



Title of the initiative:

“Brave Girls, Tender Boys. ‘We Talked with the Girls and Gave the Boys Orders’”

Boys take initiative and test boundaries. Girls are responsible and kind. This is at least the adults’ conception. But it does not have to be this way. At the preschool “Björntomten” outside of Gävle boys and girls are encouraged to evolve unknown sides of themselves. Ingrid Borggren went there.

Nature of the initiative:

It all started with **Ingemar Gens**; then equalities expert at the Gävleborg county administrative board, going crazy. He realized that all the projects he had initiated over the years to decrease gender typical choices in ex. education actually never became more than selective measures. Managing to get a few girls interested in technical educational programs one year did not mean that new girls applied for that same program the following year. The gender role was already set and the choices made accordingly. Measures had to be taken at an early age; Ingemar Gens reasoned and got the county administrative board to fund an equal opportunities project. The staff at “Björntomten” signed up instantly. They already considered themselves to be aware and to be treating the children equal, now they would get it confirmed.

Territorial level/country covered

Gävleborg county (Sweden)

Target groups

Pre-school children.

Summary

In 1996 the preschool “Björntomten” threw out the dolls and cars. That, the staff reasoned, the children had access to at home. What they do not have at home are a lot of friends. It is together with friends were games and creativity evolve. Tape, paper, crayons, bricks, yarn, pearls and clothes for dressing up is sufficient. Today the boys and girls are playing together. One game can last all day. It can easily move from room to room, out on the playground and back in again. One day the children plays “Ronja and Birk” building caves,²⁷ another day they are goblins, or trolls, or sharks. No one has to fight over toys anymore. It has been four years since the staff at “Björntomten” joined a equal opportunities project initiated by the county administrative board in Gävleborg.

When they had to inform the parents of the project they said:

- Now your boys are finally going to get access to intimacy, language and empathy. And your daughters will be getting the opportunity to climb high, stand up for themselves and learn to say “no!” In the beginning same parents were suspicious; would their boys have to become softies? Could their girls not wear pink dresses to preschool any more?



Would there be a third sex created at “Björntomten”?

- In a family the family standards sets the rules and the child learn that at a very early age, as well as the fact that this vary a lot from family to family. But, at the preschool, society’s standards set the tone and that is why our behaviour is so important, says preschool teacher Kajsa Svaleryd.

- Today all the parents are very positive about the project. We are not changing their children, *we want to see the uniqueness in every boy and girl and help them to develop their weak sides*. Not just confirm that which they already know. It should not be gender dependent what opportunities the child gets in preschool; *they are here to learn for life*.

They began by studying the situation at the dining table. At the beginning of the project the children were placed alternately boy and girl around the tables.

What was the linguistic usage, how many words and terms did the children use? The teachers were astounded. The girls said “Could you pass the milk?” while a boy could say “öhh” and the girl sitting next to him understood that he wanted her to pass him the sugar. Another boy said “öhhöhh”, the girl sitting next to him gave him the milk. The adults, had, unknowingly, passed the role as servants to the girls by arraigning the tables in this manner. - In every dispute among the boys we always demand of them to talk to each other. But how are they supposed to be able to express themselves, filled with emotions, if they cannot express themselves at the dining table. That gave us something to think about says Kajsa Svaleryd.

- It begins so incredibly early, already with the one-year olds we can see how they are put into their girl/boy-roles. It is sad to see how we as adults give up and say “He’s like this” or “she always does that” – about a one-year old!

Doing so is to put the responsibility on the child instead of seeing what you as an adult do to promote this behavior. What words are I using that make boys take and girls draw back? Now the staff began to study each other, how they behave during assemblies and other activities. They all found “flaws” in each others behavior but the accused had a thousand excuses. With the help of a video camera they got it in black and white. No need for excuses anymore.

The filming started in the hall when the children were getting dressed to go out. There was crowding and noise and the staff themselves thought they were using the words “not” and “no” to often, to the boys. The films showed how much of the spoken words were directed at the girls and boys respectively. The staff gasped at the results – the girls got 80 percent of the words. Ex, to the girl: “Oh your grandmother gave you this hat, it’s soft and nice!” To the boy: “Put your hat on!” If boys and girls are to be given the same experiences and the same opportunities/obligations *the language is the key*. If they are given the same opportunities to talk to an adult, that is equality so far.

- Now we could measure directly that she was given a relationship, emotions and appreciation whereas he was given a command. Trying to analyze why we behaved like this we came to the conclusion that the boy was in a hurry to get out. This was our expectation, but we had never asked the boys if they were in a hurry, but by hurrying them we amplified their eventual stress, instead of slowing down the process by having only boys in the hall, talking to them about the weather or the clothes, giving them the opportunity to dress themselves without the help of the good girls. Over and over again the staff realized, with help from the films, that they unconsciously added to the girl/boy gender roles. It was they who set the boundaries of the children’s development.

²⁷ Ronja and Birk,; characters in Astrid Lindgrens “Ronja, the robbers’ daughter”.