

Uni-Kindergarten
“Universitätskindertagesstätte e.V.”
Our Philosophy

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1. Introduction

The story of the Uni-Kindergarten dates back to 1967, when the ASTA (Students' Union), supported by numerous student parents, formally requested permission from the Munich City Council to set up a childcare institution in part of the barracks in the Leopoldpark. A year later, the student parents founded the charitable organization with the name "Universitäts-Kindertagesstätte," and the first group of children moved in. In the years since then, the Uni-Kindergarten has become officially recognized, fulfils the legal criteria for financial support from the state, has a stable organizational structure, internal regulations, a competent governing body, etc. But from the heady, impassioned and somewhat disorganized early days which characterized the beginnings of the kindergarten, some core ideas about good childcare have taken root and still hold sway today; children should be able to live each phase of their development free from anxiety, should learn to deal openly and responsibly with conflict, should have the chance to grow up to be emotionally secure and socially aware, and parents and staff should reflect constantly on the meaning of authority and on a world in flux, etc.

2. The kindergarten

The Uni-Kindergarten consists of five groups, each with a maximum of 14 children. The groups are composed of children of a similar age and are in the charge of two adults. Each group has its own separate room, with its own access to the garden area. The kindergarten also has a gym room, a movement and music room and the surrounding garden, which can be used by all the groups.

The Uni-Kindergarten is mainly aimed at student parents and those employed at the university, but also includes other parents who identify with the goals and working methods of the institution. The Uni-Kindergarten offers full-time places; opening hours are from 9am to 4pm. Three-year-olds who are still in their settling-in period keep shorter hours. There is also the possibility to register children for the early shift (from 8am) and late shift (until 5pm), which is an additional service provided by the kindergarten.

Apart from the three-week summer holiday, the kindergarten is open the whole year. Since in our experience the kindergarten is often not much used during the official school holidays (Christmas, Easter, Whitsun and summer), the children present are looked after in a mixed-age "holiday group" during these periods.

3. Parent-led initiative

Parents' rights and responsibilities

Parent-led initiative means that parents are confronted with a variety of new roles: they are members of an organization and responsible for its smooth running, they are employers and managers of a medium-sized business, they are in charge of the educational philosophy, and they are service contractors and providers. In order to keep all members informed and able to make decisions, there are a number of organs and structures to deal with the various issues:

1. Membership

Every parent or legal guardian of a child is a member of the “Universitätstagestätte e.V.,” an organization which has charitable status. Aside from the formal and legal aspects of membership that are laid out in the internal regulations, the main implication of this for parents is that they have the opportunity to influence the place in which their child spends a great deal of his or her time, according to the childcare needs arising from the parents’ employment, and according to their ideas and expectations.

2. Plenum

Far-reaching changes to the kindergarten, however, must be voted in by a majority of members. For this reason, a parents’ plenum meets twice a year (if necessary more often); it also serves to facilitate the flow of information between parents, the elected executive, and the kindergarten team. The plenum also makes decisions on organizational matters, such as renovation work.

3. Parents’ evenings

Parents’ evenings take place for each group on a monthly basis; parents have the chance to find out about their child’s emotional and cognitive development in kindergarten, about their position within the group, and can also give the group teacher important background information about the child. Having the group of parents meet regularly allows for the coordination of the educational philosophy, feedback on education and the sharing of practical tips and advice. Thanks to the small group size and the frequency of parents’ evenings, as well as the openness and intense feedback parents receive, friendships often develop between parents which both extend beyond and outlast the kindergarten itself.

4. Other duties

Since experience has shown that depending on parents’ own commitment is not always enough to get things done, there are some duties which are taken on by each member in rotation, for example the provision and preparation of morning and afternoon snacks, cleaning, childcare assistance when the kindergarten is short-staffed, and renovation work. Any change to this system is made via the plenum.

Rights and responsibilities of the parents’ executive

Since the plenum cannot always react quickly and decisively to matters which arise, there is also an elected executive body. One parent is elected from each group, and this executive member represents both the interests of the group and also one specified aspect of kindergarten organization (building and grounds, finances, contributions, staff, and external funding).

4. Staff

Staff members are required to be talented educators and to be personally and professionally committed to the aims of the kindergarten. Children generally learn a great deal by example. Thus, the attitude and behaviour of adult role models is a significant factor in child development.

