Children's health is of great importance for their ongoing growth and development. It is therefore important to increase our knowledge and understanding of the factors that influence children's health. The main areas of interest for the Swedish part of the ArctiChildren project are bullying and stress-related problems, as well as children's experiences of health and well-being, ethical learning and school. In this chapter we will discuss some perspectives on well-being among children from a Swedish viewpoint and we will present some thoughts on how we as adults can aid the process of promoting health together with children.

Children and health

Health is created and experienced in daily life, and children's meetings with all adults are important for their growth, learning, play and development. Such meetings can promote children's healthy development, but in some cases they can also lead to the opposite. When the World Health Organization (WHO) was established in 1948, two important statements about health were approved. One of these was the well-known definition of health: “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” According to Wass (1994), this decision has been important since then, because it not only defines health in terms of the occurrence of medically defined problems but also provides a much wider perspective on the view of health. In addition, it offers a goal for human beings to strive for. The other important statement was about the role the WHO thought that governments had in the promotion of health: “Governments have a responsibility for the health of their people which can be fulfilled only by the provision of adequate health and social measures.” In spite of the time that has passed since the WHO’s statements were made, it has been observed in the last 10-20 years that Swedish school children’s mental health is not what it ought to be. Most children and young people feel well, but the proportion of young people reporting psychosocial health problems has increased in Sweden (SOU, 2006:77; Öhrling, 2006).

The question of how children experience their health might seem easy to answer, but new problems arise when we try to understand the meaning of the concept of health. When planning to ask children in the compulsory nine-year school system how they regard their state of health, we had to think carefully about the formulation of the questions. It has proven to be easier for children to understand and answer questions based on how they feel than questions about their health (Kostenius & Öhrling, 2006). As a concept, health is often seen in relation to a number of other concepts such as illness, injury, inability and disability. For this reason, the meaning of the concept of health has often been used to illustrate lack of health or the occurrence of health problems. According to Nationalencyklopedin (1998), the Swedish word for health, hälsa, stems from Old Swedish, means 'happiness', and is related to the sense of the word hel ('whole'). From such a perspective, a healthy life appears to be synonymous with a "happy" or a "good" life, according to Bremberg (SOU 2006,77). From a holistic perspective, the idea of health may be described as people’s potential or ability to perform certain actions or realise certain goals. In meetings with children and in dealing with issues concerning children’s health, an important question to consider is who should set the goals. But other questions to be considered are about when, or rather at what time or at what age, children’s participation in health matters should be initiated. Yet another important question is about what opportunities, rights and support children are given in order for them to formulate goals for their own lives and health themselves. Children are dependent on parents and other adults to get their needs satisfied, which restricts their freedom of action. But as children develop and learn, their autonomy and self-determination also increase. Kellet, Forrest, Dent and Ward (2004) describe how ten-year-old children who are given greater responsibility also grow and develop their own competence. Throughout people’s development, their health is affected by the environment and the culture that surround them in their daily lives. To children, events in life, in their own bodies, in their families and in society mean that life and health constitute a whole. Children and children’s health cannot be regarded as an object but as a part of life. Meetings with adults are important to children, because adults can facilitate, challenge and protect children’s development and learning.
Face-to-face meetings

A large number of meetings take place within the framework of schools' activities. Buber (2002) thinks that a human being really exists only in relation to other people, that is to say, that, by nature, we are social beings. A question worth elucidating somewhat more thoroughly is, however, what types of meetings take place and whether these meetings benefit a pupil's health and hence also her/his learning. The context and the social conventions are important for the relations that are created. The social aspect is the connection between people that results in common experiences and values, even if the world-class social group can lead to personal relations, this does not automatically mean that these personal relationships exist, only the shared existence. The personal sphere being superseded by the collective sphere and these social conventions of being treated as an object. Objectifying other human beings means attacking their possibilities of making choices of their own (Sørensen, 2001; Featherstone, 1995). This is also something beyond the social conventions that may be described as face-to-face meetings. There is an instrumental and objectifying element in social relations that is lacking in face-to-face meetings (Buber, 2002; Lévinas, 1969). In addition, face-to-face meetings appear to be a separate category in our existence, a dimension that we are self-evidently familiar with that we do not see it. The social sphere and face-to-face meetings are thus two different areas in human beings' lives. Taking another human being seriously is the same as being willing to consider her/his views and possibly discuss them. In face-to-face meetings, two people are meeting, including meeting each other precisely as the particular Other1, not as an object but as a partner in a phase of life (Lévinas, 1969). The involvement of both parties is in principle an absolute requirement. A face-to-face meeting can consist of two people having a conversation, and each of them having a mission, to encourage children to take on the frameworks of knowledge, norms and values that are advocated by society. On the other hand every teacher has a mission to meet every child in a meeting relation. In this sense the meeting is a meeting of momentary encounters, such as when strangers' eyes meet on the bus; it is something that transcends mental and physical states (Buber, 2002).

