

## KINDERGARTENS AND THEIR APPROACH TO HEALTH ISSUES

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**Abstract:** *This paper presents a comparison of four Brno kindergartens (a regular kindergarten, a healthy life-style supporting kindergarten, a kindergarten focusing on exercise activities, and a Montessori kindergarten) from both curricular and experimental points of view. The first part of the paper sets out the main priorities of the „School Supporting Health“ program, which are compared with the school educational plans of the individual kindergartens. The second part presents the evaluations from the observation of one morning program. The objective of the paper is to present a probe from the different environments of the kindergartens and their approach and guidance towards health.*

**Key words:** *School educational program, School Promoting Health program, School Promoting Exercise, Montessori School*

Since 1991, the Czech Republic has been a part of the global strategy of the World Health Organization called „Health 21“. It launched a long-term program to improve the health of the population by making project „Healthy School“ available to schools (the project is now more commonly known as the „School Promoting Health“ program). Since 1993, the program has also been linked to the „Healthy Kindergarten“ program.

Experts are working to promote health education and a healthy way of life in pre-school and throughout children’s school years when habits become fixed and attitudes become most persistent. The goal of the program is to develop the life skills of each student so that their devotion to health and ability to behave responsibly to their own health and others’ is among their lifelong priorities. The objectives are based on a comprehensive definition of health as the mental, physical and social well-being (Havlíková, 1998, *Program Supporting Health* (in Czech), 2011).

This paper deals with attitudes of kindergartens toward health. It is a probe into the four different kindergartens<sup>1</sup>: to a regular kindergarten, to a kindergarten promoting health, to a kindergarten focusing on movement and to a Montessori kindergarten. The individual kindergartens wish to remain unnamed, so we will not provide their full names, only their main characteristic.

<sup>1</sup> Hereinafter also K

This qualitative probe consists of two parts. In the first part, the principles of the „School Promoting Health“ program are compared<sup>2</sup> with the school educational plans<sup>3</sup> of the individual kindergartens. The second part describes the observations at each kindergarten and compares them using the principles of the „Healthy Kindergarten“ program.

The principles of the SPHP are divided into three areas containing altogether twelve principles (Havlíková, 1998, pgs. 263-264):

**I. Care for welfare and health conditions in kindergarten**

Holistic health, Satisfying needs, Spontaneous play, Free movement, Healthy nutrition, Support of self-esteem, Social relationships of respect and cooperation, Rules and rhythms, Welfare of the physical environment.

**II. Curriculum of educating children in a healthy way of life**

First habits, skills, attitudes and knowledge, Learning experience.

**III. Cooperation with social partners of the school**

The community of family and the kindergarten, Health promoting behavior of teachers, The kindergarten as part of a community, Healthy transition to primary school.

I used the project principles for the analysis of the policies toward health of the individual kindergartens, which I then I laid out in categories to be monitored in both the educational plan and in the lesson itself:

**1. RESPECT FOR THE CHILD AND THEIR NEEDS**

This category tracks which educational approach toward children the kindergarten employs. In what way does the school wish to aid the child in mastering the required skills and habits.

In the second part of the probe we can observe these two characteristics:

- A) Maximum respect (individual approach) – the child moves about the institution completely independently and chooses the activities they want to do and solves problems on their own.
- B) Respect for individuality with a strong component of teacher control – spontaneous play alternates with controlled activities according to a class schedule.

**2. COMMUNICATION**

This category deals with communication between a child and teacher and among the children themselves.

During observations:

open partner communication

a rather authoritative approach by the teacher, the children can say what they want and the teacher listens to and helps them

**3. MIXED-AGE CLASSES**

This category monitors whether classes are age-homogeneous or heterogeneous.

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<sup>2</sup> Hereinafter SPHP

<sup>3</sup> Hereinafter SEP

#### **4. PHYSICAL WELL-BEING AND FREEDOM OF EXERCISE**

This category deals with the importance of exercising in the educational plan and actual implementation of exercise in practice. One of the fundamental aspects of a healthy life style for children is sufficient freedom of exercise, which is indispensable for healthy development because it promotes the overall physical and mental well-being of a child.

#### **5. HEALTHY NUTRITION**

Proper nutrition is essential because diet has a direct impact on a person's physical and mental well-being. Proper nutrition is important for growth, development, mental and physical performance and stamina.

#### **6. HEALTHY HABITS (TOWARD EATING, TOWARD HYGIENE...)**

This category focuses on self-maintenance and healthy eating. Here the degree of autonomy and the degree of internal or external motivation toward individual activities are evaluated. The policy toward food selection is also evaluated in the educational documentation.

#### **7. SPONTANEOUS PLAY**

This category evaluates the concept of a spontaneous play in curricula and then evaluates its length and imaginativeness in practice. Kindergartens promoting health provide children the space, time and resources to carry out spontaneous play, which is one of the natural needs of a child.