Attitude and qualifications

The attitude of staff members and their behaviour are crucial for a nurturing and loving environment. Staff members should

- be willing to accept every child as they are, unconditionally, and remain willing to maintain this acceptance
- create a non-threatening and manageable environment, with consistent and appropriate rules, in which children can feel secure
- be open and honest
- take responsibility for their own actions
- listen to and accept other opinions, and be prepared to give constructive criticism in return
- be prepared to accept constructive criticism from others
- understand the difference between institutional authority, and authority as an expression of greater wisdom and experience
- seek a good balance between individual needs and the needs of the group

Since our kindergarten houses a diverse group of children, of different genders, temperaments, and with differing aptitudes and interests, the staff as a whole should ideally reflect different interests and abilities, so that children have a range of different adult role models to choose from. Since this is something which cannot necessarily be easily established on the basis of a single interview, candidates for staff positions in the Uni-Kindergarten will be invited to discussions with the whole team, with the parents' executive, and will work a full day in the kindergarten, before they are selected for employment.

Staff duties; Managing a group

Staff members are charged with the balancing act of nurturing individual developmental trajectories on the one hand, while on the other meeting the needs of the children for group experiences, repetition, and clear structures. Staff members have to create a basic schedule which best fits the requirements of the majority of children, parents and other staff members. This schedule needs to be flexible enough to cater for the specific needs of individuals without losing clarity for the rest of the group. This calls for good communication between all parties, and the use of methodological approaches which will be discussed further on in this document.

Staff duties – Other

1. Organization

A larger part of the organizational duties, for example, liaison with the Parents' Executive, the University, municipal authorities, social services, etc. is the responsibility of the kindergarten director. Since, however, the dynamic nature of a parents' initiative means that organizational matters rarely remain static, and the kindergarten director is also responsible for their own group of children, organizational tasks are redefined annually and delegated to other members of the staff. Examples of these organizational responsibilities are include the coordination of the early and late shifts, procuring toys, managing donations and grants, managing the placements of volunteer staff (formerly statutory civil service), maintenance of the workshop and outhouse, telephone duty, administrative tasks, etc.

2. Working as a Team

The image that the kindergarten presents to the outside world is highly dependent on the shared practical expertise and cooperation between staff members. Only staff members who are clear about the aims and methods of the kindergarten can apply these in the course of their work and thus contribute to the kindergarten's reputation. There are short weekly meetings for the group leaders, and also for the group assistants; holding these meetings separately has proved itself over the years to be a useful method, as differing duties and career aims of the two groups lead to different problems arising. There are also longer meetings (weekly) or supervisions (fortnightly) for the whole team, in which all staff members have the opportunity to discuss any problems which they have within their groups, with individual children or with parents, to hear different opinions and receive constructive feedback. One particularly important aspect of these meetings is the discussion of child observations. Since observations are always subjective (i.e. one staff member will see a game played by a small group of children as being unfocussed and wild, whereas her colleague might see the same game as being lively and creative), the act of discussing observations and listening to a variety of interpretations allows each staff member to better analyse group dynamics, individual children, and their own attitudes. Within a team, every staff member has access to a learning process and can assist in the learning processes of others. With regard to the idea of the "role model" that adult behaviour provides for children, the team should aim to nurture a pleasant and supportive atmosphere in which differences in opinion (in more complex issues) are dealt with constructively. This means that short, informal conversations in the garden or in the kitchen can be of enormous importance for the flow of information, and for emotional stability!

3. Working with Parents

A large part of our cooperation with parents concerns our policy of transparency. Conversations with parents, whether planned or unplanned, are crucial. Notices and emails keep parents informed about happenings in kindergarten, regular parents' evenings focus on the children's development. Discussions about the role of the parents in a parent-led initiative are also important; parents are not simply customers, who are using a service with the terms and conditions laid out in a contract; they are themselves part of the "uni-kindergarten service centre," and take responsibility for the nature of the services provided.

4. Preparation/Career Development

Besides their time in the group, group leaders spend time planning and scheduling their themes and activities, preparing games and exercises, on career development and training (reading specialist literature etc.), and organizing events and excursions.

5. *The children*

Our philosophy has at its heart the pedagogue's view of child development. It is concerned with the profound questions, fears and pleasures that children have. Children act to express and define these emotions, giving them reserves of energy and enjoyment with which they can grow up into the world. This is why children and their needs are uppermost in our considerations.

Children's Rights in our Institution

We try to honour all of these rights within our institution:

- the right of each child to be accepted for herself/himself
- the right to active, positive care and warmth
- the right to be left alone and to withdraw from the group
- the right to distance him or herself as an individual from adults or from other children
- the right to his or her own unique developmental path, at his or her own pace
- the right to dispute with adults and children
- the right to solidarity within the group
- the right form relationships with others, and be supported in this
- the right to consistent agreements with, and relationships to, adults
- the right to participate; and of the participation of his or her parents in kindergarten life
- the right to diversity of experience
- the right, within means, to go where he or she wants
- the right to learn to deal with risks
- the right to learn the consequences of his or her actions
- the right to rooms and spaces which are designed to meet the needs of children.