Lévinas (1969) thinks that face-to-face meetings can both constitute a personal challenge and enable the learning of new knowledge. To Lévinas (ibid), these face-to-face meetings mean welcoming the Other. When I meet another person, it is important that I do not reduce her/him, regarding this person as similar to myself. It must be possible for the Other to be something else than what myself am. In order for me to have a face-to-face meeting with the Other as the kind of person s/he is really is, take her/him

1 Using a capital O means that it is others in a definite sense that are referred to. The Other is regarded as a subject, a person with a body. See further Lévinas (1969).

seriously and refrain from forcing something of my own or of my outlook on him/her. There are two different ideas, because they challenge us as human beings to welcome strangers and those who are different from ourselves and also to refrain from trying to alter them. This might not be as easy as it is thought at first glance. Feuerstein (1995) points out that there are many opportunities for people to learn from each other in these face-to-face meetings.

Noddings (2002, 183) emphasises that “Education may be thought of as a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding, and appreciation”. This means that there are good challenges (1994) different types of knowledge in meetings where there is a natural connection between life in and outside school. These meetings can affect a person's inner life and feelings.\(^2\) Lévinas (1969: 171) thinks that others are approached as a phase of life and that there are several types of relation and consequences, and consequently also in meetings between people. This has ethical consequences for schools. Teaching is, as Csikszentmihalyi (1996: 116) said, teaching the self. She also stresses that it is through these relations and meetings at school that pupils learn important values such as honesty, respect and tolerance (Campbell, 2003). The curriculum for the Swedish pre-school and compulsory nine-year school system also emphases the ethical aspect of school's mission by stating that children and pupils should be encouraged to develop an ethical attitude to people around them (Ministry of Education, 1994, 1998). Since schools are an important environment for learning and development, we think that it is central to enable face-to-face meetings.

On the one hand, a school as an institution has a mission to encourage children to take on the frameworks of knowledge, norms and values that are advocated by society. On the other hand every teacher has a mission to meet every child in a meeting relation. In this sense the meeting is a meeting of momentary encounters, such as when strangers' eyes meet on the bus; it is something that transcends mental and physical states (Buber, 2002).

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Identity and health

Identity is not merely a matter of our self-image or other people's view of us (Featherstone, 1995). Our identity is our being in the world, our way of leading our daily lives, and it is the layer of experiences and interpretations we have made through participating in social contexts (Weinger, 1998). Identity is something that is created in a constant and continual process. There is an ambigous concept, and it may be described in many different ways and from several aspects. The word is derived from the Latin word identitas, which means being the same person from one day and one situation to the next.\(^1\) I am me (Stier, 2003). What different types of descriptions of the meaning of identity have in common is its close connection to social relations and the context – the situated nature of identity. A person's identity is constituted socially in relation to other people, groups or phenomena. The contexts may be physical as well as social, cultural and existential. There are several different descriptions and points of departure when it comes to understanding identity and its meaning. There are descriptions focusing on the body and self-conception, others that focus on the individual’s own identity and how identity is described in logical descriptions of groups, and there are descriptions focusing on sub-identities such as ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, class, lifestyles, etc. (Stier, 2003). In this connection, the individual's identity should also be contrasted with the group identity. There is an antagonistic relationship between the two (Simon, 2004; Goffman, 1961). In the group identity, there are social norms that all individuals has to relate to, which is a tension relation. In our modern Western society it has become a cultural and ideological ideal to emphasise the individual's identity at the expense of the group identity. At the same time, the group identity is an important motivating driving force when it comes to taking part in organised leisure activities, for example (Simon, 2004). Cukurzenimaljkov (2003) describes it as the two pillars of happiness and thinks that the group identity is something a pupil has to relate to in order to have friends and influence others with the best opportunities for creating a happy and meaningful life.

The process of individualisation gathered momentum with the growth of industrialisation and the new petty bourgeois class that developed in connection with it (Featherstone, 1995; Bourdieu, 1984). This means that children in the educational situation may affect their identity development both positively and negatively. How then can identity be viewed? And what connections are there between identity and psychosocial health?

\(^1\) See further Bergmark, U., Learning for life through meetings with others, in this publication.

