

Can I Take Care of Other People's Children? *Helle Heckmann*

Parenting is a life-long, full-time job. One can never set that responsibility aside, night or day. The question for me as a professional care provider is whether I can take care of other people's children.

Am I able to provide the individual consideration that each child requires? I don't want to replace the parents, but I do want to create a stable and caring everyday environment.

I would not be able to if I weren't myself a mother (I don't consider being a parent a prerequisite for others but a necessity for me personally), or if I did not carry an anthroposophical understanding of humanity. It is always meaningful to work with children, but to go deeper into the spiritual development of the human being and to consider my work as a part of my own self-education links my work life with my personal life in a holistic fashion. As a spiritually striving person, I can through Anthroposophy gain an understanding of human development and the significance of the individual. This understanding helps me to meet the child, hold myself back, and let the child show the way along its own path. I do not try to make the children be as I want them to be. Rather, I offer the children a meeting with an adult who takes life and the contact with each person seriously. My inner work is mirrored in my outer action. Through my insight into the child's needs, I create a safe environment within which the children can unfold. What we do in the kindergarten is not just what I feel like doing, but something I have consciously and thoroughly thought out before I act.

I say yes to taking care of other people's children because I say yes to life and because I consider it the most important thing in life to protect childhood, since it never comes again.

There will be no reruns of childhood! Childhood is the only chance a human being has to learn to step into the social environment. If that is taken from a person, we have missed our goal: to develop love of our fellow human beings. Without that, there is no humanity.

In 1987, I started the kindergarten Nøkken in my home as a daycare for children under three years of age. The youngest child, my own, was two months old, and the oldest was two years old.

In Denmark, about 80 percent of children over one year old are cared for by people other than their parents. Before the child reaches kindergarten, he or she has generally been exposed to up to four different childcare options including private childcare, community daycare centers, nurseries, and play groups. During the most important years of life, he or she has been exposed to the care of several different adults, and unknown numbers of other children. The most vulnerable time in a person's life has been the most turbulent. Kindergarten and school are planned and structured, but the first years might as well be gotten through as quickly as possible.

In Denmark, it is quite common for children under three years of age to have constantly running noses and to be not ill but not well either. In addition, divorce rates are very high, and this creates a situation in which the child's life is split between homes.

For these reasons, I wanted to create a home for children, a place where children feel comfortable, where they are in contact with the same adults all the time (no alternating shifts), and where daily life is built around an understanding of the child's needs.

At Nøkken, when the two year old turned three, he would normally have gone on to kindergarten, but I felt he should stay with me, so I set up a place for all children up to school age. There, the children could learn from one another. Older children could learn empathy for younger ones, and the younger children could look up to the older ones. Siblings could remain together, and only children could learn to take care of younger children and to show consideration for others.

After the first year, I found that caring for children who cannot walk was simply too demanding in a large group. I could not responsibly meet their need for numerous meals and nap times, close contact with adults and peace and quiet, for meeting the several developmental steps of rolling, crawling, sitting up, standing and trying to walk.

Nøkken is now a place for children in ages ranging from those starting to walk to grade school age. As a pedagogue, it is a wide spectrum to span, but it is also a delightful challenge. We currently have about 25 children, three to four in each year of age. A child can play with younger or older children, depending on the stage of his or her development.

We are located in a large city. Most children live in apartments. Many families are split, and many don't have social networks. For these reasons, we mainly take children from our neighborhood so that they can see one another outside kindergarten times. Parents can then also assist one another in taking care of the children and can have some social life together.

Physical development is very important. Nowadays, there are big problems due to the fact that children don't move as much as they could or should. So every day, rain or shine, we take walks. All children need to move, and if we were to stay in our wonderful garden, some of the children would just sit. Movement is fun and brings joy. It stimulates the appetite and results in a healthy tiredness. Through moving, children learn to know their physical abilities and develop self-confidence. Language comes with movement, so we sing while we walk, with great joy! In the springtime, we sing spring songs, if the wind blows we sing wind songs, and so forth.

