

Childcare and meeting

The story of Wigwam, an open house for the entire family

Foreword

Following the 15th anniversary of Wigwam, we present you with this package that includes two books and a dvd. Wigwam is a child day-care with 23 positions, acknowledged and subsidized by Kind en Gezin. Yearly, we reach on average 50 to 60 children and their families.

Together with the partners who support us in the realisation of this package, we dream of parents¹ getting involved in childcare wherever. After all, they are the principal caretakers. Together with them, we may share the first three years of the child's life. Scientific research shows that the first years of the life of a child are crucial to its further development. During this period, the fundamentals for later life are built. Parents are aware of this and want to offer their child the best chances possible. If they choose for childcare – a place where their child spends a great part of the day – it is evident that parents and staff members see each other a lot, engage in dialogue and mainly have respect for each other.

That is why childcare should be a **warm and open house** where children, parents and supervisors meet each other. A place where they share experiences, play together, take care together, party together, talk together about questions on life and upbringing. **Meeting and parent participation** thus form the **central theme** in this three-part package.

In the first part, this **guidance booklet with texts and pictures**, , we describe how we see meeting and parent participation in a child day-care. We do this in four parts:

1. **A positive and safe climate**
2. **Meeting and parent participation**
3. **Raising together**
4. **Care broadening and adjustment.**

In addition, **professor dr. Stefan Ramaekers** and **Philippe Noens** , **professor dr. Michel Vandebroeck** and **professor dr. Peter Adriaenssens** explain by way of introduction and concluding observation some of these aspects.

You can find the second part of this package in the back of this booklet. It is a **dvd** on which we show this story with the help of testimonials and images from the Wigwam association.

¹ When we talk about 'parents' further on in this booklet, we refer to all primary educators of the child, such as parents, grandparents, stepparents, uncles, aunts, foster parents, etc.

The third part is a **children's book**. It is intentionally textless. This way, the interactive reading is put to the best use. Parents and supervisors can look at the images together with children and express what they see. By leaving out the text, all parents – whichever mother language they speak – can 'read' the story together with their child. During the reading, children can refer to their own world. They may recognize themselves, friends, parents and supervisors from their day-care and name them. This way, it becomes their own story. Not only does this stimulate the language development and the social emotional development, but also the reasoning ability and fantasy are stimulated.

With this package we hope to contribute to the fact that

- *toddlers* can create their own story together with their parents and/or supervisors;
- *parents* gain insight into what a child day-care can mean in the life of their child and how important their active input can be;
- *childcare initiatives* develop their own look on meeting and parent participation
- *schools* that educate students to begin to work at the childcare, discuss this theme in the training;
- *supervisors* can inform the parents better about childcare;
- *policy workers* create a framework in which they provide space to realize this encounter.

With this package, we hope to share our enthusiasm for **an open house for the entire family** with you.

The Wigwam team

Wigwam, more than just childcare

What makes Wigwam so special in our eyes, is that *meeting* takes up an important place. Because of this attention for meeting, Wigwam realizes the social and pedagogic functions of childcare in a special way. In Wigwam, raising children does not only imply stimulating development, creating a positive climate, preventing educational problems et cetera – the 'pedagogic' function of childcare in the narrow meaning of the word. The 'regular' raising – the daily struggles of parents, their questions and insecurities – explicitly receives a place too. The opportunity for encounters enables a spontaneous exchange on everyday subjects. Parents can bring up, discover and find out what is important to them in the upbringing of their child(ren). In raising children, the sense and meaning we as parents ought important and pass onto our children matter. That we as parents deal with questions concerning this, is perfectly normal. The fact that there are no ready-made answers, is also clear to many. Talking about it with other parents, finding out the meaning of what we do and what happens to us, can be a great support in our continuous attempts to do as well as possible for our children. Because of the possibility of informal encounters, child day-care Wigwam becomes a place where the child drags his parents to, a place where parents take a breather and are able to share their stories.

