

REPORT

A visit to Steiner early childhood nurseries in Europe. July 2023.

Dorothy Marlen

Introduction

Thank you to ASWETE for funding my train travel to the continent in July to observe different Steiner nurseries. I travelled to Amsterdam, Mannheim in Germany, and Kolmar in France. My choice of nurseries was the result of meeting several Steiner early childhood nursery managers/trainers at a Steiner early childhood trainers conference in Vilnius in 2022. I set up times to meet as a small group at the conference and we have kept in touch via zoom since then.

My reason for wishing to make the trip to the continent is because Steiner day care for our youngest children brings huge questions for me. Questions like what is the right care for our youngest most vulnerable and impressionable children away from home? How is it different from the care of kindergarten children (3-6 years old). Why are we so slow, in the Steiner movement in the UK to enter this early end of provision? What do we need to bring into our trainings and placement opportunities, which will support the growing need for early childhood care? What are the challenges here and abroad?

Historically, as we know in the Steiner movement, there has been the understanding that it is best for children under the age of three to be cared for by parents in the family home where they can be protected by too much too soon. That time has gone now, and most parents will re-enter the workplace by the time their children are one years old, even a few months old. On the continent Steiner day care is far more established than here. In the UK we are needing to climb on board and create the care that will truly meet the young child's needs for health, relationship, play and learning.

In the UK, setting up a nursery provision seems to be more difficult than on the continent or in America for example. There are many legal hoops to jump through with not much government support, as well of course money, a suitable venue, close to families, specialist carers and managers. However, there are now Steiner schools who are opening up 2-3 year old sessional care – Cambridge, Brighton, Michael Hall, Elmfield and Edinburgh and hopefully others will follow. My interest is in finding out what we may learn from other countries.

My trip to the continent has been an opportunity for me to observe, reflect, with time to talk with the women who run very different settings to bring back some thoughts and ideas which hopefully will be helpful to our students and to schools and individuals beginning to or thinking about opening up 1-3 year old care.

A bit of context. On the Holistic Baby and Child Care Level 3 (EYE) nationally accredited Diploma, we bring to the students Waldorf models of childcare for children 1-3 years old which have been developed around the world. For example, Nokken, in Denmark, which advocates a mainly outdoor provision, Ahwina in New Zealand which gives a comprehensive picture of creating a home like

environment, and Lifeways North America which has for many years offered a training for home from home carers.

We also give students on the course a good introduction to the Pikler approach from Hungary which is now promoted at the highest level in the international Steiner movement as being essential understanding when caring for our youngest children. It brings a concise and practical understanding of how to give the highest quality care to babies and young children and a unique understanding of the importance of natural motor development and play – only possible, as Steiner advocated, when we don't interfere. These two approaches come together beautifully when providing for our youngest children.

What we don't have in the UK still are many Steiner models of 1-3 day care which can show the way for students on placement. We have an increasing number of Steiner trained childminders, caring for children in a home environment, now the 2-3 sessional care as mentioned, but no Steiner day care taking children under 2 years old.

So, I will now take you on a tour of the nurseries I visited in the three countries.

The Rose Garden nursery in Amsterdam

www.hetrozentuintje.nl

My first visit was to Maaïke Holdstock who runs a little nursery in partnership with two other women. It is called the Rose Garden and is in what was once a shop in a shopping street in a neighbourhood near the centre of Amsterdam. There are 11 children on the books, most of whom attend half time. Maaïke and one of the women work part time as carers. The administration is shared between the three. Maaïke works one day a week on administration like billing, child planning, contracts and documents. Maaïke works 2/3 days a week. She would prefer to work three days which would be 28.5 hours including cleaning at the end of the day.

When I visited there were 6 children from 1 ½ to 4 which Maaïke usually cares for on her own. On one of the days there was a volunteer to help. The ratio is 4 children to one adult for children under 1 ½ and 8 children with one adult after 1 ½. In the Netherlands there is a culture of mothers staying at home for the first year although maternity leave is only 3 months. Then parents usually work part time when the children are young. Children go to part time kindergarten from 4-6 years old in the Steiner movement but into primary school at 4 in mainstream.