Children in the group

Many of the rights listed above are relativised and reduced by group dynamics on the one hand, on the other they can only be realized in the first place by the existence of the group. The group gives each individual child the opportunity and the impulses to imitate and identify with others, and also to test his or her abilities and limits in all the different developmental areas. The group allows children to grasp their social role, to recognize the limits of others and to know and accept their own. The various rules which govern community life can be understood through the workings of the group (e.g. it is difficult for an individual child to break off an exciting game because dinner is ready, however, he or she can recognize in conversation or from his or her own experience that it is unpleasant to have to wait a long time at the table because of a latecomer). Consistent application of rules is not only the task of the group leader, but also of the other children; in particular since many of the rules are drawn up by the children in the group or in the children's plenum. In the group, each child learns to take responsibility for his or herself and for the group as a whole. Each child can learn from the reactions of the group; this encourages the development of their sense of self, and their self-image, and also their self-confidence, their ability to be considerate towards the needs of others and to make compromises.

6. Aims

§ 1

"Every young person has the right to be supported in his or her development, and to an upbringing to become a responsible and socially integrated personality.

...to support his or her development and to try to avoid or break down disadvantage."

This citation, taken from the first principle of the Children and Youth Welfare Act (Kinder- und Jugendhilfegesetz), forms the basis for all state-approved kindergartens. The institution of

kindergarten has become a firm part of the educational and childcare landscape in Germany, which assumes that, while the main responsibility for children remains in the family, children's horizons are broadened by the institutional set up and educational expertise of a kindergarten.

The basic principle and most important aim in our kindergarten is:
"happiness"

Children will only be able to be open and happy in every situation if they enjoy going to kindergarten, and feel positive towards their group and their group leader. The following overview of different areas of development support, is purely theoretical. In practice, the act of guiding and teaching a child has several aspects which merge into one another.

Supporting the development of personal skills

Children are in a constant process of development, their personality is still being formed. Children want to grow up; to develop and explore their full potential. This means:

- being able to recognize and express their own feelings and interests without the fear of punishment or losing the love of their elders
- finding their own way through the "moral maze," i.e. the basic ethical principles
- differentiating and recognizing sensory perceptions, experiences and knowledge
- understanding that the world is in flux and subject to change
- developing a sense of their physical integrity and motor abilities.

Supporting the development of social skills

Becoming an "I" through "You"—children develop their social skills via contacts with others. The group offers a broader base for making social contact with others. The aims are:

- supporting communication and cooperation
- developing the ability to feel group loyalty, making first friendships, and taking responsibility for others
- appropriate communication of individual demands and desires, and the ability to acknowledge the demands and desires of others.
- to learn an equal relationship between both sexes
- to be considerate and helpful
- to be open and tolerant towards children with different cultural backgrounds
- to gain some first experiences of problems in society
- to learn some basic good manners and the reasons why we use them.

Supporting learning

In our kindergarten, children should have the opportunity to broaden their knowledge, perceptions and experiences of their immediate environment and the world around them; their curiosity should be fostered and they should practice apply their capabilities and techniques in learning about new things. Children should use their new knowledge appropriately, with enjoyment (or not!), creatively, and develop their stamina and concentration alongside. Some

concrete aims are:

- to develop an appreciation of nature and a sense of responsibility towards the environment
- to learn to do things independently and without help (e.g. eating, getting dressed, tidying up)
- to enjoy the creative arts (e.g. crafts, painting, singing)
- to be able to choose and carry out activities and games without help
- to gain knowledge and skills that will help with starting school
- to develop the ability to learn from their peers.

Supporting a balanced development

Our responsibility to provide the best possible support for each individual child includes efforts to identify any problems or dysfunctions as early as possible. Where we are unable to provide adequate support for particular children, we recommend additional therapy (family therapists, speech therapists, etc.). A further aim of our kindergarten is our work to undermine sexist stereotyping. Our world is permeated with stereotypical ideas about gender (in childrens books for example). We can be fairly sure that children are subconsciously raised to conform to these stereotypes; the image of the well-behaved girl and the wild boy is absorbed by all children. Given the all-pervasiveness of these stereotypes, the conscious efforts we make to undermine them (i.e. by encouraging girls to play spatially based games and to voice their opinions in a group, and by supporting boys in their exploration of “girlish” activities, such as cognitive board games, conversations with emotional content, etc.) can at best only go part of the way towards redressing the balance. For this reason, we also pay attention to a good balance of the sexes within the groups, i.e. an equal number of boys and girls.

