THE SWEDISH ECEC MODEL
- a playing learning preschool
Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services play an important role - a cornerstone for a sustainable society with many dimensions - both in Sweden and globally. It’s about knowledge and education, health and living conditions, integration, reduced exclusion, demographics, gender, family life and career. It is also a facilitator for economic growth.

The preschool should lay the foundation for a lifelong learning.

**Background**

Based on research, documented experiences and values stated in the UN Convention of the right of the Child and UN sustainable goals for the future, we will highlight what is specific with this approach developed in Sweden. It is a fact that preschool for young children will lead to benefits for the child, the family and the society. The Swedish playing learning preschool is based on thirty years of research and documented experiences.

The UN Convention of the Right of the Child states in article 12 that everything a child is involved in should be looked upon from a child-centred perspective with the focus on what is best for the child. In relation to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) it means that the environment should be adapted to children’s needs and skills. A child-centred and child friendly environment also means that the staff working there has appropriate skills and knowledge for taking care of and educating young children. In article 12 there is also another aspect that has to be taken into consideration, namely that the child should be listened to, and thereby have a chance to influence and be active in his or her own learning and everyday life in the preschool setting.

In the post 2015-agenda, replacing the Millennium Development Goals, education for all also includes ECEC. This means viewing education as a human right for all, including younger children below the school age, ensuring that all children come well prepared to school. Special focus will be on gender equality and the marginalized children in each society. In the Post 2015 agenda all countries will have to report to UN to what extent they live up to the new goals. However, it is pivotal that ECEC should have a broader perspective than preparing for school. With early years education the focus is on children aged 1 to 5 years of age, where participation in a preschool is fun, safe and educational.
**The view of the child and the pedagogy**

Children are interested and eager to learn, but we as adults have to give them agency to act and develop as active citizens. One element in this is to view children as competent with wishes and ideas. Children do not separate between play and learning, neither should the staff. If the child is a playing learning individual by nature in our culture, we should accept that and let children’s fantasy and reality be intertwined in their daily life in ECEC. It is in this process where children bring in their own ideas and create meaning, as an interplay between the play and learning dimensions, change or expansion of meaning take place.

If we accept children’s ways of relating themselves to the surrounding world, we have to create an ECEC that is a playing learning preschool.

In the Playing Learning preschool children work with literacy, math, science and technology, as well as value questions, but it all takes place in everyday life and context and not as a school subject. This mean that the pedagogy is informal and non-formal mainly, although there can be circle-time activities which often is considered to be a formal teaching situation. Young children learn by living in a rich environment together with skilled adults, who can direct children’s attention towards content and understanding. This is one of the bases for the Swedish curriculum for preschools.

A recurring feature in everyday life at the preschool is dressing and undressing in outdoor clothes. Dressing gives the children a possibility to be independent in everyday situations. The teacher has a very important task to guide and challenge the children to achieve independence. The teacher can physically help the children or give them verbal guidance, making connections to the curriculum. This means that the teacher has to have a dialogue with the children about the pair of shoes that’s on the shelf in the hallway. The teacher can also direct the child’s attention to the zipper on a jacket and give guidelines how to close the zipper and pull it up or down. When the child is dressing itself, the teacher can describe how the child is using their motor skills and coordination.

In a playing learning preschool, children are playing learning individuals, which means that they can be themselves and do not have to separate themselves as a person who is involved in learning certain times of the day, and playing other times. The pedagogical approach respects the child, and let him or her bring in ideas and theories of their own into every situation. Although the teachers are responsible for the direction of children’s learning, they also have to use children’s own ideas to come forward in their construction of meaning. Teachers have to be sensitive and listen to children’s interest, questions or ideas, and tune into the child’s world for challenging their knowledge construction.

At lunchtime a child states that without a skeleton we would be pancakes. This became a starting point for a theme about how the body works. During the theme the children developed more and more questions and theories about the body. The whole group got very involved in how the blood system works. Together they created a blood system of reed yarn and straws. During the whole process the teacher let the children try their own ideas and encouraged them to try new ones by using dialogue.
Outdoor activities

Outdoor activity is an important aspect of the Playing Learning Preschool, since it gives children space for excursions and discovering of the world out-side preschool. Outdoor activities also give the children possibilities to practical experience and learning in and about nature. Through outdoor activities children are given an understanding about environment, seasonal cycles, animals, flowers and trees, and not the least the environmental aspect of sustainable development. Through the work outdoor, which can be in the forest, but also at the preschool yard or in a park, the teacher can communicate the importance of reusing and recycling our everyday material.

In the mornings when the children arrive to preschool with their parents, it’s of great importance that the preschool teacher meets and welcomes the family to the preschool. When the parents leave the child the teacher takes over the role as the care giver. In the mornings the teacher provides wellbeing for the child as comfort, providing routines and offering the child pleasant activities. The teacher also supports the child’s feelings and answers to the child needs.

This may be one of the issues that separate preschool from school, by viewing the whole day as pedagogical and as possibilities to teach children while they have meals, in the hallway for clothes, when reading a book for two children, when cleaning up etc.

The holistic view, also means that all aspects of children’s personality, knowledge and skills should be focused on and not a narrow view of development within a particular area.

The outdoor activities also give children opportunities to be physically active for training their motoric skills, but also for health reasons. However, children need to be dressed in rugged clothes for all seasons. Outdoor activities also give children other possibilities to create play themes than in-door, since there are more space, and often bushes and other plants to hide behind. A saying in Sweden is: “There is no bad weather, only unsuitable clothes!”