#### **8. EXPERIENCE**

This is the category for field observations assessing the visible manifestation of a child's experience.

- A) Enthusiasm
- B) Satisfaction
- C) Indifference, boredom

#### **9. STIMULATIVE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT**

This category is focused on the orderliness, systematicness and stimulative quality of the environment.

#### **10. SAFE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT**

This category deals with classroom climate, and social relationships between the children and teacher and among the children themselves.

#### **11. PARTICIPATIVE AND TEAM MANAGEMENT**

This category monitors the emphasis of kindergartens on involving children in decision-making about activities and the running of them. It also monitors the way in which children play together, help each other, and how they can cooperate.

## 12. INDEPENDENCE OF CHILDREN

This category monitors how children are lead toward independence during their time at kindergarten from the point of view of self-maintenance, self-fulfillment, and their own thoughts.

## 13. THE PARTNER RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PARENTS (COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS, INFORMATION FOR PARENTS)

This category is focused on the relationship with parents. Curricular documents include an emphasis on such relationships. From my own observations, I have noticed information for parents on the bulletin boards and personal interviews with parents during the transfer of children.

## 14. TEACHERS SUPPORTING HEALTH

A large role is played in kindergarten by the teachers, who have their own qualities and who are a unifying factor of the whole kindergarten. Children learn good habits through imitation of a good role model.

## 15. RHYTHMIC DAY SCHEDULE AND YEAR SCHEDULE

This category examines how the day and year are ordered within the curriculum and how children experience them in practice through observation. One of the conditions for a Kindergarten Promoting Health is compliance with a regular day schedule so that the individual needs of the children can be met while also ensuring that there is space for flexible decision-making and mutual awareness and communication with parents.

These categories further serve us for comparing the policies toward health. First, let us focus on the analysis of the educational program. The SEP of the individual schools are available on their websites. From these we have a brief characteristic of the kindergarten with citations from the school's educational program, and the criteria are compared in table 1.

**The characteristics of kindergarten no. 1** (regular kindergarten) – the kindergarten has 3 classes (capacity of 70 children). All of the principles of the SPHP were mentioned in the SEP.

This is a kindergarten with a strong respect for the individuality of the child and „works with small groups of children according to their interests or age” (categories 1, 2, 3, 11). Food at the kindergarten is provided according to hygiene standards (category 5).

The kindergarten places emphasis on their own experience (category 8) and experience as a principal means of learning as follows from this passage: *“While attending the kindergarten, children learn to acquire healthy lifestyle habits, appreciate and take care of their own lives and health, utilize hygienic habits and to achieve well-being and serenity through physical activity”* (categories 4, 6). Another important means of teaching is through practice itself and through the practical experience of utilizing things: *“On the basis of practical activities and their own experience, the child learns to understand the world around them – to become familiar with everything that surrounds them (live and inanimate nature), to understand the context of what is going on around them”* (categories 7, 9, 12, 10) .

The kindergarten places emphasis on the social development of the children and

the relationships between them through situations and games. „*Through the use of situations and the planned activities a child learns to develop friendships, and to communicate with peers and adults.*” And “*A child learns through their own actions how to affect the environment around them and their quality of life, and deal with the resulting situations.*” The kindergarten is focused on collaborating with parents. (category 13)

**The characteristics of kindergarten no. 2 (kindergarten promoting health)** – the kindergarten has three classes (a capacity of 70 children), and there is a Parents Club there which is involved in providing further school activities (category 13).

The school meets all health standards regarding nutrition and also focuses on independence in the preparation of food and self-maintenance (category 5).

The child is considered to be an equal entity and the kindergarten attempts to discover the child’s interests with respect to this. The philosophy of the kindergarten is: “*Love the children as they are.*” (categories 1, 2, 3)

Through the example of respect for the teachers, the kindergarten’s goal is to provide the children respect for others (categories 10, 14): “*Children develop the ability to understand, listen and communicate in a nonthreatening environment while respecting the needs of the others.*”

The school specifies the importance of play and movement for the healthy development of children (category 4, 6) “*To cultivate in children a positive attitude toward physical activity as a means of promoting their own health, and creating conditions for their implementation within the school and the school grounds.*” The school also aims to create opportunities for movement and play (category 7): “*Creating space and providing adequate time for play, which is the most natural way of to acquire self-realization in preschool children.*”

The educational program also focuses on a day schedule and year schedule (category 8, 9, 11, 12, 15). “*Creating a sophisticated organizational chart with plenty of freedom and clearly defined boundaries, to offer children choice and individual decision-making*” Their emphasis is on creating a social environment. “*Creating a positive and safe environment that contributes to a child’s satisfaction and improves the performance of everyone*”. “*Creating an aesthetic and hygienic environment that provides sufficient incentives, experiences, cognitive experiences and well-being for everyone involved.*”

**The characteristics of kindergarten no. 3 (promoting exercise)** – the kindergarten has three classes (a capacity of 70 children).

