



## INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (IECE) PROJECT

### EXAMPLE OF IECE PROVISION: ESTONIA

#### 1. Abstract

In Estonia local governments are obliged to provide all permanently resident children aged from 1.5 to 7 years with the opportunity to attend a pre-primary childcare institution in their catchment area if the parents so wish. This obligation includes children with physical, speech, sensory or intellectual disabilities or those who need special help or special care (children with special educational needs). Currently 93.5% of 4- to 7-year-old children are in pre-primary education, with 77% of 1.5- to 3-year-old children in pre-primary education and 10% in childcare.

Following Denmark's example, the Estonian Union for Child Welfare has been leading a project called 'Kiusamisest vaba lasteaed ja kool' (Kindergartens and Schools Free of Bullying) since 2010. Since 2007, Save the Children Denmark, in co-operation with the Crown Princess of Denmark's Mary Foundation, has been leading an anti-bullying programme, 'Free of Bullying!', in Danish kindergartens and grade schools, with a focus on the prevention of bullying among children aged 3–10.

As the prevention of bullying is directly related to accepted social norms and the quality of social relationships, it is important that these values are taught to children from an early age. This also means that everyday practical pedagogical processes need to be analysed, assuming a research-based approach and efficient co-operation with staff in kindergartens and schools and scientists. The experience offered by cases apparent in everyday educational processes must be defined in order to get to the root of the problem. In Estonia there are about 8,000 children and 15,000 parents in pre-primary childcare institutions and two thirds of pre-schools taking part in the project.

#### 2. Inclusive features

According to national curricula, 'Free of Bullying!' is a preventive methodology aimed at creating mutual respect and inclusive relationships in kindergartens and primary schools. It develops a behavioural culture which prevents bullying by ensuring respect and tolerance towards each other, where children care about each other and, when witnessing bullying, stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves.

Good relationships created in a kindergarten are an excellent starting point for children going to school, helping them to develop social relationships. The



prevention of bullying is directly related to accepted social norms and the quality of social relationships, so it is important that children learn these values from an early age. This also means that everyday practical pedagogical processes need to be analysed, adopting a research-based approach and efficient co-operation with staff in kindergartens and schools and scientists. The experience offered by cases apparent in everyday educational processes must be defined in order to get to the root of the problem.

The key people in preventing bullying in a kindergarten or school are the teachers, whose attitude towards themselves, the children, parents, their colleagues and people in general is of definite value. Useful questions to ask are: how do the teachers evaluate their roles as creators of friendly and supportive relationships? How do the teachers describe different children and parents as colleagues and partners in co-operation?

The 'Free of Bullying!' methodology is child-orientated and focuses on the group of children or class as a whole.

It is impossible to speak about value judgments with small children directly, which is the reason why special social behaviour models have been created. In order to pass these behaviour models to children, a specific methodology was developed and put together in a coloured suitcase (green for kindergarten, blue for school) which includes different materials for both children and teachers:

- small bears for every child and a big bear for their teacher
- theme cards
- teacher's handbook
- message book
- song book and CD collection 'Everyone is Different'
- poster
- stickers
- helpful brochure for parents.

### **3. Inclusive highlight**

The main and follow-up methodological training for kindergartens and schools joining the project will be carried out by instructors from the Estonian Union for Child Welfare. In addition to methodology-based training, additional training sessions in improving early recognition skills of children at risk will be held at MTÜ Tartu Laste Tugikeskus (Tartu Children's Support Centre) and sessions for the



whole school in value education will be held at the University of Tartu's Centre for Ethics. A supervision service will be offered to the instructors of the Estonian Union for Child Welfare and other institutions by Moreno Keskuse MTÜ.

In addition to a network of instructors, the Estonian Union for Child Welfare has created an efficient local support and counselling network model, which is important for ensuring the sustainability of the project. At a local level, all 15 local governments have been involved. As recommended by the project, the network consists of local contacts, kindergartens and schools acting as methodology centres and Foundation Innove Pathfinder centres in all counties. The project's on-site activities will be co-ordinated by a local contact person or a local government educational specialist, who will also provide information on training and project-related events. The methodology centres will co-ordinate and ensure the continuation of project activities within their county, introduce the implementation of methodology, notify the public (parents, media, etc.), motivate kindergartens and schools that have joined the project and create interest in educational facilities that have not yet joined, organise information days and advise schools and kindergartens that have recently joined.

#### **4. Other evidence of quality IECE**

According to the 2014/2015 data from the Estonian Education Information System (EHIS), these support systems are made available to 11,090 children (almost 16%) attending mainstream pre-primary childcare institutions.

Local governments and pre-primary childcare institutions also use the services provided by regional counselling centres (speech therapists, special education teachers, psychological and social-pedagogical counselling) that receive state support.

Children attending pre-primary childcare institutions have guaranteed access to speech therapists and specialist teachers

Assessment of a child's development is important in order to understand their specific characteristics, to ascertain any special needs, to promote positive self-esteem and development and to plan education in co-operation with parents.

Assessment of a child's development is a part of the everyday education process. Teachers carry out observations according to their plans and children are observed in everyday activities, undirected play and in activities directed by the teacher.

A child's development is assessed on the basis of expected general skills and the results of school subject fields. At least once per academic year, the teacher carries out a development process orientated interview with the parent(s), giving feedback



on the child's development and study results and exploring the parent's views and expectations regarding the child's development.

If necessary, the group teachers, in co-operation with speech therapists, specialist teachers, other specialists and parents, will prepare an individual development plan at the beginning of an academic year. At least once an academic year a summary is made of the implementation of the individual development plan, the suitability of the environment for development and the future needs of the child.

In Estonia the criteria for the internal evaluation of ECEC provision are set and regulated by the Minister of Education and Research. These criteria cover:

- leadership and management;
- personnel management;
- co-operation with interest groups and stakeholders;
- resource management;
- the education process and the children's results;
- statistics for the pre-primary institution (covering children aged from 18 months to 7 years), including adult/child ratios, group sizes and teachers' wage levels.

Advisory activities which support internal evaluation are organised and co-ordinated by the Ministry. This advice provides support to the managers/leaders of the pre-primary institutions. The Pre-Primary Childcare Institutions Act (covering children aged from 18 months to 7 years) sets out the adult/child ratio in kindergarten groups. This includes a maximum of 1:8 in nursery groups and 1:12 in kindergarten groups. Teachers have a high education level (bachelor) and work 35 hours a week, of which five hours are assigned to preparation and reflection with their team.