The nursery is open all year round except for 3 weeks in the summer and 1 week at Christmas.

The government pays 9 euros an hour for each child in care and Maaïke charges 10.22 euros. The government subsidy is dependant on what parents earn so what the nursery gets is dependant on whether the two parents are earning. The rent is 1,700 euros a month. Maaïke takes home 2,300 euro a month.

Maaïke is a very experienced Steiner early years professional who did her teacher training in the Netherlands but then went to South Africa, Ireland and then France for 15 years where she helped to start a nursery with Rosina who I visited later in my trip. She took a Steiner early childhood training with Michaela Glockner at the Goetheanum and she has also learnt from a Pikler trained educator. She is a mother to 3 children who are now grown up.

Maaïke is gentle, calm and confident in her care of the 6 children from 1 1/2 on her own. She says that 6 children is ideal with one adult carer although it can be difficult if there is more than one

challenging child. She does however help in a mainstream nursery one day a week. Three days is the maximum she would wish to care for and hold a calm space for 6 young children as it takes much presence and focus. She needs time to rest.

The room is a typical Steiner early childhood environment, with two home play areas, plenty of open ended objects and surprisingly a small selection of tricycles which the children weave through the space. . It had a homely feel with a sofa and shelves. The large shop widow brings light and lots of interest for the children.



The pace of the day is slow and simple, the same every day and it is evident that the children are secure and happy. They arrive about 8.30, play for a while and then have a snack. Afterwards everyday they go for a walk to a park for at least an hour in the big Vondel Park close by. There are several places in the park that the children visit, with plenty of time for playing. There is a cart for the younger ones to sit in when they get tired. By the time they come back they are ready for lunch, which is a simple bread, cheese and spread with fruit and then the children have their rest. They sleep for at least 2 hours. On waking a little garden at the back of the nursery may be opened and the children can ride on tricycles, play in the sand or with materials that Maaïke brings out. At some point there is another snack prepared for them. They typically go home about 5.30pm.

I asked Maaïke about transitions and she takes a long time over settling the children in the nursery. Typically, it can take up to two months, especially if the child only comes one day a week. A parent can stay in the nursery as long as necessary until the child is happy to be left. I think this attention given to the settling in time helps to ensure that the children are happy.

Maaïke does not have parents' evenings but there is time to talk with parents when they bring their child. This is the time when questions can be answered, and information shared. There are more formal meetings with parents and partners several times a year to discuss any problems and share new ideas.

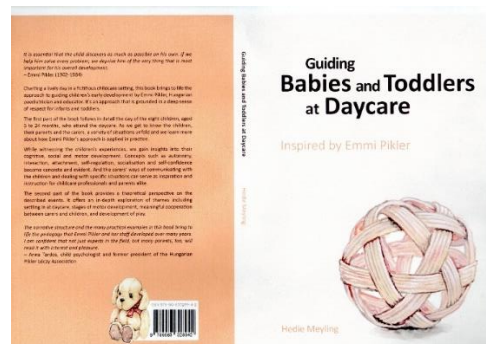
Maaïke does celebrate the festivals, bakes bread and paints with the children but it is all very low key along with songs, stories, some cooking/handcraft and seasonal decorations. The children are happiest with a sound routine. She explained that it is most important that the children are all at ease and well taken care of. This allows the day to flow well for the children. Better to keep the day low key, making porridge or soup etc as a highlight when it feels right. It is not like in the kindergarten but more focussed on the ambiance and feeling.

What I took from my visit to Maaïke was how well cared for and happy the children were – made possible by Maaïke's calm warm, focus, honed by many years of experience, the small number of children, the simplicity of the day and the cozy homely feel of the room they used. I also was reminded that a good walk and play outdoors is crucial for children, especially when they are in a care setting all day. It has, as we know many health and play benefits and breaks up what is a long day. Children eat and sleep well afterwards.

Hedie Meyling and her new book in English "Guiding Babies and Toddlers in Daycare".

