

Holistic View

The well-being, linkedness (the feeling of being linked or connected) and involvement in relation with the total development of the young child (0-8 years old)

Introduction

In inclusive education we are invited not to focus on 'how do we know which children are at risk in their development?' In the traditional way of thinking the main focus is on children's achievements. Children are showing lack of progress and will be labelled as 'at risk' and will be subject to additional interventions. In the traditional way of thinking we mainly focus on the product or outcome.

In inclusive education the key questions are different. We do not focus on what the children have learned or have not learned. We focus on the **process within the child** and on the level of the child. We focus on how the children experience their experience in the setting. You try to find out 'how the children are doing'. We should ask the following questions:

- How are the children feeling? (= well-being);
- How are they engaged in their activities? (= involvement).

When these two conditions are fulfilled, we know that both the social-emotional and cognitive development of the child is secured. Once well-being and involvement are secured we see other developments in the child.

First we have to look at the well-being and the involvement and the linkedness of the child. Secondly, we focus on the competences of the child.

In appendix 1 you will find a summary of this.

1. How is the child doing in the setting? Look at the well-being and the involvement of the child

The answer is to be found in two parts: 'How is the involvement of the child? and what is the well-being of the child?' (Laevers, Moons and Declercq, 2012) These are the first indicators for every child in the need of care and the grade of participation.. First we explain what well-being is, then involvement and then we relate this with a holistic view on the development of the young child.

1.1. Well-being

Well-being is the extent of the interaction between the child and the setting which leads to the fulfilment of the child's basic needs. The child feels like a '**fish in the water**'. That is how we describe a child who feels alright. The child expresses his feelings in various ways. This is about the physical needs; the need for affection; the need for safety; the need for recognition; the need to feel competent; the need for a meaning to life and moral values. Dissatisfaction of one or more basic needs affects the entire functioning of a person. The most obvious signal of well-being is **enjoyment**, having fun, taking pleasure in interacting with others and in activities. The children look happy, smile or laugh easily, engage spontaneously in chatting or even singing. Children who feel good give a **relaxed impression**. They do not feel threatened in any way. Their facial expression is open, there is no sign of tension or restlessness. Their muscles are relaxed. We see a kind of **inner peace**.

Another signal of well-being is energy, **vitality**. This can often be read from children's faces: the look is lively and expressive. They radiate. Their posture also gives a lot away: not shrunk or with hanging shoulders but upright, not afraid to take the space they are entitled to. When children feel o.k., they have **an open attitude towards the world around**. Whatever comes in, they are ready to experience it. They are also accessible, approachable to others. They are happy with the attention they receive: a hug, a compliment, a word of comfort, an encouragement or help. There are more chances for well-being to occur when one feels strong. Self-assurance, **self-confidence**, a sense of self-value makes one less anxious or stressed. This can be noticed in a posture expressing a certain pride, literally feeling 'big'. That positive self-image is the foundation of resilience. Children then do not allow others to walk all over them, they are assertive.

When a child does not suppress feelings but remains in touch with his emotions, they will not only be able to enjoy, but will also recover more easily from difficult experiences. Well-being indicates one is doing well emotionally, is feeling comfortable with oneself as a person. A low level of well-being signals that a child does not succeed in **fulfilling his basic needs**.

We have different basic needs.

1. Physical needs (need to eat, drink, move, sleep, etc.);
2. The need for affection, warmth and tenderness (being hugged, physical contact and vicinity, receiving and giving love and warmth);
3. The need for safety, clarity and continuity (need for a more or less predictable environment, need to know where you stand, what is allowed and what is not allowed and being able to count on others);
4. The need for recognition and affirmation (feeling accepted and appreciated by others, meaning something to others, being part of a group and belong);
5. The need to experience oneself as capable (feeling that you can do something yourself, master something, experience how to push the limits of your capabilities, experience success);
6. The need for meaning and (moral) values (feeling a 'good' person and feeling connected with others and the world).

Of course, not every form of discomfort is automatically a problem. Frustrations are inevitable. But a low level of well-being in the long-term often causes psychological problems. A child loses contact with him/herself and with his feelings. The child can behave extremely listless, anxious or aggressive or seems to take a step back in his development. Because the foundation of a personality is laid during the first stages of life one cannot pay enough attention to signals indicating a low level of well-being. Also in older children these signals tell us that their social-emotional development is threatened.

In short, well-being is about the 'quality of life'. It refers to an optimal relation between the child and their environment.

Improving the level of well-being is not equal to spoiling children and simply giving them everything they want. Children play an active role in getting to real satisfaction in life. Adults can help children by nurturing their self-confidence, by helping them to express what they feel, by teaching them to deal with other children, by letting them experience success, by developing their talents and entrepreneurship, etc. Well-being generates energy and ensures that the child remains in touch with him/herself and gains inner strength. That is why we should invest in well-being - for the present child and the future adult.