7. Methods

Methodological Requirements

Preschool children experience the world as a whole, and learn by action and by experience. This is the basis of our whole approach; that is to say, our method, the consequence of the children's situation, is *play*.

Methodological requirements

Play in kindergarten is divided into free play, in which children can decide on the location, the playmates, the kind of play and the time-scale of their play themselves, and into guided play or activities, during which the group leader decides on certain aspects. In order to provide the best conditions for both free play and guided play, we have tried to develop child-friendly spaces and time scales.

I. Indoor spaces

The group rooms offer the children spaces which encourage a range of different activities:

A cosy corner and/or quiet spaces offer children a place to withdraw, to look at picture books, to rest, or to hide. Different corners have different functions, e.g. for role-playing, or for building and constructing. A large table provides space for “working,” e.g. cutting, sticking, painting, modelling, tearing etc. Each group room also has a platform or a gallery, so that children can also learn about vertical space, and a mirror and costumes for dressing up games. We make sure that the respective spaces for noisy games and for quieter activities are kept separate and that the connecting spaces are so placed as to disturb activities as little as possible. All rooms should facilitate their independent use by children. Moreover, children in our kindergarten have the possibility to change the functions of a particular space (e.g. one child decides to take all the cuddly toys from the cosy corner and sit them at the table so that they can watch her painting),

We take the approach that all changes in room function are of value and important for the developing child

and we support them by allowing them to appropriate all moveable objects (mattresses, curtains, blankets etc.), in the awareness that our sense of function and tidiness as adults is not the same as that of a child's!

During free play, the children can make use of the whole building; this widens the scope and the space available to the children for the games considerably.

The hallway and the playzone (Spielzone) allow the children to shout and let off steam, to climb, and to meet children from other groups; the staffroom and the washroom can provide opportunities to withdraw from the rough-and-tumble, etc.

Children make use of these possibilities according to their age, their development and their own tastes.

2. Outdoor spaces

By outdoor spaces we mean the design of our garden, which at a first glance doesn't look “designed” at all, but rather “overgrown” and “dangerous.” Children are allowed to change the function of their outdoor environment too, e.g. sand can be taken out of the sandpits and (for whatever reason) deposited on a hill; a broken vacuum cleaner is dragged around for weeks, sometimes serving as a monster, at other times as a bulldozer or a friendly robot; likewise old tables, car tyres, leftover bricks etc. are in use as various different things. In addition, there are diverse pieces of equipment for the children to train specific skills (climbing frames, climbing rope, sandpit toys, tyre swings, wooden Wendy houses, etc.) A large concrete area is suitable for games with toy cars, bikes and balls. The children enjoy planting things, the different ground levels, natural features, trees suitable for climbing, hedges and thick bushes to hide in, areas of dead wood particularly good for spotting spiders and insects such as snails and woodlice etc. In order not to disturb the children's outdoor games when they are in full flow, we consider it not productive to tidy up the garden on a daily basis, wasting valuable play time. In fact, many games, i.e. digging a long moat, last several days. (By comparison, an outdoor game in a standard kindergarten with standard equipment and fixed-function games lasts on average not longer than five minutes!) For the children it is important that they are allowed to go outside at any time during free play, and that the garden provides them with enough space to play free of observation.

There are lots of conversations with the children about hazards and about being careful with plants and animals to enable all children to be able to make responsible use of this freedom.

We regard it as an important safeguard against accidents to allow children access to "dangerous environments," rather than keeping them away; this allows them to learn to deal with risks sensibly.

3. Weekly schedule

Various organizational and educational needs (e.g. the need to make advance appointments with music teachers etc.) give shape to the fixed weekly schedule that each group draws up for themselves, which aim to satisfy the child's need for a stable and straightforward routine.

An example:

Monday: Art

Tuesday: *Music & Movement* session with an external teacher

Wednesday: Crafts

Thursday: Whole-kindergarten activity

Friday: Singing or storytime

The weekly schedule is not set in stone; it can and should be adapted to fit around individual needs and interests within the group. In our kindergarten we don't have longer-term topic-based schedules, allowing instead the children's curiosity and the observations of their group leader (which interests, conflicts, moods etc. are present in the group at a particular moment in time) to form the basis for the themes addressed.

