, is crucial to a person's self-esteem, mental health and interaction with others. Staff duties range from care and learning situations to informal interaction with the children during everyday routines, during play and on excursions. The children for their part should have a say in deciding the content of their day in kindergarten. Their well-being requires staff to interpret what they are trying to express with their body language, to listen to what they are saying, and to allow their "voice" to be heard in everyday situations. For example, children will often express a desire to participate in planning and evaluating core activities in kindergarten, and they want to have a say in their own participation in these activities (Bratterud et al. 2010). Another example is how children can experience being told off as something unpleasant and frightening. They therefore want adults to speak to them in a normal voice. Nor do they want others to overhear an adult being angry with them. For that reason it is important that staff reflect on their own behaviours, roles and practices



and evaluate their actions on the basis of the children's expressed wishes and needs.

### **Children need adults to be available**

Some children say they feel that adults are inaccessible or unavailable when they want to establish contact with them. For staff it is often very challenging to find time to do everything. This is particularly true at busy times when several things are happening simultaneously, such

as when practical tasks are being carried out at the same time as a child requires comforting. It is therefore very important to establish good routines that allow the children to feel that an adult is always available. Consider how to organise the day to best allow the children to be able to establish contact with one of you when they need it. Evaluate your routines regularly and seek to identify changes that can make you more available.

## **Suggestions for reflection and co-operation**

- A. What can you do to build a good relationship with each child?  
Draw up a list of measures that you would like to try out.
- B. How can you help ensure that new kindergarten children, especially the youngest, are integrated and become part of the group?
- C. Take note of what the children appreciate and what they want to do more of in kindergarten.
- D. Take note of things that the children are not happy with.  
Encourage the older children to elaborate on their answers when you speak to them about it.
- E. Draw up a plan for how you can meet some of the children's wishes or needs. (See C and D.) Implement the plan and talk to the children along the way.
- F. What prevents you from being accessible to the children during the day? What can you do to improve the situation?
- G. Discuss the difference between humour and irony.
- H. Agree on what you can/should do if you find that someone is making disparaging comments to or about a child.
- I. Discuss how to model respectful and tolerant behaviour.





*You should talk to children just as you talk to other people.*

Anne-Cath Vestly



### 3. Relationships and interaction between children

#### **Kindergarten should provide a safe yet challenging environment for children**

Children should experience happiness and well-being in the company of other children during everyday activities, play and learning. Children are relationship-focused and opinion-forming from the moment they are born. Kindergarten children are social beings who contribute towards both their own learning and well-being and those of others.

#### **Children develop through interaction with others**

To be able to understand social relationships and processes and master social skills, the children need to experience and participate in social groups. Children require stimulating interaction in order to develop optimally. Interaction takes place in care situations, during play and in learning situations in other words, in all everyday situations in a kindergarten. Children learn to interact with others through one-off encounters, exploration and experience. They develop the ability to reflect on their own actions and behaviours based on what they experience. Children should learn how to look after themselves and others. To be able to behave sympathetically and make ethically grounded decisions, children must be allowed to develop knowledge and skills in the company of others. Experiencing achievement while interacting with others is an important part of a child's life.

#### **The adults should participate whilst the children interact**

Children need caring adults who are able to identify and interpret their communication signals. Adults should actively participate in and support the children's development. For this reason we will continue to emphasise the presence, roles and contribution of staff members in this chapter, which looks at children's relationship-building, relationships and social interaction with other children. Staff are a key resource in that they use

themselves as tools when working with the children. As affectionate, caring adults who see, validate and acknowledge everyone, they are a significant factor in each child's social learning process when it interacts with other children.

#### **Children need boundaries that they understand**

The children should have a say in setting necessary boundaries and rules for interaction in kindergarten. This can help the children to understand the limits that have been agreed and to give them meaning. Adults should communicate consistent, clear and understandable rules and boundaries to the children, and all staff should stick to them. Be aware that boundaries are situation-based and person-specific to a certain extent. Adults should clearly demonstrate behaviours that they value through words and actions, and they should practise positive limits and rules in their interaction with the children.

