

The nursery that took all the children's toys away

Do toys stifle children's creativity? One Munich; nursery decided to find out by packing all their playthings away and allowing their imaginations to run riot.

The Independent's Sarah Jewell reports
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Children are voracious consumers, particularly of toys. Their toy chests may be bursting but they are still desperate for the latest Beanie Baby or Action Man. Depriving children of their toys seems punitive, yet a growing number of nurseries in Germany do just this.

For three months of the year they put away their toys, pencils, paper, paints, books and building blocks and all that is left to play with are the tables, chairs and a few blankets. The children are left to their own devices, to invent their own games and decide for themselves what to do.

The project is called "Der Spielzeugfreie Kindergarten" (the nursery without toys) and was founded by Rainer Strick and Elke Schubert, public health officers who worked with adults suffering from various forms of addiction. They were concerned about the addictive habits that start early in childhood and wanted to show that children can play happily and creatively when they are not being "suffocated" by their toys.

One of the nurseries that has been following this project for the past two years is the Friedrich-Engels-Bogen nursery in Munich. Gisela Marti, a teacher there, says: "In these three months we offer the children space and time to get to know themselves and because they are not being directed by teachers or toys, the children have to find new ways to master their day in their own individual way."

The aim is to make the children "self-confident, able to bear conflict and frustration, able to say 'yes' as well as 'no', and also aware of their weaknesses and strengths".

The children's day is deliberately unstructured as one of the basic beliefs of the project is that children spend too much time being rushed around from one activity to another and they end up with a "reduced space for life", according to Gisela Marti. The children are encouraged to do what they want, in their own way. During this time "courage and imagination" are promoted, qualities that children and adults alike need for the development of self-confidence.

A video taken of the children during the three-month toy-free period shows them on the first day staring at each other hesitantly and looking apprehensively around the big, empty classroom. One of the nursery teachers, Gudrun Huber, says: "The children didn't know what to do but we left them alone, even if they were bored, because sometimes things in life are boring and you have to learn to cope."

On the second day the children are filmed playing with the chairs and blankets. They make a den by draping the blankets over the tables and weighing them down with shoes, and then they start

running around the room, chatting and laughing excitedly. Gudrun Huber explains how their mood changed: "Once the children realised they could do what they liked and they were in control, they really went a bit mad - they got very boisterous and excited, climbing all over the furniture." Initially it was difficult for the staff, not just because it was "unbearably noisy", but because, as Gudrun Huber says: "It was difficult to hold back and let the children be."

Gisela Marti also says that the most noticeable thing during the "time without toys" is the noise. "The first two weeks weren't easy - the children dragged the tables and chairs about and they ran and shouted. I went home with a headache every day."

Like Gudrun Huber, she found it hard to re-evaluate the rules: "They weren't allowed to do anything really dangerous, but they were allowed to jump on the chairs and tables, and that is not something they would normally be allowed to do. As a teacher you do have to have confidence in the children and allow them to do what they want," but she adds: "Everyone has to work within their own boundaries and some teachers will allow more dangerous and active play than others."

Gisela Marti found that once the children settled down to the new regime, they invented games: "They loved acting and putting on a show, or pretending to be in a circus or on a train, but most importantly, all the time they were playing, they were learning to socialise."

Two weeks before the end of the project the teachers and children have a group discussion about which toys they would like brought back.

The children were happy to get their toys back, but they were also aware that they had fun without them, as one little boy in Gudrun Huber's class said: "I like having no toys because then you can use your imagination instead."

At the end of the project, Elke Schubert thought there were definite benefits. "We find that children [on the project] concentrate better when they work, integrate better into groups and communicate better than the children who didn't take part."

Gisela Marti says the childrens' concentration skills improved enormously, particularly when drawing and painting. "Before the pens and paper were taken away from them, the children used to do one little squiggle on a piece of paper and then throw it away," she says. "But when paper was given back to them they drew or painted all over it until there was not a patch of white paper left."

The parents were also positive about how the "time without toys" affected their children. Some parents have even copied the nursery's example. As one father said: "Klaus used to get out all his toys and spread them all over the room and they got in such a mess that he wasn't playing properly with any of them. So we put all the toys away in the cellar and now we only get out what he actually wants to play with and he gets much less frustrated."

Elsa Davies is director of the National Playing Fields Association here, which strongly endorses the idea of learning through play. She says: "The most natural and durable learning happens through play and often play which is freely chosen by the child. Teachers often underestimate the power of that learning."

But Gisela Marti, who worked for three years in a nursery in London, thinks the toy-free season is unlikely to happen here because the British approach to nursery education is so different to that in Germany. "In German nurseries we want the children to learn social skills and how to behave in a group. We don't teach them letters or maths. That comes later. First we try to help them be happy, secure and self-confident."