While I was in Amsterdam I visited Hedie Meyling, a Pikler trainer with the European Pikler Association. I first met her in 2011 when I arranged for her to come to the UK to train me and 15 Steiner early years practitioners in the Pikler approach. The training was held at York Steiner School during 2011-12 and 2013-14, with weekends and occasional weeks. More recently in 2020 she approved my dissertation which was the last step in becoming a certified Pikler pedagogue with the European Pikler Association. We have kept in touch.

A few years ago, she wrote a book in Dutch about caring for children in day care informed by the Pikler approach. It is now translated into English and hopefully will be available to buy very soon. It is a wonderful description of a day in a Pikler day care setting, offering a very clear picture of how Pikler principles translate into exemplary practical care of young children. As I have mentioned earlier, at the highest levels in the international Steiner movement the Pikler approach is accepted and promoted because it enriches anthroposophical understanding of how to care for our youngest children, at the very practical level. Pre-kindergarten children need a different approach to caring than kindergarten children and the Piler approach and this book shows us how to do it.



The book will be available soon.

Mannheim, Germany - an outdoor setting for children up to three years old.



My next visit was to the Akademie für Waldorfpädagogik in Mannheim.

<https://www.akademie-waldorf.de/>

The Akademie is now a university called ALANUS Universität. They train in two places, in Bonn Alfter and in Mannheim with Bachelor and Master Studies. All state recognised. On the compound is a state acknowledged training for early childhood teachers and a privately organized Waldorf early childhood training for early childhood teachers to achieve Waldorf training. There is a nursery training and a leadership training. There is a kindergarten and a nursery on the compound as well.

Nicole Schreyeck, who hosted me, teaches on both early childhood programs and runs the nursery training. She is also a puppeteer. She also runs a training in Taiwan.

Nicole has a diploma in social work and a master in Waldorf education and nursery training in Frankfurt and Dortmund. She trained in anthroposophical early childhood care with Claudia Grah-Wittich at Der Hof Frankfurt, where Steiner and Pikler principles have been brought together, and she ran her own nursery for many years.

I spent a half day in one of the outdoor pre-kindergarten settings for children 2-3 years old. On the day of my visit there were 8 children (12 maximum) and three carers. The day runs from 8.30-5.30pm.

The outdoor setting as you can see from the photos is spacious, with plenty of trees and bushes creating different areas for a large sandpit, swings, mealtime area with a big table and comfy bench seats, and little pathways to connect. There is a little hut for changing children's nappies and a shed where the play equipment is kept.



I was reminded that young children need a lot of space to run and explore. There were a few children who were happiest playing in the sandpit, but mainly the children moved from space to space.

Pushing small wheelbarrows perhaps transporting collected fallen apples and other objects, playing on the swings, climbing branches seemed to be the most popular past times. The carers during the morning brought out different play objects for the children - more wheelbarrows and at one stage a box of balls and other play objects.

It was a very hot day and thank goodness for the shade of the trees and umbrellas. Even so, some of the children found the heat too much and were very unsettled – crying and finding it hard to be comforted. There was also some conflict between the children, especially over the wheelbarrows and objects in the sandpit. The adults were very attentive and caring towards the children, but it was a difficult day. The happiest times for the children were when they were sitting in the shade around the large table having their mid-morning break and then lunch before they were taken inside a nearby building for their rest. At these times the mood changed, they were happy to sing little songs and finger rhymes and eat and drink together. At these times harmony prevailed.

The carers sadly did not speak English and I don't speak German so there was no opportunity to ask questions during my visit. But later we met with Nicole to review the morning. The carers shared that it was a difficult morning because of the heat, and usually the children were much more settled and happier.

My main feedback was whether they could break up the day by taking the children on a walk every morning – not on such a hot day but generally. (I was influenced here by seeing Maaiké's day and a visit I made to Helle Heckmann's Nokken kindergarten in Denmark a couple of years ago where the children walk every day). There was agreement that this would help to break up the day and give a healthy outlet for the children's energy and need to move. Being in an outdoor garden, park, wood, or rural space where children can feel free to move and run can only be more preferable than being in a room during a long day care day, both for the children and the carers.