#### **Staff should observe the interaction between the children**

Observations allow staff to gain the necessary understanding to help support the children's development. They must observe the children continually, which means they need to be vigilant. Adults who get involved and actively participate in the children's domain have a great opportunity to see and hear what happens when they interact. Children who say they are being teased or harassed by others often explain that this frequently happens when there are no adults present. It is therefore important to design the physical environment to allow staff to keep an eye on the children. Staff must be very conscious of and reflect on the social processes within the group of children. The child's experience should determine which approach the adults take as they engage with the child and continue to support its development.



*One does not love one's children just because they are one's children but because of the friendship formed while raising them.*

Gabriel García Márquez

### **Children's actions can be predictable**

Staff should seek to stay one step ahead of situations where they suspect that the interaction will stall and the communication between the children turn negative. Such assumptions are often based on experience. Maybe Lars tends to get very disheartened when he is rejected and responds by starting to cry and running off to hide. Perhaps Liv, when she gets angry because Vilde takes the dinosaur she is playing with away from her, reacts by biting and scratching. The adult should try to be pre-emptive and offer a helping hand. This way the child can begin to recognise the warning signs. It is important to validate the child's feelings there and then. Children must be allowed to feel disappointment and anger. The adult should show disapproval of their actions, however. Running away is not the right thing to do to, and it is not acceptable to inflict physical pain or injury on others. In the long term staff should model and promote alternative actions that could eventually become strategies for the children.

### **Children sometimes need adults to intervene**

No kindergarten can completely prevent spontaneous episodes involving hitting or kicking, teasing or exclusion, but the adults who are present need to deal with these incidents. The children must first be given time to stop or change their behaviours. At the same time it is the adults' responsibility to stop actions that harm others either physically or emotionally. Adults need to care and to acknowledge the children's experiences and emotions that they have there and then. Children need caring adults who allow them to deal with their own emotions so that over time the children become able to identify their feelings and make them accessible and manageable. Make it clear that actions that have a negative impact on others are unacceptable, and stress that everyone is responsible for ensuring the well-being of all the children in the kindergarten. The aim is not to make everyone equal but to raise awareness amongst the children and to support their behaviours in order to make the interaction between them more effortless and positive and a source of well-being for all.

### **Children need experience in handling conflicts**

Conflicts of interest and power play will occasionally

occur between the children. A staff member who observes a conflict between children should first wait and see whether the children are able to deal with the conflict themselves. If they are unable to do so, the adult could contribute as an arbitrator or source of support. If the children are expressing themselves verbally, the adult and the children involved should listen to everyone's explanation. Attempt to see the issue from everyone's perspective. It is important not to give the impression that there is a winner and a loser. Children who experience a difficult episode should be dealt with by adults who are reassuring and inclusive and who take good care of them. A child who has done something undesirable or unacceptable should not experience being judged or rejected by the adult. Instead the adult should clearly show that they disapprove of what the child has done while also acknowledging its feelings and showing it respect and affection. It is okay to be angry, but not to hit someone. The adult should also show that he or she has expectations and faith in the child. Let the children suggest solutions, talk to them about their suggestions, and let them try out what they feel is the best suggestion. A child who has done something wrong will often have a particular need to be seen and acknowledged in a different context that it is able to master, e.g. while interacting with others around the dining table or on an excursion later in the day. It is important to activate the children's resources. Focus on the things that the children are able to master and support them in developing these skills.

### **Children often choose strategies that they feel are effective for them**

Anger often stems from situations where the interests and needs of one child come into conflict with those of others. For example, if a child repeatedly finds that it gets its way or achieves what it wants by screaming or pulling someone by the hair when it is angry, there is a good chance that it will continue to employ this strategy. An adult can make the child aware of the consequences that this action has for others and for the child in question. It can help the child identify alternative actions next time it feels angry.



### Children need mastering strategies

Children need a range of different response strategies that they can employ if they are harassed, teased or excluded. Many children have a repertoire of actions that they use in everyday life. Some may benefit from observing other children or reflecting with an adult on various strategies in order to develop their own strategies. This could involve setting limits if an activity becomes too boisterous or uncomfortable by signalling that the other child or children should stop, by walking away from the situation, and/or by asking for help from an adult. Children can also try to take responsibility by asking for help from an adult on behalf of someone else. This way the children can practise taking moral responsibility.