Meeting is an open happening The moment of meeting is not decided too long ahead and furthermore it is unclear what is expected, what is ought to happen or which criteria someone has to fulfill. A real meeting place is a place where people are not judged or evaluated with the help of a framework, but a place where people themselves can give meaning and discover, and create the framework themselves in which raising has a meaning for them. For this kind of meeting, nothing big has to be set up. Because of smaller things – a presented coffee during the welcome, a listening ear of a supervisor, the opportunity to participate in an approachable group activity such as cooking or crafts – Wigwam becomes more than a child day-care for several hours; it becomes a place where *children*, parents, volunteers and supervisors stay and expose themselves to the ideas of others. Not necessarily to learn from, but to experience to be heard and at the same time listen to others, to be able to speak and discover your own voice in speaking, and thus become responsible for your own (vision on) upbringing. This way, parents and Wigwam support each other in the caring for and upbringing of children.

Prof. dr. Stefan Ramaekers & Philippe Noens
Center for Philosophy of Education, K.U.Leuven

Meeting is more getting to than having to

Since a couple of years, people tend to speak of 'the social function of the childcare'. This concerns for example the fact that today the more wealthy families are still overrepresented in the childcare. And vice versa: families who have a harder time (financially, on the labor market, language wise, et cetera), also have trouble finding a decent childcare for their child. Fortunately the last couple of years some things have already changed in the policy, but especially also in the child day-cares. Yet, a lot of effort is necessary in order to undo this unacceptable injustice.

And if all these children have found a place, then what to do with this social function? How do we make sure that not only there is enough room for everyone, but also that it is alright, for the children and for their parents? And what does 'right' mean in the context of a great diversity: socially, economically, culturally, or in case of the family composition? This is less often discussed. And that is pretty understandable. Because what is 'right' cannot simply be converted into quota. We can discuss some general issues on this topic. We know the groups shouldn't be too large (an adult per six children seems to be the international standard limit). We know we need well trained educators. We know these educators should not be replaced too often. But if those requirements are fulfilled, what do they *do*, those professionals of childcare?

We can probably agree on several general guidelines. One does not shake a baby. One treats everyone with respect and expects the same from the children. One searches for an equilibrium between the autonomy and the freedom of everyone and ensures enough structure. This kind of matters. But does Paul get to leave the table before his plate is empty? Do we wake up Mohinoor, because otherwise she won't be able to fall asleep tonight at home, or do we let her sleep trough her siesta? Can we come between if Maaïke and Amir are arguing again about that red car? This is what educators do: taking this kind of decisions day in day out.

The unique aspect of Wigwam is that they do not make up the answers to all those questions from some kind of expertise on what is right for 'the' child, but that they involve children and parents in their search, over and over again. That they invest in the meeting. And thus unarguably also in the difference of opinion. And thus in the dialogue to deal with this difference. This way, they build pedagogics, up from below. Maybe that is the essence of 'the social function' of the childcare. It is certainly not the easiest way. It is the way of democracy.

Educationalists have rich words for what is going on there: reflexive practitioners, action-oriented competencies, informal social support, citizenship practices. Researchers like myself worry (rightly) about how they can stimulate this kind of practices. And if we don't know what to do anymore, then we come and take a look at a place like Wigwam. Because for example, what 'participation' really means, is something you can only find in practice, with

falling, a lot of falling, and getting back up and continuing. And if we become acquainted with that inspiring practice, it becomes clear that this is so much more than *childcare*. It is about upbringing. It is about community work. It is about living together. I think we should lose the word 'childcare' immediately. It does injustice to what is really happening. Does someone have a suggestion?

Prof. dr. Michel Vandebroeck
Department Social Agogics, UGent

The story of Wigwam

1. A positive and safe climate

Childcare invests explicitly in a positive and safe climate for children, the main condition for a high-quality care. A positive and safe climate is an **atmosphere** which you sense. An atmosphere in which you are seriously listened to, where your expectations and questions are taken into account, where you are treated with respect and where you are recognized in your own way of being a parent, being a child and being a person. This climate should be perceptible by everyone involved: children, parents, team, visitors.