My experience was that there was a routine, a way of using this particular space, a set way the children and adults were using the garden that was somehow limited. I wondered what could help creative exploration and keep the space fresh for the children. Maybe, the addition of different objects in the sand pit – not just the usual objects you take to the seaside, but utensils like teapots, sieves and pots, (see Ute Strub DVD Entfaltung, or the Pikler Spielraum DVD) which would give interesting opportunities for explorative play; more simple equipment for safe climbing and crawling; a garden where vegetables were growing, and the children could water the plants. I also wished there had been some opportunity for water play – a tap, a fountain especially on this hot day.

What I took from my observation in this outdoor kindergarten was the importance of a place being big enough for a variety of spaces, a sandpit, mud kitchen, places to run and climb, small places to hide, a place to gather for sharing a meal. (I think again of the wonderful garden space at Nokken in Denmark) These young children have not yet entered the imaginative stage of play as older children in a kindergarten. They are however strong imitators and having the opportunity to imitate adults doing some work like preparing the food or tending the space is gold. They need to move, and they also need to move explore and discover freely.

The 12 care gestures in Educaring. A workshop with Inge Heine

www.Stillen-Huellen-Pflegen.de

The next day I was invited to attend a day workshop given to Nicoles's students by a retired anthroposophical nurse called Inge Heine. She comes every year to give a special workshop on the 12 nursing gestures of care developed for early childhood by Rolf Heinz and explained in the article and chart below. She also has a business supporting parents in parent and baby groups, 1:1 support and other activities with parents. She started the workshop by asking what is gesture? "I am here and what I do is in the gesture. It is something you can't see, and it happens between you and another".

The 12 gestures are cleansing, nurturing, reliving, protecting creating order, enveloping, balancing, stimulating, challenging, awakening, affirming and uprightness.

Rolf Heine writes in the article I have given the link to below "In the art of healing and the art of education, it is not only WHAT is done, but HOW it is done that matters.... The HOW appears in a person's posture, gestures and facial expressions—and also in the context in which something is said or done. Only in context—in a relationship—is the WHAT experienced as being either coherent or dissonant.... It is called a therapeutic gesture in therapy, a pedagogical gesture in education and a nursing gesture in nursing."

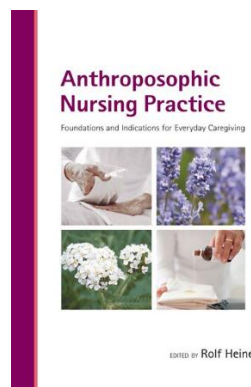
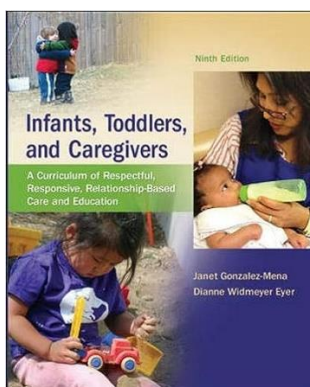
<https://www.anthromedics.org/PRA-0615-EN>

https://www.anthromedics.org/bundles/quotus/img/Early_childhood_Nursing_gestures.pdf

A very comprehensive book called "Anthroposophic Nursing Practice " edited by Rolf Heine gives many useful thoughts for carers of young children including the 12 gestures. It is available here <https://www.florisbooks.co.uk/book/Rolf-Heine/Anthroposophic+Nursing+Practice/9781938685286>

The book has sections which provide a holistic understanding of baby and early childcare. The Pikler approach, although not anthroposophically informed is very well aligned with what is given here. Michaela Glockner in the Forward states Anthroposophical nursing "can be used wherever the ideal of human-orientated and humanity -enhancing nursing care is sought. The material presented can also provide motivated lay people, social workers, educators and a variety of other therapeutically orientated professions with inspiration for their daily work". I would add that I think the book is one to have at hand if you care for young children in any way.

Finally, here is a book which is recommended for the care of babies and toddlers that was recommended to me by Nicole based insights from Emmi Pikler and Magda Gerber. It is a standard reference book in the USA.