There are different levels of well-being that we can observe:

| Level | Well-being | Signals |
|-------|--------------|--|
| 1-2 | Low = NO | The child clearly shows signals of discomfort : is angry, cries, screams, looks sad or frightened, hurts him/herself or others, doesn't respond to the environment and avoids contact. The posture, facial expression and actions indicate that the child does not feel at ease . However, the signals are less explicit than under level 1 or the sense of discomfort is not expressed the whole time. |
| 3 | Moderate = ? | The child has a neutral posture . Facial expression and posture show little or no emotion. There are no signals indicating sadness or pleasure, comfort or discomfort |
| 4-5 | High = YES | The child shows obvious signs of satisfaction (as listed under level 5). However, these signals are not constantly present with the same intensity. During the observation episode, the child enjoys, in fact it feels great : looks happy and smiles, is spontaneous and expressive, talks to him/herself and sings, is relaxed and open, engaging with the environment and is lively and expresses self-confidence and self-assurance. |

1.3. Linkedness and well-being: the context

Next to this it is important to look how the well-being is imbedded in the interactions between the child and its environment?

We call this linkedness. We talk about linkedness when children have the attitude of 'connectedness' with everything that lives, the sense that we are part of history, the world. The feeling of unity encourages people to look after themselves, others, the environment, the world. Laevers, Moons and Declercq (2012) distinguish four 'relational fields'.

1. Well-being of the child's relationship with the adult - Two questions need to be asked :

- how does the child feel in relation with the adult?
- how does the adult feel in relation to the child?

The more positive the answer is, the better the well-being.

2. Well-being of the child with the other children of the group - How does the child relate to other children? How do the other children relate to the child?

3. Well-being of the child related to the setting - What is the influence of the contextual aspects (the environment for development and learning; the way things are organised in the group and in the setting as a whole). First it is important to focus on space and daily life routine. Here the room the child interacts in is important. Next, we have the daily routine and the question of expected and unexpected events. Secondly, we can also focus on the child's interactions with the learning environment and play. Thirdly is the broader context of the setting; the experience of breaks, lunch time, excursions, outdoor activities. You can read more about this in the key ADAPTATION

4. The relationship with family members/people who take care of the child. - The quality of the relationship with family members plays a very important role in his life. The main question is 'what is the quality of the relation between the child and his parent(s) and other family members of people who take care of the child?'

1.4. Involvement

Involvement is what we observe when children are intensely engaged in an activity. Characteristics of involvement are concentration, motivation, intense mental activity, deep satisfaction, being near the 'zone of proximal development'.

Well-being is important, but does not guarantee development. A lack of involvement is a cause of concern. It flags to us that the development is slowing down or is coming to a standstill, at least in the area of competence which is no longer addressed. It is therefore a matter for intervention to restore involvement. If you are involved, you feel motivated by the activity, you are truly interested and driven to engage in it. You cannot achieve a high level of involvement if you do things only because others ask or force you to. The **motivation** must come from within. Involvement means that you are completely open to experiences, you have an **intense mental activity** : the impressions you get are

very strong. Bodily sensations and movements, colours and sounds, smells and tastes have a certain range and depth that is not there otherwise. You fully address your fantasy and mental capabilities. When involvement is low the sensations are not really lived through and remain superficial. Involvement is a wonderful state: it really takes you away. What you experience is energy running through your body. Children spontaneously take initiatives to get into this particular state. Play is the place par excellence where this satisfaction can be found. If involvement is lacking, you become bored and get a feeling of emptiness and frustration. The child feels **satisfaction**. The source of involvement is the urge to discover or explore, the urge to experience the world, to use ones' senses, to get a grip on reality. Initially, this 'getting a grip' should be taken literally: touching and grabbing everything that comes within range. Gradually, 'grasping' means 'understanding' and gets less concrete. This we call **exploratory drive**.

Involvement is only possible when an activity challenges you, when it is not too easy and not too difficult. Children with a high level of involvement operate at the very limits of their capabilities. They fully address their skills, they give the best of themselves – whether they are babies or adults, children who are slow in their development or highly gifted children.