On excursions to the nature nearby the preschool, there is a lot to discover. After a spring rain there are lots of worms on the ground for the children’s fascination. The teacher can inspire the children to discover the life of a worm. How long is it, where does it live, what’s the head and the end of a worm, what does it eat? If the children are interested, the teacher can on the next excursion challenge the children to listen how the worm sounds when the worm moves, by putting it on a piece off stiff paper. To challenge the children’s motor skills and to also provide the names of the objects in the nature, the teacher can give the children tasks in a playful method. For example, run to a birch, stand on a rock, jump on one leg to a tree and hug it, walk backwards to a log and stand on it and scream out your name.

A holistic view

Care and learning are two notions that are important in a preschool approach. This means that care is part of the holistic view, looking in to what is the best for each child through the whole day, as well as caring for children’s emotions, cognitive development and health. Care cannot be separated from learning, since a situation where adults are not meeting children’s needs and are not in relationship with them, the pedagogy will not be of benefit to the child. To care for each child is also used for pedagogical purposes.
Values of democracy and respect

Values based on the UN Convention of the Right of the Child, as human right - both to have a voice and be respected and give respect to others are fundamentals. Value questions are also multicultural and multi ethnical aspects, that has to be dealt with in every-day work with children. Another value is that everything should be sustainable; toys, material, food, but also the curriculum should focus on children’s learning about a sustainable world – nature, lifestyles and social sustainability.

Democracy has to do with children’s learning in two ways; learning about democracy as a phenomenon, and living in a democratic environment in everyday life in ECEC. Democracy becomes in this way both content and a method!

Communication - the source for children’s learning and development

The main content for all learning within all fields, is language and communication. Literacy should be promoted in a wide sense by using books and modern technology, like digital tablets, but also by using rhymes, dialogues, songs and by playing with letters and words.

All modern theories of young children’s learning and identity development are based on development of language and communication. It is via language and communication children develop notions, concepts and words for dealing with early mathematics, science and technology, as well as social relations and values. There is no evidence that young children will benefit in long terms from being taught to read and write early. They may be more advanced compared to their peers a few years, but for the long-term skills to become literate, only vocabulary and communication skills matters.

On the other hand it is important that the preschool introduces and communicates with children, thereby raises their interest for various aspects of the world around them – also the content that later becomes subjects in school. It may however, be more important with children’s interest than their actual knowledge in early years.

Communication and interaction are two strongly related aspects in pedagogy for early years. Both of these aspects are linked to relations between children and between children and adults. This means that staff must have both an intention to direct the child’s attention towards something, and be willing and have the skill to go in dialogue with children and challenge their ideas and knowledge process.

Learning is a process, where every skill and all knowledge children develop can be viewed as a ‘touch-down in time’ that may change rapidly when children encounter new experiences. Because of this, it is more important that children are on the right track and show interest and eagerness to find out things, than that they are knowledgeable about certain content areas. Communication has to be used both on an individual and a collective basis. This means that the classroom has to be organized to enhance communication, which often means smaller groups where all can be heard and contribute, but also in circle time for all children, where they have to learn to listen and respect others. Some activities can be carried out with a larger group of children while other works better in smaller groups. Children have to develop both as individuals and as members of a society.

Creativity - the base for life and learning

When preschool was developed in the 19th Century the most distinguished separation from school education was aesthetics and creative work. Children should be active with the whole body and mind, creating with clay, crayons, paper, various fabrics etc. Since children have a need to move and do things, these activities become a key aspects of early education. But also other aesthetic areas, like music, rhymes, movement, dance, drama, become content areas in preschool, something put into practice every day related to the thematic organization of the work in preschool.
Various aesthetic areas can be viewed both as content but also as form. This means that children learn about these areas, but they are also used as means for learning something else. Aesthetics can in this regard be viewed as a language in which children can express themselves, and children need many ways to express themselves, not the least for becoming able to be skilled in imagination. Children have to learn about the world around them, but also develop the skill to use their fantasy and imagination as a necessity for learning and creativity.

All research looking at children’s development and learning in preschool agree on one aspect, and that is the importance of cooperation between parents and the preschool staff. The more the preschool knows about the children’s experiences from home, the better they can adapt and encounter each child in preschool, and the opposite, the more parents know about children’s experiences from preschool the better they can understand and relate at home to children’s experiences in preschool. With the child in the centre for preschools, cooperation becomes extremely important.

But the cooperation is also important for the democracy process, that parents have a feeling that they can influence their child’s everyday life by being actively involved in different aspects of preschool. The staff has to consider that the parents are the ones who are closest to their child, while parents have to trust the staff, that they may have another view of the child since it is two different expectations and contexts - at home and in preschool. And the different settings may affect different sides of the personality of a child, which is why the two different institutions contribute to develop a ‘richer’ child. It is however as important that parents are involved in the cooperation as it is that children have a voice and feel listened to.

**Systematic quality work**

Preschool education should be based on science and documented experiences, and from this background we know that the quality of the setting makes the difference for children’s development and learning. From this point of view, children’s learning should be a focus in the quality of work for the teacher’s everyday work. However, pedagogical quality is related to four dimensions: 1) what support and structure the society provides, 2) teachers’ education and competence, 3) who the children are and what their experiences are, and 4) everyday activities going on in preschool. All these dimensions are important for the complete preschool quality. The teachers’ focus must be on children’s acting and communicating – since it is here they express their understanding of the world around them.

The important concept for teachers is to follow children’s meaning-making, and acting, and by that making sure they develop in the direction of the curricula guidelines. Young children’s skills and knowledge is not of importance to measure, but rather being able to see changes in children’s everyday acting or expression about various content areas.

www.playinglearningpreschool.se

**References and suggested reading**