A warm welcome

Bringing a baby or a toddler to a child day-care is a big transition for parents as well as for a child. You are going to trust the one that is the most precious to you to 'strange' people. This can be a big shock for a child. It leaves the warm nest of home and is brought to a whole new **environment**, where it suddenly goes on to live in a group with other children and adults. A warm welcome for the entire family ensures a good start.

Well-being ... I'm home

The well-being of children is a focus point in every day-care. Because the role of the parents is essential here, we explicitly invite them to come and 'participate' with their child **multiple times**, so parents, children and supervisors can get **accustomed** to each other. We inquire about their habits in the care of their child: *At what time do you put her to bed?, how do you comfort him? ...* We explain the functioning of our child day-care, so they can also get to know our habits. This way, the transition from home to day-care goes as smooth as possible. Moreover, if parents feel good, they transfer that onto their child and vice versa.

Because a **safe bonding** is the basis of a balanced development, we give the children a lot of warmth, hugs and individual positive attention. We offer a warm lap for comfort and safety. During the meeting moments we also talk with parents about the importance of bonding, for example following the interactions between them and their children or following the appeal their children make on them.

Clarity and familiarity

Not only warmth helps children feel safe and secure. Clarity and familiarity and a **consequent approach** are just as important. Thanks to a great parent involvement, day-care and home are being attuned to each other. Eating, sleeping and other activities in the toddler group happen on fixed moments. Inside of this **fixed structure**, there is room for

the rhythm of each child and for the creativity of children, supervisors and parents who participate in the activities

2. Meeting and parent participation

Childcare today knows that parent involvement is essential. In Wigwam, there are a lot of meeting opportunities for and with children, parents, brothers and sisters, supervisors, neighbours ... Meeting other people and sharing experiences allow for new ideas and brings new energy. From this, a mutual respect grows and a longterm bond of trust emerges. Parents and supervisors are after all partners in the upbringing. Parents are thus more than welcome to participate in the daily activities.

'It takes a village to raise a child'

Working together

Parents do not just participate in daily activities, they often help out in the child care centre. Children love it when their mother or father come over to cook. Futhermore, this way children discover new dishes. And it is of course a wonderful experience when mother or father comes over to mow the lawn, to prepare snacks for the New Year's reception, to put a new recreational toy together, etc. Through the existence of parental groups we often also elaborate long-term projects. For example, parents got together weekly over a course of some three months to work together on a 'narration bag' for each child. These are also ideal moments to catch up with each other.

Celebrating together

There's no better way to recharge your batteries than with a nice celebration: New Year's drink, parting party, multicultural breakfast, neighbourhood party, Indian tea afternoon, Easter breakfast, Sugar festival, Festival of Light, Sinterklaas ... and we use theme weeks to organise some extra family activities: during the week dedicated to reading to children, we organise a breakfast with a children's author who reads to the children; in the week dedicated to education, we will be dancing together, making music, enjoying a baby massage...

3. Raising together

Every child care facility maintains a certain number of pedagogic principles when dealing with the children. Nevertheless, child rearing remains a quest for answers that starts over every single day and that differs for each child and each parent. Numerous meetings, as discussed in the previous section, are essential to this daily quest. Thus a pedagogic approach specific to each child is established. Raising together is therefore one of the main pillars of our pedagogic guidance principles. Raising together presupposes a collaboration between children, parents and child workers.

The basic outlook of the child worker is essential in this process. This outlook can be felt in all contact with children, parents, colleagues and visitors. Eye contact, smiling, touching, physical proximity, sharing joy, use of voice, taking turns and reciprocity are some of the basic attitudes necessary. (For the Misc-theory of P. Klein, see p. 23 'For those interested in further reading')

Developping is done together

Apart from the well-being of the child, a lot of attention is also paid to stimulating the child's development in today's child care facilities. Respect is key here. Children must be given the chance to develop their own talents. The emphasis is put on what they can and are and not on what they are not yet able to do or be. Each child holds a vast barrel of potential. Therefore we introduce them to a wide range of materials, activities, persons, etc.