A visit to two eco-nurseries in Colmar, France

<https://www.lejardindespetsits.fr/>



My final visit was to Colmar France where there are two nurseries co-founded by Rosina Dendarie. The nurseries are called Le Jardin des Petits and Aux Erlen, they are eco-nurseries based on Steiner pedagogy but also inspired by Pikler and Janusz Korzack.

The initiative was born in 2007 by Maaïke (who now runs the Rose Garden in Amsterdam) and Rosina. An association called the Prim'Enfance Association was created by them with a group of early childhood professionals. This association is a non-profit association and the first nursery Le Jardin de Petits was inaugurated in 2011. The other smaller setting started in March 2023. The children are aged between 10 weeks and 3 years and the settings provide half day and full day care.

The association consists of a president, 6 council members, parents and the employees.

There is a steering group of four members who direct the nurseries. There is the president who has legal responsibilities and organises the website and publicity, one legal director and two part time administrators who also work with the children. Rosina is the primary nursery pedagogue but also works as a carer with the children.

How the nurseries came about is very interesting and I will share some of the story here. More details can be found on the website.

The vision (to paraphrase the information on the website) was to create a place that understands and respects the emotions of the young child, recognising him in his own right and being able to fully accompany, without judgement. In addition to create a quality of environment that favours the child's awakening, and to encourage imitation and play to the fullest extent, enfolded in rhythm and the nourishment of being in nature, healthy organic food.

The nurseries have an arrangement with La CAF, a government agency which funds nurseries. It gives money directly to parents. They also give money to the settings who propose childcare.

In the beginning Rosina and Maaïke wanted to create a micro crèche, with 12 places. Normally these micro creches are co-financed by the local community. But, Colmar had already enough nurseries and they refused to co-finance their nursery. So that they had to look for other financial help.

So, Rosina and Maaïke created an enterprise nursery where the places are co-financed by the local enterprises. The enterprises are different local businesses wanting to help their employees to find a nursery. The businesses give the money directly to the nursery. And they recover most back from tax refunds and other advantages. To give an idea the business originally paid 1200 euros a month for each place and they got back 900 euros. So, the business only paid 300 euros a month. The difficulty

was to find enough businesses. More recently, the price has gone down to 680 euros per month for the same service, same organic food etc.

Le Jardin des Petites has the capacity for 24 children. But the nursery could only find 14 businesses wanting to participate. To create more places for children the Association needed to register as a small nursery or micro creche which can have 10 children (which makes legal obligations easier). Having a double status makes for a complicated administration but is the only way the nursery can continue. The second more recent nursery Aux Erlen has the capacity for 12 children.

I bring this information, although it is more complicated than I have summarised, as I wonder whether in the UK independent nurseries can form alliances with local businesses to create a partnership of care, and whether this may be a way of bringing some stability to a setting.

Now to the nuts and bolts.

The large nursery can take 24 children, 10 babies from birth to walking, where the ratio of staff to children is 1:5 and 14 older children where the ratio is 1:8. There are two groups for the older children (7 in each) and the baby room is separate. The nursery runs from 7.30-6.30pm.

In the smaller nursery there are 12 children, 6 months to 3 years old, with 4 workers, 2 of which are part time. This nursery runs from 8am-6pm.

There is a cook who cooks organic healthy lunches for both nurseries.

Here is a typical daily schedule which I have taken from the website.

A typical day with the "big guys" goes like this:

7:30 a.m. Opening, reception of children and their parents, free play time, start of the day (folding the laundry, preparing snacks).

9 am Musical welcome: songs and nursery rhymes related to the seasons. Hello to each child and to "Jean Petit" (gnome of the nursery)

9:00 a.m. Snack on fresh fruit, dried fruit, and herbal tea.

10 a.m. Free play inside or outside.

10:45 a.m. Outing in the garden (sandpit, odd jobs, rounds) or in the nearby park.

11.25 a.m. Return to the crèche, wash hands and have a meal together.

12.30 p.m. Changes, preparation for a siesta, free play and story.