4. Daily routine

The same basic principles govern the daily routine; a fine balance between a stable structure and flexibility, between the needs of the children for independent experience and the interventions of their group leader to ensure targeted learning. The daily routine should alternate between free play and activities, and there should be enough opportunities for group interaction as well as sufficient time for children to be alone. The daily routine can also integrate the needs of individual children (e.g. alternative activities for those children with differing needs). The daily routine can be divided into the following time periods:

08:00 – 09:00 (Early shift) free play

09:00 – 09:30 Children arrive

09:30 – 10:00 Free play

10:00 – 11:00 Brunch and talk about the plans for the day

11:00 – 12:00 Activity

12:00 – 13:00 Free play

13:00 – 14:00 Lunch and review of the day

14:00 – 14:30 Rest / storytime

14:30 – 15:30 Small group activities / free play / tidy up

15:30 – 16:00 Afternoon snack, home time

16:00 – 17:00 (Late shift) free play

5. Rules

Our rules, both within the kindergarten as a whole and within each group, are guided by the needs and limits of other children, of kindergarten staff, and of parents. Rules are only to concern those aspects of kindergarten life which children are not able to negotiate on their own!

In effect, this means that group leaders

- have to constantly reflect and review the rules which they as adults apply (are they really necessary, or are they expressions of power?)
- must make rules which are simple, clear and justified
- must resist the temptation to avoid all conflicts by means of systematic and wide-ranging rules
- encourage children to resolve conflicts themselves, and give them examples of how to do this, including negotiating specific rules for a particular game with other children
- intervene when children are unable to resolve a conflict on their own
- make suitable rules for the group after discussion and debate
- use the “kinderplenum ” to draw up a set of rules which apply to the whole kindergarten, involving the children themselves

This means for the children in our kindergarten that they have many more opportunities to experiment with different ways of behaving. They can learn from the reactions of their peers which modes of behaviour are sensible and which are ineffective. Children get cross, fight, and don't always want to be considerate of others; conflicts are part of their development! The fact that there is not a rule governing every eventuality is what gives them the chance to discover how conflicts work, and how they can maintain their ground or compromise with others.

Free play

Understanding and cultural processes are based on knowledge, and knowledge is formed by means of processes of perception. A child discovers his or her environment through sound, sight, smell, touch and taste. This information is absorbed by the child during free play, is processed and put into sensory context.

Children can't be forced to make the jump from perception to knowledge to understanding; they have to do it on their own, and it has to be an experience connected with enjoyment. We apply the following guidelines to ensure that free play is educationally effective:

- the children themselves decide what, where, and the duration of a particular activity
- children may play alone (or may simply watch the other children), or in small groups, and may change their minds about the activity
- group leaders are to take the wishes and interests of the children seriously and support them in their play
- materials and other play opportunities should be made freely available to children
- the children should be the agents, the group leaders' role is to observe.

Activities and guided play

For reasons of space, it is not possible here to list the various activities on offer (e.g. music,

woodwork, circle games, pottery, preschool education, excursions, stories...), the way they are presented and the diverse benefits for the children; instead, we will look at just two activities in more detail in order to give an impression of the way we work.

Example; whole-kindergarten activity

Each group leader offers an activity from a different area (e.g. theatre play, examining stinging nettles, circuit-training, making a collage out of natural materials...). The children can decide using a list which activity they want to do. They don't know which group leader is offering which activity. A few educational benefits resulting from this are:

- the child learns to make decisions and experiences the consequences*
- new, interest-based groups are formed*
- each child gets to know each group leader, and vice versa*
- children learn to identify with the kindergarten as a whole*

Example; crafts

In standard kindergartens, children's crafts produce objects of no or minimal real value, their rather questionable design the product of adult aesthetic expectations. In our kindergarten we try to make things which have a genuine use, recognizable to both children and adults (e.g. decorating mugs for kindergarten use, decorating the group rooms, making a frame for the ivy to climb in the garden out of leftover pieces of wood) and which satisfy the child's desire to be a useful part of the adult world, and we respect the specific artistic expression of the children. In practice, this means that group leaders assist in providing materials, themes and techniques in as much detail as required, but stand back and let the children do the creating, however the children themselves see fit.

8. Final thoughts

The kindergarten's responsibility for the best possible fostering of each individual child is not a replacement for parenting at home. Each family has their own values and social and cultural background. Our institution can't complement every style of parenting perfectly; rather, our kindergarten walks the tightrope between parental expectations, the expectations of the children, the Bavarian regulations concerning preschool institutions, the ideas of each parents' executive, the inner values of the kindergarten staff, and the the values of our region and our society. In conclusion, the verbal and non-verbal dialogue of all members of our parent-led institution, that is the children, parents, and group leaders, is the basis of our philosophy, and that the material and emotional landscape of our kindergarten is both the basic principle and the ever-changing result of this dialogue!