By allowing children to experiment, they can accumulate experiences, create things, have fun ... In short, they can develop themselves. In all of this, the process itself is more important than the result. (For the pedagogic theory of Reggio Emilia, see p. 23 'For those interested in further reading') Parental involvement is a key factor in realizing an individual kind of developmental stimulus.

Self choice and action

Choosing for oneself, and acting on one's own and being respected for it, this all contributes to the independence and development of a sense of responsibility: getting dressed or undressed, playing in the different sections, choosing between activities... This type of stimulating is a part of the daily order of business in a child care facility. Parental involvement contributes to the fine tuning of the development of individuality at home and in the child care facility.

During meals there is also attention for the development of individuality. The hot meals are presented in the form of a buffet. The toddlers are allowed to fill their own dishes and return to their place carrying their own plate. While waiting for their turn, they can indulge on some raw vegetables. This way they are exposed to different tastes. Furthermore, raw vegetables are a healthy addition to prepared vegetables.

Diversity

Diversity is a fact in our present society. People differ both on the outside and on the inside. Diversity in the child care facility refers to parents, children and child workers with different experiences, opinions and backgrounds. Diversity therefore implies more than just deliberation and exchange. When children, at a young age, are raised in a world in which diversity is seen as being evident, they will take these views with them for the rest of their lives.

4. Care broadening and adjustment.

Today attention to the well-being of the child and stimulating their development on an individual basis is considered to be self-evident in every child care initiative. As is described in this booklet, child care is given an extra dimension when there are opportunities for meeting and parent participation.

Since Wigwam is situated in a housing estate where a lot of vulnerable families reside (single parents, long-term unemployed, generational poors, immigrants with a different mother tongue, socially isolated families, parents who have suffered certain 'injuries' during childhood...), meeting and parent participation are even more essential. In our enrollment policy we mainly focus on the neighbourhood and aim for a social mix of families. Wigwam also offers inclusive child care and gives precedence to children and families with specific care needs.

Throughout the years we have developed a number of methods in order to realize this care broadening.

- Visual help is often essential in the exchange of information to parents. A couple of examples. During intake we go over a simplified version of the internal procedures using pictographs. A pictograph of a sick child to explain when the child cannot come to the child care facility, a pictograph depicting what the child should bring along every day (spare clothing, diapers) The sign with the menu on it which is found next to the entry is also provided with pictures and pictographs. Furthermore, we make use of leaflets in our baby groups that are given to the parents to take home and these include pictographs of eating, sleeping and playing, in stead of the usual notebook and to help during the daily talks at the time of dropping the child off or collecting it.
- When the child has come to Wigwam for about three months, then we make a house call. We ask about the parent's experiences during these first months and exchange information to better fine-tune the care at home to that in the child care facility. At the transition from the baby group to the toddler group, a similar meeting takes place with the parents, in which we ask about their satisfaction with the provided care. When their child turns two, we talk to the parents, among other things about potty training and school choice. When necessary, extra visits at home or at Wigwam will take place.

- We deliver information about schools in the neighbourhood to the parents and we also regularly organise information sessions about kindergarten, during which a care coordinator from a kindergarten delivers the necessary information. Occasionally, we accompany the parents to the school for registration.
- At regular intervals the whole team will come together to discuss the development and evolution of each child. Based on observational data² and an exchange of experiences, we set up goals for each child and we make arrangements to fine-tune our care of these children. A more specific approach, for example for a child with a dietary problem, we will register in a food diary. We keep a medical diary for a child with epilepsy, a language diary for a child who clearly lags behind linguistically, etc.
- In the group diary we note down, on the one hand, particularities (about sleeping, eating, care ...) to discuss with the parents when they come to pick up the child, on the other hand, the group and individual activities of the day.
- Every week, we organise a team meeting during the toddlers' nap time. We then make organisational agreements and consult about pedagogic approaches and about children/families with specific care needs.
- Apart from frequent contact with child care initiatives (such as CKO)³, Lokaal Overleg Kinderopvang and Lokaal Overleg Opvoedingsondersteuning) we have an extensive collaboration with organisations in well-being and caregiving. We regularly take part in all sorts of meetings regarding collaboration, client discussion, etc.