1:30 p.m. Supervised siesta until around 3 p.m.

3 p.m. Wake-up time.

4 p.m. Snack

4.30 p.m. Free play inside and outside.

5:30 p.m. Quieter activity with the few remaining children.

6:30 p.m. Closing.

Every day the children go for a walk. In addition, twice a week Rosina and her colleague take a group of six children (aged 20 months to 3 years) to the nearby forest. For several hours the children walk

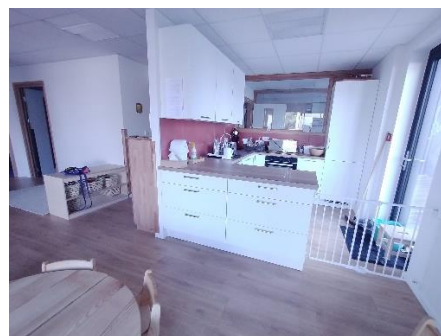
or play freely in the forest. The carers observe how much more imaginative the play is and how much the children become more autonomous and regulated. Also, the social relationships between the children change for the better after the outings in the forest. Being in nature is one of the essential aspects of their pedagogical approach and these outings have enormous benefits to the participating children.

Unfolding of the typical day for the "little ones":

The life of the "little ones" group has a similar pattern to that of the "big ones", but the rhythms of sleep, meals and care are more individual. The meal for the "little" children takes place at 11 a.m. and the snack at 3.30 p.m. Going outside, remains the priority, as far as possible.

During my visit I spent most of one day in the small nursery and the next day in the larger nursery.

The small nursery is in a new building created for business use. The rooms were able to be designed by the nursery. It has a light spatial feel with simple modern furniture and equipment. There is a fenced timber decked and grass outdoor space which has a gate to a nearby wood.



The day I was at the little nursery there was Rosina, a volunteer and myself. There were 4 children, as the nursery is new and in the process of building up numbers. The children arrived at different times and there was a slow flow to the morning with a snack and then a 45 minute walk to the nearby wood and this is something that happens everyday. There is a larger wood and open ground further away which also is a wonderful place for children to go to. Rosina had some wonderful photographs of the children being allowed total freedom to explore. The walk outside was followed by lunch brought from the larger nursery. In the afternoon after a long sleep the children played more in the garden. It was calm with an easy flow.

I spent the next day in the big nursery, which is in an old building in the middle of a car parking area in Colmar. dividing my time between the baby room and the room which had the older children. There is a garden with trees, a large sandpit and play house. Later I went with Rosina and 5 children to a local park. It was a hot day. This outing was a highlight for me. There was climbing equipment, sand and a supply of water from taps. For atleast an hour the children played freely and happily. When we got back to the nursery they had lunch and then a good long sleep. In the afternoon there was a snack and then more play and quieter activites as the last children waited to go home.

On these days I had the opportunity to be with the children, to interact with them even though I don't speak French! This was very special.

Whilst in Colmar I also visited the Grunewald masterpieces but that is another story.



Talking to Rosina I learnt that a huge challenge for these nurseries (and nurseries in general) is finding properly trained carers, and also carers who will stay. It is an ongoing problem. There is no nationally accredited Steiner early childhood training in France, as in Germany and the Netherlands, so carers who do have the required government accredited training often do not know anything about Steiner and Pikler principles and practice.

We talked about the care gestures we have learnt in our Pikler training - the slowing down, how we use our eyes, our voice, our hands, our full presence during times of physical care. In my observations I felt that the understanding of respectful care given to us by the Pikler approach was sometimes lacking a little especially with the younger carers. Can this be given as extra training where needed? Rosina also spoke about the busy lives babies and children have which means that they come stressed and un-regulated to the nurseries. Going for walks everyday helps the children calm down and hopefully eat well and sleep.

On the website there is a quote by Januzs Korczak

"You say: it's tiring to socialize with children!"

You are right.

*You add: because you have to put yourself on their level, stoop, bow, bend, make yourself small!
There you are wrong.*

This is not what tires the most.