### When a child changes its behaviour it can be a sign that it is not happy

Staff must be able to recognise negative patterns of interaction and should work actively to prevent these from developing or persisting. They should observe the children over time and notice any changes in their behaviour. A common sign of discontent is when a child does not want to go to kindergarten. Other indicators are when normally outgoing and happy children become quiet, serious and withdrawn. Active children may shy away from play, seek less contact than before with other children and become passive. A child who has previously interacted well with other children can become restless, run around, be noisy, spoil things for others and show frustration and anger. Some may react by getting exhausted

and tired, by becoming clingy around adults, or by crying more than before. Other may struggle to eat or sleep.

### The feeling of being teased, harassed or excluded will always be a subjective one

The child must be allowed to express how it feels about kindergarten. The youngest children are unable to use words to describe if something is good, bad or difficult, but by using their body and non-verbal communication they can express how they feel. With time children become increasingly able to use words to describe their emotions, needs and thoughts. The adults can talk to them about how they feel, about the things they may not be happy with, or about what they find unpleasant or difficult while in kindergarten. With most of the older children the adults can raise the issues that they observe, talk to the children about them and discuss them. Be aware, however, that even older children may struggle to express thoughts and feelings. Some may not be able to make themselves heard in a group with many children. Some may not even consider the option of talking to someone about their problems, while others may not want to talk about them. Perhaps they are not able to describe in words if they are not happy or if something is wrong. Staff should observe the children's posture, facial gestures, emotional expressions and their interaction with others. They should try to talk to the children, listen to what they are saying and seek to establish what the children are trying to convey.

## Suggestions for reflection and co-operation

- A. Which challenges can you observe in the interaction between the children?  
What should you focus your efforts on right now?
- B. What should you do if a child makes it clear that it is not happy?  
Identify a selection of measures. Implement these measures. Are they working?





## 4. Friendships

### **Friendships are important to children of all ages**

Being friends means interacting in a relationship where each child feels accepted and valued for the person it is. Even the youngest children form strong friendships, and many children state that the best thing about kindergarten is to meet other children and play with their friends. Friendships help create a sense of participation and kinship, which in turn helps build positive self-esteem. Being part of a group makes children feel secure and allows them to form social relationships. Exploring together with other children could lead to new friendships. Forming and maintaining friendships is an important aspect of the socialising process and a preventive factor against undesirable and negative tendencies.

### **All children should have at least one friend**

Some children say they sometimes do not have anyone to play with in kindergarten. Knowing how important friendships are, we must not allow someone to feel that they do not have friends or that they are lonely. One important duty for staff is to help the children build relationships with each other. For example, the adults could invite children who do not normally socialise with each other to participate in a shared activity or game, and they could encourage new acquaintances by rearranging the children's changing room spaces or the line when going on outdoor excursions. Sharing experiences in small groups across different departments can also be the start of new relationships and friendships. It is important to remember that fledgling friendships can be fragile. Observant staff should notice when children forge new bonds and be careful not to interfere and disrupt such processes. For example, it is important not to create groups that split up the children or to direct them to regular places around the dining table or during story time.

*Without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods.*

Aristoteles

### **Suggestions for reflection and co-operation**

What can you do to support the children's friendships?





## 5. Social competence

### Social competence is the key to children's well-being in a kindergarten environment

Children are social beings from the moment they are born, and they communicate with adults and with each other using both verbal and physical communication. Social competence is about being able to communicate and interact well with others in various situations. This skill is essential if each child is to succeed, thrive and be valued as a friend and equal participant in the interaction with other children. A child who interacts well with others is both able to adapt to the group and to be a visible participant who asserts his or her place in the

group. Research has shown that children's ability to establish friendships is very much linked to their social competence. Social competence involves a set of skills that forms a natural part of the children's interaction, such as self-esteem, empathy, prosocial behaviour, self-assertion and self-control. Which of these skills are relevant depends on the situation and context. When relating to the adults and other children in kindergarten the child continues to develop the social competence that it needs to sustain relationships with other human beings in general.

