

Living together and belonging in preschool

Guidelines for supporting

preschoolers and their relationships



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PART 2

CORE MESSAGES FOR BELONGING IN PRESCHOOL



Eight key messages

These key messages summarise what we learned from our literature review (see section 5), the analysis of data from the participating nursery classes (see sections 3 and 4) and the many discussions we had with teachers and with each other. These key messages are our conclusions about belonging and relationships in the classroom, which we would like to share with you. They reflect our view of what can be important for a good relationship policy in the nursery class. They also form the common thread in the practical stories and ideas that you will find further on in this inspiration book.

Key messages

1. Establish basic rules for coexistence in your classroom. Make it clear what you consider important.
2. Give preschoolers confidence in social situations. Preschoolers are social agents.
3. Wait a moment before intervening and observe... Perhaps the preschoolers will regulate themselves and each other?
4. Belonging is not always peace and harmony. Conflicts can and may arise!
5. Look beyond individual competencies. Respond to group dynamics.
6. Working on social-emotional development and language go hand in hand.
7. The space and materials in the classroom influence children's sense of belonging.
8. Look at conflicting interests from different perspectives.



Key message 1

Establish basic rules for coexistence in your classroom.
Make it clear what you consider important.

Preschoolers do not automatically know social rules. Social rules are learning processes that develop through various experiences. Children who do not follow rules are not 'naughty' but are learning. For many (new) preschoolers, not only school but also functioning in a group is still unfamiliar, especially functioning in a class group. This requires adjustments, every school year anew. It also requires practice. Especially when there are big differences between preschoolers or when, for example, different social rules apply at home.

The basic rules for living together can be expressed in different ways in a class, but essentially often boil down to having respect for yourself, for others and for the material environment. It is also certainly useful to make the basic rules visual, so that they are always visible.

In addition, be aware that as an adult, you are a role model for a climate of cooperation in the classroom. Invest in relationships with preschoolers and between preschoolers, and make it clear to yourself how you want to exemplify these basic rules. This way, the rules will also be 'tangibly' present in your classroom.



Key message 2

Give preschoolers confidence in social situations.
Preschoolers are social agents.

Preschoolers are often underestimated in the role they can play socially. Even at a very young age (even as babies), they are aware of others and focus on their reactions. Preschoolers are, by definition, 'agents' in their own relationships.

Although it is up to the teacher to lay down the basic rules for interacting with each other (see key message 1), the preschoolers are then involved in the day-to-day implementation. Learning to interact with each other is a process that can only be achieved together. You cannot do it for them because you are not always there and you have not seen everything. In addition, it is an important learning process for preschoolers to find their own place in the group and relate to others. You can encourage and support them in this by observing and listening to children carefully and learning about what they themselves find important. Even the youngest preschoolers can already indicate this. And that can sometimes differ from what you, as a teacher, expect.



Key message 3:

Wait a moment before intervening and observe...

Perhaps the children will regulate themselves and each other?

Immediate intervention by the teacher is not always necessary. Even young children can sense when someone is sad, for example, and can take the initiative to comfort them, even if the teacher has not noticed. This is in line with key message 2. Therefore, wait a moment and see how they handle it themselves.

On the other hand, intervention is sometimes necessary, but that does not mean it will lead to the desired result. You should not underestimate the effect of your own intervention, but you should not overestimate it either. For example, if you ask a toddler not to shout, the effect is often temporary. But perhaps another toddler in the corner has heard this and repeats it. Other toddlers can then take over the role of the teacher for a moment... and that sometimes has more effect.

The lack of (long-term) effects of your intervention may be related to your beliefs, which differ from the values of the preschoolers. For example, why do you think it is necessary to intervene when children shout at each other? Perhaps this conflicts with what preschoolers themselves consider important at that moment? How can you take their perspective into account? As a teacher, you are initially more of a mediator or protector than a boss.

The strength of the group is therefore equal to the strength of the teacher. Not only the teacher but also the preschoolers are (jointly) responsible for belonging in the classroom.

Key message 4:

Belonging is not always peace and harmony. Conflicts can and may arise!



Creating a *sense of* belonging is important in a classroom, but it is normal that things are not always peaceful and harmonious. Belonging is not simply '*everyone being happy*'.

As a teacher, you must also recognise and support the *politics of* belonging in your classroom, for example by teaching children how to deal with social positions within the group. In addition, you must teach them how to deal with the fact that social positions can change in different situations. As a teacher, you observe how this sometimes leads to inclusion and exclusion and you can talk to preschoolers about this. In this way, you teach them to listen to what others have to say about this and to come up with solutions that include everyone in a positive way.

As a teacher, you must be particularly alert to negative patterns that threaten to trap some children in a social position they do not want. If this systematically damages their *sense of* belonging and the child withdraws or rebels, it is important to pay attention to this. How is this maintained? What role might you yourself play? How can you model that things can be different? If this proves difficult, it may be necessary for the teacher to act as the boss after all.



Key message 5:

Look beyond individual competencies. Respond to group dynamics.

