

Pedagogy during the corona pandemic

Children growing up during a pandemic also have the right to good pedagogy.

My name is Bitten Holmer Flansmose and I am a pedagogical consultant. It is Thursday morning, and I am visiting the childcare institution Helsted Børnehus in Randers Municipality for a talk with the leader of the institution Michael Nielsen about the pedagogical environment in the light of COVID-19.

On the door to the institution is a sign that says, "When dropping off or picking up, call this phone number", and when I step inside, the first thing I see is a bottle of hand sanitizer. Michael and I do not greet each other with a handshake as we normally would. We nod and look into each other's eyes for a brief moment – the world as we know it has changed.

It is about half a year since Denmark shut down and reopened with a number of new requirements and guidelines. The childcare institutions are in many ways back to everyday life. However, what kind of everyday life is that? Have we gained experience that we will use in the future, or are we slowly returning to what we came from? Those questions I want to ask Michael.

The parents understood

I start by asking Michael what it was like to start up again after the lockdown with all the new requirements and guidelines. "When we had to reopen, it was important for me to be as clear as possible to the staff and the parents," says Michael. "There must be no doubt about what should happen and who should do what".

"I met with the management and we wrote down all the guidelines for the parents. It was a lot of work, but we succeeded. The parents adopted the guidelines and followed them 100 %. There was full understanding on their part. We also prioritized addressing all inquiries immediately. The parents need to feel that we are listening and taking care of their thoughts and concerns. By the way, we always do that," he continues.

I ask Michael how the parental cooperation works now that parents are not allowed to enter the institution. What do they do to ensure good parental cooperation? "We are generally very aware of how we communicate with the parents," Michael replies. "We want to keep them well informed so they can talk to the children about their experiences at home. For example, we make sure to write to the parents every day about what we have been doing. We also make a monthly plan and a weekly plan that we share. In addition, we have placed our noticeboard outside so that parents can look at it with the children. Right now, we have a project on sustainability and waste and you can read about it on the noticeboard".



Caption: The noticeboard now hangs outside.

Less time on small talk and more time to the children

The guidelines for having parents in the childcare institutions in Denmark have been relaxed, and now you must avoid crowds. In addition, right now we must have a maximum of 50 people gathered inside. Therefore, it depends largely on the institution's physical environment whether you can invite the parents inside. Michael has decided that the drop-off and pick-up of the children will continue to take place outside. "We have created a good structure, so it is the same adult who receives the children at the gate in the morning and the same way in the afternoon. It makes the children more independent. In addition, the childcare workers do not spend as much time on small talk as before, but can instead spend the time on the children," says Michael.

The playground looked like a spider web

"When we started up after the lockdown, we had to work with fixed small groups of children with the same adult attached," says Michael. "The playground was divided by strings into small spaces where the different groups could stay. It looked like a spider web. But it worked. The adults were present and at ease and it calmed the children down. Everyone knew where they were going to be, and it worked really well for the children".

Now that the guidelines have been relaxed, Michael can see that the childcare workers are once again leaving the children to solve practical tasks, but he has addressed this. He has discussed with the childcare workers how they remain present and do not fall back into old routines.

The other childcare institutions in Randers Municipality agree that the small groups have increased most children's well-being and learning. There are fewer conflicts and better learning environments. The downside, of course, is that it can be a little rigid and that some children miss their friends in the other groups. In the 2nd phase of the reopening, the children were again allowed to be together in larger groups.

The children love nature

In the reopening phase after the COVID-19 lockdown, one of the requirements has been that the childcare institutions should mainly stay outside. It has been easy for Michael to live up to; "outdoor life is part of our profile and has always been so. It has not changed during the corona pandemic," says Michael.

Nevertheless, the importance of nature for the well-being of children have been confirmed. They use the areas around the institution more and benefit from being located with fields and woods nearby. Not all childcare institutions in Randers Municipality have been used to being outside so much. Some of their experiences have been the following: "The gross motor skills of the youngest children have really improved, and the language development has been strengthened by the children being more outside", "there are far fewer conflicts between the children and there is less noise" and "the children's imagination is challenged more".

I ask Michael if there are any challenges in having to be more outside now that it is going to be winter. "It just requires good warm clothes," he replies. The winter season is just as interesting and instructive as the rest of the year, Michael believes. It is about using the opportunities that nature provides. Moreover, the children love it.

Sick leave has been significantly reduced

The extra cleaning has made a huge difference. Sick leave has dropped drastically. The children have become skilled at washing hands, and it is no longer a duty but part of the pedagogical work. There are even childcare institutions that emphasize that it has been positive for the children's cleanliness that the toilets are cleaned twice a day. The extra cleaning has given such good results that Michael would recommend that the institution maintain the high level – also after the corona pandemic.

Many of the childcare institutions also point out that it has been an advantage for the children's creativity that some of the toys (those that cannot be cleaned, for example) have been packed away. Therefore, the institutions will maintain this.

The future

When I ask Michael what experiences they have had and what they want to continue with, he answers very briefly: "Continued focus on small groups, a good standard with permanent, trained staff, thorough cleaning and lots of outdoor life". Many of these things he also prioritized before the corona pandemic, but it has been confirmed that they are essential elements of the good pedagogical learning environment.

In addition, he concludes; "We have to go from emergency preparedness to pedagogy. There are children growing up during the corona pandemic and they also have the right to good pedagogy. We cannot just put the brakes on. We need to get back on track, and so we are. In the beginning, it was very much me as a leader who had to lay the groundwork and think creatively in the new framework, but now the childcare workers have taken over. They are fully engaged in lots of good pedagogy and do not let themselves be knocked out by the new framework, but instead use it. It will be exciting to see what the future brings. As employees of the institutions, we must in any case ensure the children a good pedagogical learning environment – regardless of the framework".

About the article

This article is based on the experiences from various childcare institutions in Randers Municipality from the reopening until now. The article is based on an interview with the leader of a childcare institution and on the answers in a note from Randers Municipality's childcare institutions from June 2020.

Background

In the period from 16 March 2020 to 15 April 2020, Denmark was more or less shut down due to COVID-19. This also applied to childcare institutions that were only open for emergency care. When the institutions reopened on 15 April, it was with a wide range of restrictions and requirements for the physical environment, group sizes and cleaning. These had and continue to have an impact on the framework of the childcare institutions.

Requirements during the reopening

For example:

- The children are divided into fixed small groups of 3-5 children for one adult.
- The playground is divided into small spaces, and the children are not allowed to change groups/spaces.
- Same adult for the same group of children all day.
- Wash all toys twice a day.
- The contact surfaces in the institution are cleaned twice a day.
- The parents must not enter the institution, so the children are dropped off and picked up outside.

From "unthinkable" to "it actually works"

Half a year ago, most childcare workers in Denmark would probably argue that it would be unthinkable to let parents drop off the children at the gate in the morning. But it has proven to have certain benefits. It seems that there are fewer conflicts and less crying when the children are dropped off. In addition, there is more peace in the institutions when new parents do not arrive all the time.

On the other hand, it is difficult for the parents to gain knowledge about their child's day and, in general, there is less small talk.

Are small groups always a good idea?

Many of the childcare institutions in Randers Municipality say that it works well with the small groups. The adult is more present when he/she is alone with a group of children.

On the other hand, it is vulnerable and inflexible when there is only one adult for the group of children and it places great demands on the individual adult's professionalism, the institutions say.