It's more about being forced to rise to the height of their feelings, to stand on tiptoe, so as not to hurt them. »

Januzs Korczak

Summary and conclusion

As described earlier the beginning of my journey to the nurseries in Amsterdam, Mannheim and Colmar started at the Vilnius Steiner trainers conference in 2022 when I organised some informal meetings for those involved in 1-3 year old nurseries in Europe. The women in the network, who I have introduced here, invited me to visit them and their nurseries and so the tour was arranged.

My aim for visiting different nurseries was to be more practically informed about the challenges and experiences of doing this important work to share with students on the Holistic Bay and Child Care Diploma. I hoped it would also be useful for Steiner schools and individuals wishing to embark on 1-3 nursery projects in the UK.

I thank the women I spent my time with. There were qualities that they all shared – open heartedness, generosity, a deep commitment to the well being of our youngest children, calm strength and fun. I am honoured to have met them and I hope to invite them to Emerson to share their experiences with those in the Steiner movement and beyond who have an interest in 0-3 care.

Here is a list of what I have digested so far about my experiences of visiting the different nurseries.

A walk and play outside every day.

Day care at any age is tiring and a very long. My experiences of observing in mainstream day care is that everyone, children, and the carers wish to go home by about 3 pm. Helle Heckmann (Nokken) stipulates a 6 hour day. 6 hours in care, 6 hours at home. The parents if they want to send their children to Nokken have no choice. This is what young children can manage. But we live in a world where parents work long hours and young children can be in day care for up to 10 hours. The walk everyday in the morning, generally whatever the weather, breaks up the day, gives the children the exercise and free play in nature which is crucial to their health and makes it easier for the carers too.

All of us, children and adults need to feel our inter-connection with nature, if the planet is to have any hope of recovery.

When they come back the children are hungry so eat and sleep well – up to 2 hours or so. The afternoon then in my experience has a different quality – the children have come home to themselves more and can calmly play.

Babies and toddlers can be taken to parks and woods in wheeled carts or prams.

Small groups

Babies and young children need to be cared for in small groups. Large groups, common in mainstream nurseries are often noisy and stressful for the children. Research shows this. At the Pikler House the 1 to 3 year old groups are 12 in number cared for by 2/3 carers. Nokken has 24 children but the younger ones 1-3 are cared for separately except for the walk to the local park each day. Child minding settings are ideal for the youngest children as they are small and the children can experience a home from home day. The settings I saw on my trip were of different sizes but always the mood was calmer and the children more settled when the group was smaller.

Simplicity and a strong rhythm.

In my conversations with the women I visited, it became very clear that the day for children up to three needs to be simple. It can be a challenge to let go of the rich variety of activities that we offer in kindergartens for 3-6 year olds. However, our youngest children need repetition, the same events every day to settle and feel secure and a rhythm they can trust. Simple puppet stories, nursery rhymes and simple activities like chopping fruit and wiping tables and lots of time for free exploration and play maybe enough.

Practising Pikler principles

All the women I visited have had Pikler as well as Steiner training and saw that practising the Pikler principles was essential to creating a good relationship to young children in their care. Children need to be met fully by the adults who care for them, they need time to orientate to any instructions, they need to fully trust the adult to understand and meet their needs which they may not be able to say. Research confirms that way we touch children, listen and talk with them, bring our presence to them is crucial. Finding carers with a good understanding of this is difficult and the challenge is to train up staff in a nursery who do not have this understanding.

Finally, some thoughts about simple activities for little ones.

The Pikler Institute researched children's play in the first 3 years in detail over many years and we can learn much from them about appropriate play objects and self-initiated activities for this age group. A few examples -providing toddlers with good sized containers and similar objects for sorting and collecting and for imitation explorations; (Ref The Origin of free play by Eva Kalo et al.. Available from www.pikler.co.uk) The carers carrying out work activities – for example, tending a garden, that the children can imitate; having a good range of equipment for climbing and crawling practice and providing fine sand play with adult utensils as developed by Ute Strub.

I hope what I have experienced and written about may be of help to those who are running or are hoping start care for our youngest children.