We usually walk for about twenty minutes to a large park. The children play freely on the grass, in the trees, and around the bushes. We adults bring along our handiwork projects and stay in one place so the children know where we are. We try not to interfere too much with their activities. We also limit surveillance and comments about the children's behavior.

Of course, there are rules of behavior. The children may fight, but they may not bite, hit others on the head or face, pinch, or scratch. When a child says, "No thanks," it means to stop, and *it must be respected*.

Children between one and two years old, and some of the three year olds too, observe their environment, participating a little but clearly staying close to one of the adults whom they use as the center of their activities. The older they get the wider they venture from that center. The big children are out and up in the trees, totally taken by play.

Play is the fundamental ingredient in our kindergarten. Playing is the springboard toward social life. Through play, all the drama of becoming a human being can unfold. Both the beautiful and the ugly sides are tried out here, which deepens the understanding that there are other people in life, that in a social setting one must show consideration and listen to others. This has surely become a central issue in today's kindergartens.

We walk home from the park at around 10:30, and we are very hungry by the time we get there. The younger children, aged one to two, for whom eating is highly concentrated work, are taken

by two adults and sometimes a student to a little wooden house in the back of the kindergarten, where they change their clothes and have their meal.

The older children eat in a bigger wooden house, where there is a livelier ambience. There they learn table manners, about which many know little. Eating together is an important social activity.

We make very simple food from biodynamic products: rice on Mondays, oats on Tuesdays, millet on Wednesdays, all simply boiled in water. We have a vegetable pate on Thursdays and seasonal vegetable soup on Fridays. After eating, the small children take a nap until about 1:30 p.m., the big children hear a tale, and then five to seven year olds go out with an adult who chops wood, saws, carves, or does some gardening.

Meanwhile, the three to four year olds are inside while an adult is cleaning up, decorating windows, or preparing for seasonal festivals. The children play with dolls, dress up, or rest on the couch. Then they play in the garden until 1:30 snack and 2:30 pick-up time. When the children go home, they can still spend time with their parents before dinner and bedtime. They are still their parents' children.

At Nøkken, the adults have quite a lot of practical work to do taking care of three old houses and a garden of about 900 square meters, many apple trees, gardening beds, chickens, and rabbits. We also heat with wood stoves, so for daily life to function adequately a great amount of work must be done.

The children play side by side with an adult who is busy with his or her own meaningful work that the child takes in. The experience of how the basics of life happen strengthens the child's own development and understanding of the world. This happens from doing.

We must relate to our kindergartens in a new way. Children spend more time in school than at home, and when they are not at school they often go other places to visit people, to take classes, and so forth. The parents experience a high level of stress from the pressure to keep the children stimulated. The home values lose priority. In many split families where the child lives between two homes, with new "fathers," new "mothers," and new "siblings," the kindergarten becomes the more stable home. Are our kindergartens ready for this?

Because all parents work, the kindergarten's short opening hours are difficult for them. They have had to obtain reduced working hours from their work place, as well as more consideration for family life. They have deliberately chosen another way of life with a reduction of the pace and a lower standard of living. This requires a definite conscious choice.

Often I must assist parents as they recover the meaning of the family. If parents and children don't develop a close-knit relationship during childhood, what will happen later in life, from youth to old age?

For me, the most difficult aspect of working in a kindergarten, is the work on myself to meet others. If I have done my homework well, preparing for the daily tasks, and reflecting on the previous day, meeting the children is uncomplicated.

Meeting the parents and especially the colleagues is considerably more complicated. How do we, the big individualists that we are, meet, and through listening to each other, create a common vision so that we can create an enlivened existence together.

Very often it feels like taking two steps back for each step forward. Steiner kindergartens are not small, isolated paradise islands where children don't meet life's harsh sides. It is our adult shortcomings that create this illusion.

I love my work and continue to believe that it is the most meaningful job in the world.

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