The main philosophy of this kindergarten is to respect each child and to accept them as they are (categories 1, 2, 3). This follows from: “*You create conditions for them so that they can gradually become more independent, confident, self-sufficient, and attentive to their surroundings, even if they are ‘different’.*”

The main priorities of the school are an emphasis on healthy exercise and alternating it with rest, and perceiving the current needs of the children (category 4, 6, 8, 11, 12, 15): “*All children are equal; none of them are discriminated against in any way. The SEP and the individual thematic educational plans make it possible to devote more care to children who need it, who have a momentary problem, who return after a long absence, etc. Controlled activities are sufficiently rotated with activities chosen by children, with relaxation activities, and with motor activities. So that children learn where the boundaries of freedom lie, they jointly prepare the rules of conduct they are to respect.*” Further-

more, this passage shows the importance of changing activities and the daily schedule. A timetable for the day, however, serves as a framework and it is possible to vary it according to the situation: *“Each class has its own daily regime, which is not always necessary to strictly adhere to. On the contrary, it is customary to react to children’s current needs, their interests and any situation that arises.”*

**The characteristics of kindergarten no. 4 (Montessori)** – the kindergarten has one class (a capacity of 20 children).

*„The whole approach to children and their attendance at kindergarten is based on respect for their personality and their individual skills. All methods are based on positive feelings and experiences. „(categories 1, 2, 3).*

*„The requirement for successful physical development is provided by plenty of movement. Physical activities are adapted to physical abilities. Their importance lies, among other things, in that they help shape a sense of apprehension of their own movement (kinesthetic perception), which is a prerequisite for self-confidence and for preserving their physical experience.“* Focusing on the natural movements of children and everything associated with them meets kindergarten categories 4, 6, 8, 11, 12, 15.

*„Mental well-being is understood as a part of health. A cheerful mood, humor, and good relationships between children and adults are important in preventing feelings of stress from a different environment.“*

Furthermore, the kindergarten places an emphasis on other elements that comply with the remaining categories.

Table 1 shows the analysis of the SEP and sets the concepts of the individual principles of each school next to it.

**Table no. 1: Comparison of school education programs**

Categories examined	K no. 1	K no. 2	K no. 3	K no. 4
<b>Respect for the child and their needs</b>	Main and long-term aim. B)	Main and long-term aim. A)	Main and long-term aim. B)	Main and long-term aim. A)
<b>Communication</b>	Main and long-term aim. A)	Main and long-term aim. A)	Main and long-term aim. A)	A)
<b>Mixed-age classes</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes
<b>Rhythmic day &amp; year schedule</b>	yes, with regard to the situation and current wishes of children	yes, with clear boundaries, choice and independent decision-making	yes, with regard to the situation and current wishes of the children	yes
<b>Physical well-being and freedom of movement</b>	Great emphasis, at K playground.	Great emphasis, at K playground.	Great emphasis, at K playground.	Great emphasis, at K playground.
<b>Healthy nutrition</b>	According to standards.	According to standards. With regard to the discussed topic of the thematic EP.	According to standards.	According to standards.

<b>Stimulative physical environment</b>	Yes	Yes, Sufficiently equipped, reactions to topics, creativity of teachers.	Yes, Efforts to equip with wooden materials	Yes, designed by M. Montessori and the creativity of teachers
<b>Safe social environment</b>	That children feel good.	Plenty of ideas, experiences, cognitive experiences for the welfare of all concerned.	Yes, important for potential development.	Emphasis on mental well-being of each child.
<b>Participative and team management</b>	Trying to create a situation so that children learn to cooperate.	Strong emphasis, democratic foundation.	Trying to create a situation so children learn to cooperate.	Children learn to cooperate through situations that are brought about by „work“.
<b>The partner relationship with parents (communication w/ parents, information for parents)</b>	Important partner, Joins in kindergarten events.	Working with parents, parents are involved in modifying environment, etc.	Parents are invited to events, sometimes participate in the preparation.	Important partner.

From the characteristics and from table 1, we can see that all the principles of health promotion in all SEPs are more or less integrated. The principles are given different emphasis (e.g. in the category of Stimulative physical environment or Participative and team management), but they should be in some way included in the running of each of the institutions.

Table 2 shows a comparison of the observed four kindergartens in the course of morning activities, during which the categories considered important for health education were accentuated.