It is certainly important to stimulate social skills so that children can build better relationships. But the reverse is also true: children who have better relationships have more opportunities to practise their social skills through play. Building social relationships and creating a positive dynamic in the classroom are not a 'luxury', because they have an impact on all areas of development.

Social difficulties are accordingly best viewed from the social position assigned to the preschooler within the group. For example, if there are no situations involving shared leadership in a group, if preschoolers are not given the opportunity to experiment with discussions during break times, or if the same preschooler is repeatedly excluded, then he or she will have few opportunities for social learning. Simply working on the social skills of the individual child will not improve his or her position in the group. The group must also give the child opportunities to interact and thus learn social skills.

Working with the children to understand which groups (communities) exist in the classroom, what is valuable to the children in these groups, and how they set boundaries for this, offers the most opportunities for growth for all children. If you make this discussable and encourage them to listen carefully to each other, you will see that most children are quite flexible and willing to give each other new opportunities.



Key message 6:

Working on social-emotional development and language go hand in hand.

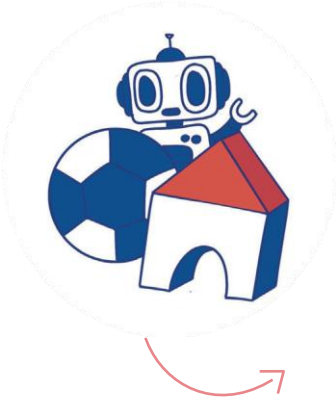


A rich language offers more opportunities for quality relationships and therefore also for inclusion, for finding your place in the group. Preschoolers who are proficient in language are therefore more often chosen as playmates. Children who have little language or use it infrequently (for various reasons) are more likely to be socially excluded.

Conversely, children who have many strong social contacts develop richer language through interaction. Among other things, they learn to better anticipate the reactions of others in their communication, which results in more responses. They can then build on that input. Children who are less popular in the group miss out on these language learning opportunities.

As a teacher, it is important that you support all children in their interactions, both in terms of their language development and their social development. When conflicts arise, for example, it is often the children who are most proficient in language who tell you what others have done wrong, which means you only get one perspective. Sometimes there are also children who say nothing and just 'look questioningly' at the teacher. They do this because they don't understand *'huh, what is he doing now?'*, *'what's happening, is this OK?'*, or because they want to object non-verbally to a rule being broken *'teacher, that's not allowed, is it?'*. Finally, there are children who show their anger through their behaviour. They too can look questioningly, thinking *'oh dear, did she see that?'* or *'help me, I can't do it on my own'*.

As a teacher, help all children to express what they have seen or done and how they feel about it. Finding the words to describe emotions is therefore crucial. It can mean the difference between aggressive behaviour (because you cannot make yourself understood in any other way) or opportunities for connection (gaining a better understanding of each other's point of view). When children learn to talk about situations based on their own experiences and emotions, they also learn to reflect on their own role and see what they can do differently next time.



Key message 7:

The space and materials in the classroom influence children's sense of belonging.

The space and materials in the environment have more influence on relationships between preschoolers than we think. Just think of a popular toy that preschoolers fight over. Something like that can take away opportunities to play. But it can also be an opportunity to learn to wait your turn.

The same applies to space: simply having a place at a table can determine whether you are allowed to play with clay or not. Your place in the circle, for example sitting next to the teacher, can also be experienced as part of your social status.

As a teacher, you must therefore make conscious choices regarding the space and materials in terms of whether they encourage or hinder interaction. Can all the children see each other in the circle? Are there enough seats at the table? Are there enough materials for everyone to play? If there is still discussion about this, you can work together to find solutions through mediation. Perhaps the solution is to make changes to the space (add a table, make the corner more spacious) or even outside the classroom (go outside together for a while)?



Key message 8:

Look at conflicting interests from different perspectives.

It is inherent in social situations that there are always different perspectives from different parties involved, each with their own interests and needs. The individual rights of one child may conflict with the rights of other children or with collective rights (e.g. *'I want to play there with you alone'* versus *'we want to play there too'*). One democratic right may conflict with another (e.g. *'everyone can stand at the front of the queue'* versus *'the youngest children go first'*).

It is logical that you cannot always do right by everyone, because there is often no single solution that works for everyone.

It is particularly important to be aware of habits and patterns that systematically reduce certain preschoolers' opportunities for belonging. It is also advisable to discuss conflicting interests with colleagues. After all, other people can offer different perspectives, with an eye for other needs and interests.



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Belonging in preschool ... It sounds romantic, but practice shows that living together in a class can cause fireworks! How can nursery children form a 'group' and build good relationships with each other? And how can you, as a teacher, give nursery children a voice, choice and agency in their social relationships in the class?

In this inspirational book, we discuss the results of the practice-oriented scientific research 'Relationships between preschoolers: assumptions of teachers and the voice of preschoolers' (Education & Development, UCLL). We do this on the basis of practical stories, practical tips and the theoretical framework on belonging.

*To read in one go
Or occasionally
When feeling
the urge*



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