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Children and democracy in daily life

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The most important thing for children is to participate

Many educators focus on teaching children 'formal' democratic skills; for example asking them to sit in a circle and make decisions on common rights and values, or teaching them how to debate and to conduct discussions with a chairman. We think that the most important thing is for children to learn and understand democracy as a basic belief that there is room for everybody's voice, and that this attitude is a part of a richer mutual life. However, these understandings can only be developed through children's own experiences, and can be developed only in an environment where the adults show the way.

In practice this means allowing children to have an influence on the rules of the institutions they attend, on the educational content, and on the methods by which education is carried out. This is a learning process for the children, and it is important that it is made very clear to them when, on which level, and on what matters they can exert their influence. In this way they will understand that democracy is a way of life; a practical attitude rather than a formal element, and this basic understanding of democracy will be reflected in their daily life.

Everyday life is a combination of constraint and freedom. In the freedom lies the opportunity for the child's choices, a cornerstone of democracy. Understanding the essential meaning of choice is a long learning process for children: small children are inclined not to choose, because they realise that they lose the 'not chosen' and they want to have it all; for example, they choose the red ice-cream instead of the yellow one, but reach out both hands to get both! Following are some examples of institutional choices seen from the perspective of the child.

My day in the institution, some choices and experiences

In the morning:

1. Why do I have to go to the kindergarten? Do I? (Is the explanation understood)
2. Which food shall I bring for lunch? (Which clothes? May I choose myself?)

In the kindergarten:

3. Who shall I play with?
What shall I play?
When am I allowed to play? (How wide are the limits and the contents?)
4. Do I have influence on the everyday rhythm in the kindergarten - breaks, lunch and afternoon tea, and fruit?
If I have made a good play-group, can I go to lunch later?
Is the tidying-up more important than our car-race?
5. How can I tackle different children? Can I make Peter be the dog all day?

6. Does the kindergarten look upon my interests as troublesome ... or do they help me with my interests? (Stupidity and ignorance are enemies of democracy - choice takes place without comprehensive knowledge.)

To learn democracy as child is the precursor of managing power in the interests of all people as an adult.