### Definitions of terms that may be useful when staff reflect on social competence

- **self-esteem:** to experience inherent worth, accept oneself, feel accepted, experience inner strength, and to have a positive attitude towards oneself
- **empathy:** to have an understanding of the perspectives, thoughts and feelings of others, to be able to put oneself in someone else's place, to show compassion and consideration, and to be able to interpret and understand expressions of feeling
- **prosocial behaviour:** to have positive, social attitudes and to be able to perform actions such as comforting, caring about, showing consideration for, helping and sharing with others
- **self-assertion:** to be able to assert oneself and one's own opinions in a good way, to dare stand up to peer pressure, to take the initiative and join in play and conversations that are already in progress, to participate without having to be asked, and to invite others
- **self-control:** to be able to adapt to different situations, tackle conflicts and defer own needs and wishes in situations that require participants to take turns, compromise and make joint decisions

### Empathy is a core competence in kindergarten

Empathy is the ability to put oneself in another person's place and to understand their situation. An empathic person is capable of distinguishing between own thoughts and feelings and those of others. By doing so, the person is able to comprehend that it is possible to experience a given situation differently to himself or herself. An empathic person is not only able to notice whether the other person is happy or sad, but he or she can also understand the motives behind the other person's actions. In kindergarten this can be seen in the way the children feel affected, perhaps by feeling pain inside, when they see someone being upset or when they see someone causing hurt to someone else. This is a fundamental aspect of the interaction between the children. Empathy is often expressed through action. For example, the children may feel able to intervene in a situation that is causing upset to someone else. Empathy allows children to better communicate with, show consideration for and help each other. These skills are essential to allow the children to bond. It is also important to experience empathy from others in various situations. Children develop empathy through experience in everyday situations. The adults should show that they acknowledge the children's prosocial actions.

### Examples of social competence initiatives in kindergarten

Children develop social competence primarily through their day-to-day, informal interactions with others. We should still like to include a few examples of how some kindergartens have chosen to focus especially on social competence. All the examples involve adults inviting the slightly older children to reflect. The children put their own thoughts, opinions and feelings into words.

#### Formal conversations

Formal conversations differ from spontaneous everyday conversations in that they are planned and chaired by an adult. Some kindergartens use a method that they call children's conversations or children's meetings. The children are invited to reflect on and talk about everyday experiences and about their feelings and thoughts relating to these experiences. Some choose to use

pictures as a starting point, showing children interacting in a variety of ways or children expressing a range of emotions. With such conversations the children need to be given time to reflect. They then put into words their thoughts and feelings and gain experience in speaking up and asserting their own opinions. By listening to others, they are given an opportunity to see an issue from other perspectives and to empathise with the situation of others. A third alternative is philosophical discussions. Such discussions base themselves on a given problem, and the children are invited to think, talk together and answer questions that do not have a single or conclusive answer.

#### Literature

Picture books and stories can provoke thoughts and conversations about feelings and compassion and possible responses. The children can discuss what they think the persons are thinking and feeling. They can try to place themselves in the situations being described to them and explain why the persons act the way they do. They could also be asked to describe what they think happens next in the story and what they would have done had it been them experiencing the situation.

#### Dramatisation and role play

When children dramatised a story or engage in role-playing they participate in interaction with one or more people. They are also able to explore different emotions linked to the roles and situations in question. This can help reinforce the children's empathic skills. The adults can also put on role plays for the children. This could involve portraying someone who exhibits prosocial behaviour or who clearly lacks this social competence. Adapt the content to suit the children's age and competence. The contrasts can be made very clear, e.g. someone who shares with someone else, and someone who does not want to share; someone who offers help, and someone who turns their back and walks away from someone in need of help. Talk to the children about their impressions, experiences and thoughts afterwards. Let them evaluate the different actions and justify why they think some actions were good and some bad, for example.











## 6. Communication and language

### **Communication is important in order to understand and be understood**

Being able to set boundaries by giving a stop signal with the hand or saying “no” or “stop” if something happens that the child is not comfortable with, is an important communication skill in kindergarten. Similarly it is important to be able to interpret the signals of others in order to understand what is desirable or acceptable behaviour and what constitutes a transgression. The staff should support the child as it explores everyday situations. Help the child to communicate its feelings and thoughts, to express its wishes and needs, and to interpret the feelings, wishes and intentions of others. The children will need time to try this out and gain experience from different situations over time.