\(^2\) Lévinas (1969) thinks that face-to-face meetings can both constitute a personal challenge and enable the learning of new knowledge. To Lévinas (ibid), these face-to-face meetings mean welcoming the Other. When I meet another person, it is important that I do not reduce her/him, regarding this person as similar to myself. It must be possible for the Other to be something else than what myself am. In order for me to have a face-to-face meeting with the Other as the kind of person s/he is really is, take her/him

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\(^1\) See further Bergmark, U., Learning for life through meetings with others, in this publication.
There are field reports indicating that pupils have become crueler to one another, a new manifestation of hardening attitudes in schools. For the first time in the history of Swedish schools, a school was closed down on 11 May 2006 due to failure to guarantee the pupils a secure learning environment. In this particular case, it was a small group of children who terrorised others, damaged the school’s premises, and sabotaged teaching.

On the other hand, the upper secondary school at Rinkeby had been threatened with closure and almost impossible to work in a few years ago, the school has now won both national and international prizes for entrepreneurship, enterprise, and knowledge development, and the pupils’ working climate is just very good. Pupils are now applying for this upper secondary school.

Although Sweden is considered a leading country as regards preventing and taking legal measures against bullying in the compulsory nine-year school system (Forsman, 2006), about 100,000 pupils in Swedish schools are involved in bullying every day, and this exposure must be regarded as the greatest threat to pupils’ health and development. Bullying might consist of pupils being verbally assaulted, harassed, or degraded, excluded from the community of their class and classmates, or mentally or physically attacked during their school days. The victims are likely to regard as empty rhetoric the control documents’ commitments to the involuntariness of human life and schools’ obligation to protect each child from violence. Pupils themselves have ranked protection against violence, acts of cruelty and bullying as the three most important factors that must be secured in schools (Friends, 2006).

Another important aspect of human communion that can affect children’s well-being is silence. There is always silence in our daily lives and we can never escape it. But the boundary between constructive and destructive silence may often be very thin (Alerby & Elidottir, 2003). The fact that a lack of time, which in turn leads to a stressful lifestyle, in their opinion (Alerby, 1998). One way of handling stress is to Passhicer-Vermeer and Passhicer (2000), high sound levels will be precisely one of our chief public health problems – one of the greatest problems in schools. Stress in schools is often on a personal level very tangible, and in a general perspective it constitutes one of today’s greatest public health problems. Stress is increasing in society as a whole and in children and young people stress is also on the rise (Kostenius & Lindqvist, 2006). As pointed out initially, there are tendencies indicating that children’s psychosocial state of health has deteriorated over time (Claussen, Peterson and Berg, 2001; SOU, 1998, 2000, 2006), and the commission for Swedish Government Official Investigations, recently appointed to investigate children’s and young people’s stress and mental health, also points to this downward spiral. This commission emphasises that “... there is a clear connection between schools’ ability to implement their principal assignment and students’ stress and mental health” (SOU 2006, 261). In a report from Barnombudsmannen (the Children’s Ombuds-
in the 21st-century. What in this context we can pause and think about is whether the sound level of schools contributes to stress among those studying and working there. Children themselves clearly undermined the importance of being in silence during the school day – “The Peace Area is my favourite place because it is quiet. It is important precisely because it is quiet” (Alerby, 2004).

**Concluding remarks**

As we stated at the beginning of this chapter, children’s health and well-being is of great importance for their ongoing growth and development, or in other words: “Health is a breeding ground for development and improvement” (Bergmark & Alerby, in press). Therefore it is important to achieve increased knowledge and understanding of factors influencing children’s health and well-being in general, and in schools more specifically. We have illuminated aspects like bullying and stress among children, which are increasing ill health and decreasing children’s experiences of well-being (Forsman, 2003, 2006; Kostienius & Öhrling, in press). We suggest that instead of focusing on factors which are problem-orientated, we shift the focus to possibility-orientated experiences and activities. One way to develop a healthy school can be through appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). Instead of problem-solving, appreciative inquiry focuses on positive experiences and what we want more of (ibid). Antunezov (2005) emphasizes the significance of seeing health and positive aspects in our lives, which has a close connection to appreciative inquiry. According to Bergmark and Alerby (2008) appreciative inquiry involves listening to the student, in this case the child, and focusing on the health and positive aspects in school, or as they express it: “It focuses on the discovery of people’s gifts and strengths and equality of voice.” Kostienius and Öhrling (2008) suggest that adults keep asking questions and listening with a ‘sensitive ear’ when working with children, to be open to the children’s experiences by giving them a voice in the process. Positive question has a tendency to result in positive solutions which lead to positive action (Ghaye, 2005). Appropriate inquiry is a positive change in an overall perspective on change. "Phenomenological study about children’s thoughts concerning their environment" (Forsman, 1998: 44). Institutionen for pedagogik och ämnesdidaktik, Centrum for forskning i lärande, Luleå tekniska universitet. Luleå: Universitetstryckeriet.


Reference


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