



Valuing Children's Perspectives

Developing ECEC Quality with Children – Handout –

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DESI – Institut für
Demokratische Entwicklung
und Soziale Integration

| BertelsmannStiftung

Dear ECEC professionals, ECEC center directors, pedagogical advisors, professional development providers, ECEC providers and parents,

Children have the right to be seen, heard and asked. They have a right to “today” (Janusz Korczak) and a right to have their human rights recognized, respected and upheld.

Children actively shape the world around them and the interactions they have with adults and other children. Our task is to pay close attention to children’s many different forms of expression, to understand their perspectives, to help interpret them where necessary, and to involve children systematically in the ongoing development of the quality of their everyday lives and of ECEC provision.

To support this process, the Recognizing Children’s Agency in ECEC Quality Development project developed and tested a comprehensive set of research methods that gives children a wide range of opportunities to express what makes an ECEC center “good” from their perspective:

The ECEC Treasury – Ideas and Approaches for Shaping Quality Together with Children (available at www.childrens-perspectives.org/ecec-treasury1and2).



The Valuing Children’s Perspectives: Developing ECEC Quality with Children poster is a product of an extensive research and practice development project. It presents 23 dimensions of quality from the perspective of children attending ECEC centers, grouped into seven broader areas of quality. The poster offers insight into robust research findings on what matters to children between the ages of four and six in their ECEC centers: what they value, what they wish for and what they need in order to feel safe, feel they belong and be able to learn and develop.

The 23 quality dimensions from children’s perspectives invite you to reflect on and discuss – both individually and, above all, together with others – the extent to which each of these dimensions is already prioritized in your own ECEC center. From your perspective, are there areas where change is needed? If so, what ideas do you have for introducing change? How these quality dimensions are translated into everyday pedagogical practice is ultimately your responsibility. At the same time, meaningful quality development can only take place through dialogue – through an inter-perspectival process that brings together the perspectives of all those involved, including ECEC providers, center leaders, ECEC professionals, parents and children themselves.

Children have the right to have their human rights recognized, respected and upheld

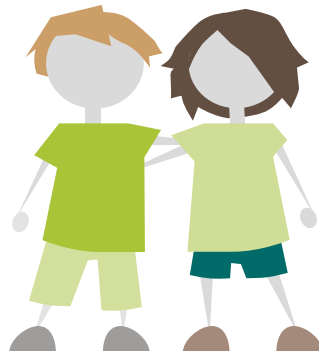
Children have the right for ECEC professionals to take their experiences, feelings and concerns seriously and to recognize and respect their rights and dignity¹.

The foundation for this lies in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Democracy education² and a culture of solidarity are inconceivable without secure, trusting pedagogical relationships. They also require ECEC professionals who act and reflect on their practice with a strong ethical foundation.³

Children's fundamental needs – to experience a sense of belonging within a community while at the same time being supported in the development of their autonomy – must be recognized, respected and actively upheld.⁴

Inclusion can only be realized through the principles of participation, contribution and, above all, belonging.⁵

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1

On the relational quality of "equal dignity" (Danish: ligestilling), see Jesper Juul (2012): Family Life: The Most Important Values for Living Together and Raising Children. Bloomington: AuthorHouse.

2

See Rüdiger Hansen, Raingard Knauer & Benedikt Sturzenhecker (2011): Partizipation in Kindertageseinrichtungen. So gelingt Demokratiebildung mit Kindern! [Participation in early childhood education institutions. This is how democracy education works with children!]. Weimar, Berlin: Verlag das Netz.

3

See Annedore Prengel, Friederike Heinzel, Sandra Reitz & Ursula Winkhofer (2017): The Reckahn Reflections on the Ethics of Educational Relations. Reckahn: Rochow-Edition. See also https://paedagogische-beziehungen.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Englisch_Broschüre-ReckahnerReflektionen_Final.pdf

4

See Hans Rudolf Leu & Lothar Krappmann (eds.) (1999): Zwischen Autonomie und Verbundenheit – Bedingungen und Formen der Behauptung von Subjektivität [Between Autonomy and Relatedness. Conditions and Forms of the Assertion of Subjectivity]. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

5

See Tony Booth, Mel Ainscow & Denise Kingston (2006): Index for Inclusion: Developing Play, Learning and Participation in Early Years and Childcare. Bristol: Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education.

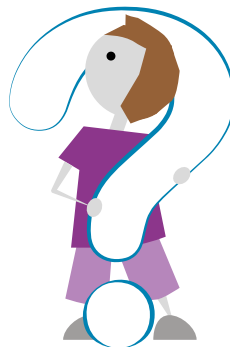
Children have a right to the present day

Children have the right to be recognized and respected – as active participants and human beings in the present – within a humanistic, rights-based understanding of childhood. Their ways of exploring, experiencing and (co-)creating the world here and now matter in their own right.

This also means that educational settings should not primarily serve an economically driven logic of future productivity and utility, nor should children be viewed and addressed merely as “adults in the making.”⁶

In this sense, children have a ‘right to today’ (Janusz Korczak).⁷ They have the right to time that is not already structured in advance, to the freedom of having time, and to fully experience and savor moments of joy, fulfillment and happiness.

Children therefore have the right to learn, grow and make sense of the world – and to be encouraged, accompanied, inspired and empowered by ECEC professionals throughout that process.



6

See Peter Moss & Mathias Urban (2010): Democracy and Experimentation – two fundamental values for education. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung.