### **Language is important in order to communicate**

Good language skills are key to making a positive contribution in the interaction with others. Children who do not communicate well verbally may not be heard or seen when they socialise with other children. Lack of verbal communication can also be the cause of conflict. For example, a child with a mother tongue other than Norwegian may become frustrated at not being understood, and it is not uncommon for a two-year-old who is not yet able to put their needs and wishes into words to hit, shove or bite others when they get frustrated or angry. A good strategy is therefore to work actively and systematically with language skills to help build relationships and create more effortless and positive interaction between the children when they socialise and play. This is an essential part of everyday interaction. Staff can also arrange conversations in small groups of children in which all the children get to participate and be seen and heard.









## 7. Interacting through play

### **Much of the day in kindergarten consists of play**

Kindergartens should help give children a good childhood by allowing them to engage in play as a source of well-being. Play is a fundamental aspect of life and learning. Children can participate in play with enthusiasm and involvement. A playing child is able to distinguish play from other activities and to interpret play signals. Children who play display an ability to relax, to become engrossed in the action and to have fun either alone or together with others. Play is a source of humour and joy, and by engaging in different forms of play the children are able to express themselves and feel that their own experiential world is valid. Constructive, social development occurs in relationships where the goal is equality between the participants, as is the case in play.

### **Children gradually develop their play competence**

Children must master the skills needed to both join in play and to maintain the play situation. Children's play can be complex, and some games require experience and practice. Many children learn by observing others during play and should be given time and space to do so. In order to help the children develop good play competence, the adults should be present when the children are playing. The adults should observe the play and reflect on what they witness and discover. It is important to pay attention to the interaction taking place during play and to take note of how it develops. The adults should consider how they can and should help, if at all.

### **Children often want to involve adults in play**

Children often try to attract the attention of adults while they play. "Look at me!" the child shouts as it swings back and forth on the swing or sets off down the slide. And that is exactly what the child wants: to be seen and validated by an adult. While children are keen to play with each other and spend a great deal of time doing so, they sometimes also want to involve adults in their play. When adults participate in play, the relationship

between them and the children is momentarily defined by a symmetry that differs from their everyday interaction. The child may manage the interplay with spontaneous, playful input and thus discover its own desire to make decisions and to express thoughts, imagination and feelings. At the same time the child discovers how the adult adapts and respects his or her intentions. This interaction can further the child's play competence. Humour and the feeling of shared joy help strengthen the relationship between adult and child and increase the child's well-being.

### **Some children struggle to participate in play**

Some children will not naturally participate in play, and some find themselves outside the play group in kindergarten. There can be different and complex reasons for this. The children join kindergarten with different life experiences, and kindergarten does perhaps not work sufficiently as a shared arena for picking up on all these differences. Social competence is a prerequisite for taking part in play, and some of the children do not properly master the social skills that play requires in every situation. A child may be sidelined during play because it does not understand the communication taking place during the game. Others, who master these skills well, may set the terms and take charge of the game. Some children are regularly turned away from play or ignored. Others are often or always assigned passive roles such as playing a baby or dog during role play. It is the staff's responsibility to help organise play situations to make them as inclusive as possible and to prevent negative patterns of behaviour from manifesting themselves.

### **Some children require the support of adults during play**

Most children join in wholeheartedly during play in kindergarten, but some children require help and support from staff in order to be included. The adults can contribute in the situation being played out right there and then. At the same time it is important that the adult keeps a slight distance and assesses the situation to ensure



*I toyed with those thoughts. They were what I toyed with most. I had no one else to play with.*

Lars Saabye Christensen

that his or her well-meant support does not interrupt or control the play. Adults should participate in the play on the children's terms. He or she can act as a support and assist the child to allow it to master different play situations. For example, the child may need help to interpret signals from other participants in the game, to understand what is happening, and to get an insight into the game. The adult can also help the child communicate its feelings, opinions, wishes and intentions so that it becomes an active participant in the game. The experience that the child gains can help bolster its play competence.