There are different levels of involvement to observe:

| Level | involvement | Examples |
|-------|--------------|--|
| 1 – 2 | Low = NO | The child hardly shows any activity: no concentration, daydreams, has an absent/passive attitude, displays no signs of exploration or interests, doesn't partake in goal-oriented activity and doesn't seem to be taking anything in. The child shows some degree of activity but which is often interrupted: limited concentration, often looking away during activities and dreaming, is easily distracted and action only leads to limited results. |
| 3 | Moderate = ? | The child is busy the whole time, but without real concentration: attention is superficial, doesn't become absorbed in activities and these activities are short lived, limited motivation, does not feel challenged and the child does not use his capabilities or imagination to the full extent |
| 4 - 5 | High = YES | There are clear signs of involvement, but these are not always present to their full extent: engaged in activities without interruption, displays real concentration although sometimes the attention can be more superficial, the child feels challenged and motivated, the activities engage the child's capabilities and imagination to a certain extent. During the episode of observation the child is continuously engaged in the activity and completely absorbed in it: completely focused and concentrating on the activity without interruption, highly motivated and perseveres, is alert and shows precision and intense mental activity, not easily distracted, even by strong stimuli, the child addresses his full capabilities/imagination and enjoys being engrossed in the activity. |

2. Developmental domains

What about the levels of development? For 'a lag in development' does not necessarily imply that the child is not getting what it needs to develop, while being 'ahead in development' equally does not imply that the child's development is not endangered.

It is very important to see the child in total from a holistic perspective. In experiential learning we address nine areas of development that process orientated learning as essential when it comes to defining the kind of outcome education should strive for. Competences are not taken separately in a set of isolated skills. It considers them as a complex entity and therefore offers educators, teachers, parents a framework to identify talents in children and support deep-level learning.

The nine areas are emotional health, gross motor development, fine motor development, language and communication, artistic expression, understanding of the physical world, understanding of the social world, logical and mathematical thinking and self-organisation and entrepreneurship. Important to these areas is that the development can be different from child to child. It is important to look at the level of the child and stimulate well-being and involvement related to the level of development. We used to focus on subjects, we are daily challenged to focus on the child like the child is and who he/she is related to his culture and background. This approach is less in line with a 'curriculum' perspective and more holistic in nature. It is good to distinguish basic competences when you observe children. In this way you recognise talents of the children.

1. Emotional health: being well in your skin - Here confidence and assertiveness, self-image and self-esteem are very important. Next to his energy and mood are part of the emotional health. To have self-confidence, to stand up for yourself, to be relaxed and able to enjoy life (a cuddle, a compliment, the company of others), to get easily over painful experiences, to be able to cope with new situations are important.
2. Gross motor skills - Competence in this area deals with the way in which one can use and steer one's body in all kinds of situations where the movement is required and an awareness of the body.
3. Fine motor skills - Fine motor development concerns the way in which one can display dexterity in handling all sorts of tools and objects which require meticulous co-ordination. In extension to his manual skill and the eye-hand co-ordination it requires, we can focus on the control of other parts of the body like eyes (blinking), tongue and facial expression.
4. Language/Communication - In an active sense, this domain is about mastering language as an 'instrument' to express an accurate and powerful way (orally or in writing) something one experiences, feels or thinks. Through this, the original experience or thought becomes sharper (for oneself) and at the same time accessible to others. In a passive sense, linguistic competence is the skill to easily understand and access what other people express in all sorts of forms and through all kinds of media.
5. Artistic expression - Artistic expression is about the capability to use all kinds of means/media to articulate an experience, a sensation, a feeling, a thought, a fantasy... The 'result' of this

expression is original, rich and shows imagination. Artistic expression also includes the ability to comprehend, flavour and enjoy the (artistic) expressions of others. You can talk about 4 domains of artistic expression: visual art, language art, movement and musical expression. For this artistic expressions you use different kind of media.

6. Exploration of the world - Exploration and understanding the physical world implies grasping characteristics of materials, being able to conceive how objects 'behave' in all kinds of situations and in relation to each other, being able to predict effects of certain actions on objects. It is about time, place, nature and technology.
7. Social competence - Social competences means you are able to express your feelings and you can feel these from others. The basic emotions are glad, sad, angry and anxious. Social competences means also you are related with others in different way : together, against each other or alone.
8. Logical and mathematical thinking - This domain refers to the power of abstraction, the capability to transcend the concrete. This implies categorising objects and phenomena, sorting and numbering them, positioning the objects in space and in time, discovering partners and linking cause/consequence and drawing conclusions on the basis of logical reasoning.
9. Self-organisation/entrepreneurship - This domain is about the position to organise oneself effectively by making adequate use of opportunities available in the surroundings and in oneself. This rests on different aspects. The 'will' to do things, the ability to make choices and set goals, the power to make scenarios to solve problems and to look at the result and learn from it.

In a traditional way of following the development of the child educators, parents and teachers are still eager to focus on a part of the development. The focus is most of the time on logical and mathematical thinking (cognitive thinking), the emotional health and motorial skills (psycho-motorial development) and social competences (socio-dynamic skills).

Appendix 1 : summary

CONTEXT

The learning environment

(space,materials, activities, interaction, organisation, safety,...)

PROCESS

The content and quality of the child's experience

OUTCOME

The 'growth' in **competences, dispositions and attitudes/talents**



Well-being

Linkeness

Involvement