7

See Urszula Markowska-Manista, Avi Tsur & Batia Gilad (2017): Janusz Korczak und die Rechte der Kinder. In: Claudia Maier-Höfer (ed.): Kinderrechte und Kinderpolitik. Fragestellungen der Angewandten Kindheitswissenschaften, 13–28. Wiesbaden: Springer. An English version of this text is available on the website of the Korczak Education Centre at <https://neurim.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Janusz-Korczak-and-Childrens-Rights.pdf> (accessed September 2026).

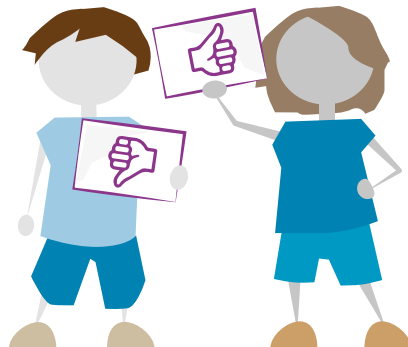
Children have a right to be seen, heard and asked

Children have the right for their experiences and everyday lives, their perspectives and their practices to be recognized as an integral, equally valued and equally respected part of processes of quality assessment and quality development.

What matters to them? What do they enjoy – and what do they not enjoy? What would they like to be different? What helps them feel safe, comfortable and at ease? What causes them sadness, and what brings them joy? What strengthens them as individuals and as members of a group? What

creates opportunities for them to explore themselves and the world around them? What – and whom – do children praise? What – and whom – do they complain about?

Quality in ECEC centers should be developed in ways that ensure children – the very people whose lives are most directly affected – are seen, heard and asked, and are actively involved as participants in shaping decisions and influencing change.



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The Recognizing Children's Agency in ECEC Quality Development project

was commissioned by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and carried out by the Institut für Demokratische Entwicklung und Soziale Integration (Institute for Democratic Development and Social Integration) in Berlin between January 2018 and December 2019.

A study conducted within the framework of the project involved almost 200 children between the ages of four and six from 13 ECEC centers across Germany.⁸ Using twelve specially developed and highly diverse research methods – including Photo- and Video-based ECEC Center tours, Children Draw Their ECEC Center, and A Wonderfully Wild Day – the research team gained access to children's experiences and perspectives. The analysis was grounded in the Documentary Method,⁹ a qualitative research methodology that makes it possible to examine not only children's verbal accounts but also their many other forms of expression, including drawings, photographs, actions and interactional practices.

Based on the analysis of the collected material, the researchers identified a set of quality dimensions that make children's perspectives on their ECEC centers visible and understandable. To ensure that these methods would also be useful in professional practice, they were piloted and further refined in two professional development programs involving early childhood ECEC professionals. Here, they are brought together in the ECEC Treasury – Ideas and Approaches for Shaping Quality Together with Children, where they support not only the systematic exploration of children's perspectives in ECEC settings but also documentation and collaborative quality development involving all stakeholders.

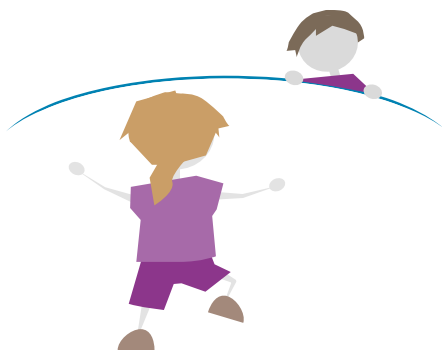


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Based in part on earlier work published in: Iris Nentwig-Gesemann, Bastian Walther and Minste Thedinga (2017): Kita-Qualität aus Kindersicht – Die Quaki-Studie. Abschlussbericht. [ECEC Quality from Children's Perspectives. Final Report]. Berlin: DESI Institut/Deutsche Kinder- und Jugendstiftung.

9

See Ralf Bohnsack (2014): Documentary Method. In Uwe Flick (ed.): SAGE Handbook of Analyzing Qualitative Data, 217–233. London: SAGE Publications.



How can you integrate the Valuing Children's Perspectives poster into your professional practice?

The quality dimensions presented on the poster are designed to **inspire and support your own internal quality development process**. They:

- can help you gain an overview of the findings from a recent research project;
- serve as a daily reminder that recognizing and respecting children's perspectives lies at the heart of process quality in ECEC and, like a seismograph, should accompany every quality development initiative;
- invite you to discuss and reflect together with your team, parents and children. What significance do the individual quality dimensions already have in your ECEC center? Which dimensions are important to the children in your setting – and which are not?

Together with the ECEC Treasury – Ideas and Approaches for Shaping Quality Together with Children, the poster offers a variety of ways to **actively incorporate children's perspectives into quality development in your ECEC center**.

- Choose one of the quality dimensions presented on the poster and work through the accompanying reflection questions on the corresponding card in the ECEC Treasury.
- Choose one of the **data collection methods from the ECEC Treasury** and use it in your ECEC center. Discover

for yourself which topics and experiences matter most to the children in your setting. You can then compare your findings with the quality dimensions presented on the poster, which are the result of extensive research. You and the children are sure to discover new insights together. To support you in analyzing the material you collect, the ECEC Treasury includes a corresponding analysis card and an analysis example for each data collection method.

- Documentation and presentation of children's perspectives are essential for initiating dialogue and fostering an inter-perspectival approach to quality development that brings together multiple perspectives. The six documentation cards enable you to **make your observations and insights into children's perspectives visible**, share them with your team, parents and children, and use them as a starting point for discussion.

With our ECEC Treasury, we invite you and the children in your ECEC center to embark on an exciting journey of research and discovery. Through these methodologically structured shifts in perspective, you will gain not only valuable insights into children's perspectives, but also into your own. Children will open a window onto their world. Be curious and attentive. Look closely, listen carefully, take your time – and trust the children to show you the way!

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