² We are developing an observation notebook that integrates Ziko, developmental tasks and warning signals for each developmental domain. Also see p. 23 'For those interested in further reading'.

³ CKO, Centre for Child Care, a project founded by Kind en Gezin, see www.kindengezin.be

Finally

As shown above, we constantly strive towards offering an open house for the entire family. Low thresholds and constant presence⁴ are of key importance in this. The whole day, often through multiple years, we are familiar persons in the family's life. The child care facility is without a doubt the place to 'be there' for families, to make meeting possible, to offer opportunities, to (re)form links, potentially along with families⁵ with other people, the neighborhood, organisations, schools and society.

Sometimes families are in need of extra information or extra help. And for some, the step towards more classic help and well-being organisations is too big. The care broadening of Wigwam gives parents room to breathe, to find solutions to possible problems, to expand their social network, to get an education, to look for a job, etc. Care is then given informally, through the bond of trust that already exists and through the meetings that take place daily. When necessary, we help the parents to look for adapted care.

With care broadening for the whole family, we at Wigwam try to help children and parents to get optimal chances to develop and find an adequate place in society (see also DECET⁶). The combination of an open house for child care with integral care broadening does make a difference for a number of children and families.

At Wigwam a multidisciplinary team daily tries to achieve these goals. Volunteers and interns from all different branches, with different experiences and diverse backgrounds, complement our regular team. Due to these helping hands there is more time available for individual attention and care. Volunteers and interns also often come up with fresh ideas. They make sure that we reflect critically about the way we run things. This way Wigwam is constantly moving...

Experience has taught us that, when meeting and parent participation are given an important place within child care, this is beneficial both to the child workers and to the children and their families. Furthermore, we are certain that parent participation guarantees a good quality of child care.

We also hope that the child care facility will become an open house, where meeting and parent participation become obvious.

The Wigwam team

⁴ Presence theory, see p. 23 'For those interested in further reading'.

⁵ Basic linking method, see p. 23 'For those interested in further reading'.

⁶ Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training, see p. 23 'For those interested in further reading'.

to Wigwam...

For those who think that child rearing is an impossible verb, this Wigwam booklet offers a good solution. It is good that apart from the many meetings about the children we regularly work the floor again to watch and enjoy all that is really taking place. In a fun way, this booklet stresses the resilient side of children, that which strengthens them to successfully deal with everyday challenges. The tools the Wigwam team offers to achieve this goal are special and simple: Make use of yourself! Show off your assets in order to encourage the children on the journey to discover their talents. This can only make parents more eager to go on a similar journey.

These days we consider the child's ability to get as much advantage as possible out of life no longer as something you either have or don't have, but as something to be developed. Children learn to be resilient by striking sparks with their environment, first of all with their parents, brothers and sisters. This is encouraged by 'wigwamming'. Learning in a playful way is what most appeals to children, and parents will often learn from this too. Seeing someone do something, also inspires. Not just the young imitate, we all do it to a certain extent.

Parents are very important, as has been stressed often throughout this booklet. But as shown in the pictures, they are not the only educators with an influence on the child. Contact with socially competent child workers is also important. This way Wigwam contributes to the resilience of the children who visit daily.

Positive child rearing is a recipe for success. Just think of how good it feels when someone tells you how good you were doing that day. We want to feel like that more often. By using this method more often and more consciously with children, we hope that this generation turns out to be one that will use this type of positive language itself.

Professor dr. Peter Adriaenssens
UZ Leuven, Child psychiatry