**Table no. 2: Observations of individual kindergartens**

Monitored category	K no. 1	K no. 2	K no. 3	K no. 4
Respect for the child and their needs	Open communication, aid of teachers much in demand.  B)	Open communication, aid of teachers minimal, rather involved in activities.  A)	Open communication, aid of teachers moderate.  A)	Open communication, aid of teachers minimal.  A)
Mixed-age classes	4-y.o. 5-y.o., 6-y.o.	4-y.o. 5-y.o., 6-y.o.	3-y.o., 4-y.o. 5-y.o., 6-y.o.	3-y.o., 4-y.o. 5-y.o.
Rhythmic day schedule	Yes, children react to signals alerting to the rhythm of the day.	Yes, children usually monitor the time themselves.	Yes, children react to signals alerting to the rhythm of the day.	Yes, children usually monitor the time themselves.
Physical well-being and freedom of movement	Community circle, collective activity (rhymes, songs) Outdoor activity.	Community circle, collective activity (rhymes, songs) Outdoor activity.	Community circle, collective activity (rhymes, songs) Outdoor activity.	Activities including walking on the ellipse (rhymes, songs) Outdoor activities.

Healthy nutrition	Yes	Yes, the children prepared their snacks completely on their own.	Yes, the children themselves brought and carried away their meals .	Yes, the children prepared their snacks completely on their own and also cleaned up afterwards.
Spontaneous play	Approx. 2 h	Approx. 2h	Approx. 2 h	Approx. 2.5 h
Experience	Children responded with enthusiasm A, 2 children B.	Children responded with enthusiasm. A	Children responded with enthusiasm. A	Children responded enthusiastically A
Stimulative/ing??? physical environment	Things <b>were put away</b> , books were <b>inaccessible</b> , too many things (e.g. board games) resulting in a disorganized arrangement.	Things <b>were put away</b> , books were <b>inaccessible</b> , too many things on the shelves resulting in disorganized arrangement (e.g. sets of blocks).	Things neatly <b>organised</b> and <b>accessible</b> .	Things <b>put away</b> and <b>accessible</b> .
Safe social environment	Absolutely, None of the children avoided their collective, they chose to games to play on their own or were inspired by their teacher.	Absolutely, None of the children avoided their collective, They chose to games to play on their own or were inspired by their teacher.	Absolutely, None of the children avoided their collective, they chose their games to play completely on their own.	Absolutely, None of the children avoided their collective, they chose their games to play completely on their own.
Participative and team management	Mostly individual games were popular, cooperation was not necessary during team games.	Mutual spontaneous game, children agreed on who would do what, one group spontaneously prepared a performance.	Mostly individual games, cooperation during team games was not necessary, everyone agreed on the choice of a song. Respect for each other in the community circle.	Mostly individual activities, children were gathered spontaneously and played together. Respect for others on the ellipse.
Healthy habits (as for food, hygiene...)	Children sometimes needed help from teachers.	Children were completely independent.	Children sometimes needed help from teachers, which they asked for.	Children were completely independent.
Independence	Rather yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parents' awareness and communication with parents	Communication was very good, noticeboards gave sufficient information.	Communication was very good, noticeboards gave sufficient information.	Communication was very good, noticeboards gave sufficient information.	Communication was very good, noticeboards gave sufficient information.

Table 2 proves that health promotion is done very well at kindergartens. Small nuances can be found in certain categories such as stimulating environment, respect for child, length of spontaneous play during morning activities. The biggest differences can be found in the children's independence:

- from the perspective of self-monitoring the time (in the category: Rhythmic day schedule)



- from the perspective of self-maintenance (in the category: Healthy habits)
- in terms of self-fulfillment

Analysis of the SEPs of the particular kindergartens and further observation revealed that directors and teachers are particular about children having a good relationship towards exercise, classmates and themselves. All of the categories are more or less represented in all types of kindergartens. Kindergarten teachers try to make sure that the children feel comfortable and happy there and that they develop well.

It is therefore an attempt to create physical, mental and social well-being.

## Literature

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## MATEŘSKÉ ŠKOLY A PŘÍSTUP KE ZDRAVÍ

**Abstrakt:** Článek předkládá srovnání čtyř brněnských mateřských škol (běžná MŠ, MŠ podporující zdraví, MŠ zaměřující se na pohyb a Montessori MŠ) z hlediska kurikulárního a také z hlediska experimentálního. První část článku vytyčuje hlavní priority programu „Škola podporující zdraví“, které jsou srovnávány se školními vzdělávacími plány jednotlivých mateřských škol. Druhá část předkládá vyhodnocení pozorování jednoho dopoledního programu. Cílem článku je předložit sondu z různých prostředí mateřských škol a jejich přístupu a vedení ke zdraví.

**Klíčová slova:** Školní vzdělávací program, Program Škola podporující zdraví, Škola podporující pohyb, Montessori škola