#### **Children may need new impulses in their play**

Staff members who participate in the start of a game can offer new impulses and inspire and contribute towards variation in the play situation. They can make a contribution by introducing elements of role play for one and two-year-olds by "pretending". Adults can introduce new games to older children, such as rule games or other group games that can involve several children. They could also introduce new play topics. You could base new ideas on a shared experience such as a visit to a farm, a fairy tale about trolls, a film about jungle

animals or something else that the children are interested in or curious about. Choose some equipment – perhaps in partnership with the children – and place it where it is easily visible and available. Organise the play area. The adults could take part in the game on the children's terms to begin with before retreating later on.

#### **Children often enjoy playing in small groups**

Some children find playing in large groups indoors or outdoors unsettling, confusing, chaotic, overwhelming or difficult to participate in. In such cases it can be useful if a staff member helps create a setting and boundaries for the game. An adult can create a play situation in a secluded, calm part of the kindergarten with only a few children. When there are few other children to play with it becomes easier for the children to understand the coherence of the game and to stick to the play topic. Play groups create perspective, structure and security (E.B. Ruud 2010). The adult gets a good overview of the game and can calmly observe the interaction between the children before offering appropriate support if needed. Such groups should be maintained over a period of time to allow the children to get to know each other, to build relationships, and to



discover and experience through participating in good play situations. Staff can organise play sessions across different departments to give children who do not normally meet an opportunity to play together. For example, children with the same mother tongue may enjoy playing together.

### Children imitate role models

Staff can help the children by acting as good role models in different play situations and portraying possible patterns of behaviour. They can model how to ask to take part in a game, how to take turns while playing, how to negotiate roles and handle conflicts in the best way. An adult can also put into words the internal processes that take place before he or she carries out an action to make the interpretation and assessment of the situation clear to the children. By using speech, the model allows the children to share in his or her thoughts and reasoning. The children can learn from the model and try out and refine different ways of behaving. Staff members should model inclusive behaviours. For example, they can show how to agree that everyone should take turns to make decisions or how to share toys. The adults should acknowledge the children when they master various social skills during play. They should validate the children and reinforce the positive interaction between them by commenting on and highlighting it. This way the children become natural role models for each other. This allows children and adults to work together to try out, develop and establish structures that could work in the long term.

### Sometimes the children experience conflicts of interest during play

For example, a conflict may occur if two children want to play with the same toy or if more than one group of children want to play in a particular, defined area simultaneously. Children position themselves even during play. Staff should observe and take their signals seriously. Children may struggle to evaluate how others perceive them and what they do during play. Sometimes it can also be difficult for children to see the link between cause and effect when interacting with others. Adults can help them to understand what is happening and to guide them through specific situations. They can contribute by mediating and by helping to find compromises. This could be relevant if a child is excluded from an ongoing game, for example. The child is able to see the consequences but may not understand why it is no longer allowed to take part. The adult, on the other hand, has noticed that the child was dominating the game and that the others had become exasperated by being bossed around. The first thing to do is for the adult to attend to the child who is upset because it has been excluded. He or she can ask the child whether it can suggest a solution. Together they can discuss and assess various options. Alternatively, the adult could offer to help the child rejoin the game but without being so bossy. By communicating openly, being specific and making a contribution, the adult guides the child in an appropriate and reassuring manner.

## Suggestions for reflection and co-operation

- A. Share experiences where you have contributed positively to the children's play on their terms and discuss what constitutes good input from adults during play.
- B. Talk together about how the kindergarten can organise play in small groups and discuss what you can achieve by doing this.





## 8. Co-operation between kindergarten and home

### **Co-operating with the child's home is a fundamental part of the kindergarten's duties**

Everything that a kindergarten does should be in the best interest of the child, and close co-operation with the home is important in order to support the child's development. The relationship between kindergarten and home must be based on openness and equality. Staff are responsible for co-operating with all parents in a way that makes them feel that they are being seen, heard and included. It is important to the parents that staff show an interest in their child and that they are present and reassuring.

### **The parents should follow the children to a new arena**

Mutual and warm-hearted communication between guardians and kindergarten staff has a positive effect on how the children function and thrive. The parent's closeness to and knowledge about their own child is key to this co-operation, and they should have a say in the child's kindergarten experience. Parents and staff usually meet the child in different settings and contexts, and they may therefore hold different knowledge about the child. Both parties can benefit from sharing this knowledge. A concerted approach and collective reflection can help create a more complete and nuanced experience, which can form the basis for good interaction with the child.

### **Parents and staff should meet daily**

Day-to-day contact and informal conversation about the child and about what is happening in kindergarten is an important aspect of the co-operation with parents. It allows parents to see how staff are aware of, interested in and looking after their child, and it can help build trust in the kindergarten. For example, when parents come to collect their child they can be updated on that day's activities and on the child's experiences and well-being. This provides a great starting point for the parents to talk to their child about the events of the day and

about its experiences. It is also a good basis for assessing the child's well-being and a useful starting point for continued co-operation with the kindergarten.

### **Parents are an important resource**

Staff and parents must work together to create an inclusive and good psychosocial environment that prevents unhappiness, insecurity, discrimination and harassment. Staff members need to show in practice that they see the parents as a resource and that their input is important if the children are to thrive. Conversations about and reflection on the kindergarten's objectives such as approaching the children with trust and respect, or fundamental values such as fellowship, care, tolerance, shared responsibility and solidarity, should take place regularly and incorporate practical examples from life in the kindergarten. Parents and kindergarten should work together to encourage healthy attitudes and share responsibility for supporting and nurturing the children. Parents can pick up signals relating to life in kindergarten and then provide input which can help enhance the kindergarten environment. Kindergarten can be a place for parents to meet and build networks.

### **Parents naturally worry about their children**

Staff should make it clear that it is normal for children to experience challenges when interacting with other young children, and most of them will find themselves in uncomfortable situations every once in a while. Still, it is hard for parents to be told of or to observe episodes where their child is being excluded, teased or harassed. It can also be difficult for parents to see their child occasionally, periodically or frequently tease, harass or exclude others. Staff must then describe how they themselves act. Key points will be their closeness to the children, observation, their rejection of behaviours that negatively affect others, and the adults' role of offering support in the interaction between the children.

### Parents need information

Established, good relationships between parents and staff make it easier and more straightforward to raise any concerns or problems. It is important that any informal conversations with parents taking place within earshot of others have a positive angle and focus primarily on the child's experiences and achievements, including social achievements. If the child is present, it would be appropriate for the adults to include it in the conversation. Staff should emphasise the importance of parents making contact immediately if they are in any way concerned about their child, and they should stress that the kindergarten will be equally quick to inform the parents should an issue arise. If the child indicates that it is unhappy, or if the parents or staff are in any way concerned about a child or uncertain of something, the parties should speak to each other and work together to identify solutions and shared goals. These must be one-to-one conversations. There must be an open dialogue where staff justify and explain which action they are taking, and how. Make it clear that this is the kindergarten's responsibility. Also talk to the parents about how they can contribute and support the initiatives. Keep in regular contact and agree where and when to meet.

### Parents' evenings are a forum for co-operation

Social competence, child development and the psychosocial environment in kindergarten are important topics that could be covered at parents' evenings. Also invite the parents to suggest topics that they wish to raise at parents' meetings. At such meetings the kindergarten should also brief the parents on its ongoing, preventive initiatives to create a good psychosocial kindergarten environment. Base the presentation on facts and everyday stories. The parents can then discuss amongst themselves the topic in question or given scenarios relating to the topic. You can finish off with a group discussion involving everyone. Perhaps the meeting will identify initiatives that parents and kindergarten should co-operate on, or maybe you will agree to review and assess the situation at the next meeting.

### Suggestions for reflection and co-operation

- A. What characterises a high-quality kindergarten-parent relationship?
- B. How can you continue to give the parents supportive messages about their child?
- C. Which issues do you wish to raise at the next parents' meeting?
- D. Plan and conduct a parents' meeting dedicated to interaction in kindergarten.

Evaluate the meeting and note down ideas to be reviewed and addressed at the next meeting.



## 9. Co-operation between staff to create a good kindergarten environment

### Reassuring adults means happy children

Mutual openness and supportive co-operation are important to staff. Everyone can make mistakes, and some days are better than others. A consistently accepting and appreciative manner helps create reassurance, trust and well-being. A good starting point can be a shared fundamental principle that everyone wishes everyone else well. It would be helpful to develop a supportive culture where colleagues back each other up. This will help prevent uncertainty and stress and encourages active participation and input. Staff members should reflect on their own behaviour and interaction and work together to raise the quality of the interaction between them.

### Staff members contribute to the environment and culture in the kindergarten

Relationships and interaction between the adults also have a significant effect on the psychosocial environment in a kindergarten. Confident staff members working in an inclusive environment help build an affectionate environment around them. Humour can provide an energy boost during the working day. Employees who enjoy their work often feel more energetic. Their well-being is contagious and has a positive effect on the atmosphere in the workplace.

### Staff should share responsibilities

In order to create a good kindergarten environment it is important that staff work closely and take responsibility together. They should debate which values to base their actions on and negotiate a shared approach in order to establish a course of action. Each staff member must take a conscious and reflected approach to the rules and routines that determine the working day. At the same time every staff member has personal room for manoeuvre within given boundaries, and judgement will always have to be exercised when making day-to-day decisions.

### Adaptable staff members can help raise standards

Staff should reflect on what they see and hear when they are spending time with the children, they should talk about what they are experiencing and sensing within the group of children, and they should reflect on their own values, attitudes and actions. If all staff members behave consistently according to a set of shared principles, the children's kindergarten experience can be made to be predictable, organised and consequently safe. Most established truths eventually become outdated, and all kinds of communities continue to evolve and change. Plans, routines and rules must be evaluated regularly and revised when necessary in order to maintain a high standard.

### The head teacher is a central relationship-builder

The head teacher manages both the adults and the children in a kindergarten. Within every organisation the management has a significant impact on the staff's ability and motivation to do a good job. The head teacher has a major responsibility for the psychosocial environment in the kindergarten. This requires him or her to be reflective and to use his or her knowledge about children's development, learning, socialising, relationships and relationship-building as a starting point for creating a good psychosocial environment. The head teacher should actively help encourage good relationships between children and adults, between children and between adults, including the parents. He or she should be visible and involved in the children's everyday activities and experiences as much as possible during a busy working day.

### The head teacher should oversee development

Staff are the key to quality. In order to create a good psychosocial environment in kindergarten, it is important that the head teacher recruits qualified adults and supervises an ongoing and long-term development process. Staff require theoretical knowledge, practical examples



to validate the theory, and self-experience. The head teacher should keep up-to-date with the latest research and theory. He or she should allow staff to build on their expertise and to continue to develop their skills. The head teacher should offer support to staff members so that they feel they are achieving in their roles. Setting aside time for reflecting on own and kindergarten practices is important in order to continue to raise standards. The head teacher should demonstrate his or her trust and faith in the staff. At the same time he or she should communicate that staff are clearly expected to display competent behaviour. Rules are adopted and routines established in partnership with staff and parents. The head teacher must be conscious of the managerial role and follow up on agreements and rules.

#### **The head teacher should contribute to a good climate of co-operation**

The head teacher is responsible for shaping an organisational culture that is open enough for staff to give each other feedback as a basis for guidance, co-operation,

reflection and changing own practices. In this context some staff members will need the head teacher to help them feel comfortable in their roles. The head teacher needs to be a good role model. He or she must quickly step in to stop any negative patterns of communication amongst staff members. Working with the teachers, the head teacher should manage the staff, manage the partnership with the parents, and follow up on any concerns that are raised.

#### **The head teacher does not hold sole responsibility**

The teachers provide important support for the head teacher, and he or she should be given help from other agencies when necessary. Working closely with the educational psychology service is essential. If it involves specific children, the parents must first give their consent. It is important to catch children who struggle psychosocially at an early stage. The earlier measures can be taken, the more effective they will be. Ingrained patterns of behaviour can be difficult to break, and the process can therefore be very draining on resources.

### **Suggestions for reflection and co-operation**

- A. What characterises an adult who is a good role model in kindergarten?
- B. Which qualities are present in the interaction between staff?
- C. What can you do to strengthen co-operation amongst staff?
- D. How should staff observe each other and give each other feedback?



## 10. Reading list

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