

MOTHERS IN THE CENTER MOTHER CENTERS



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MOTHERS IN THE CENTER

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MOTHER CENTERS

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Preface

It has been 20 years since this book was first written by women from the very first mother centers in Germany. 50 women from the first three mother centers contributed with their stories and reflections to this book, creating a very animated and hands on reader that illustrates what mother centers are all about. The reaction was overwhelming. The book started a movement that spread into other countries. Currently there are mother centers in 15 countries, in Germany, Austria, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy, Liechtenstein, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Bosnia, Slovakia, Kenya, Rwanda, the Phillippines, Canada and the USA.

The centers have grown along with the life stages of the founding generation. Children grow, mothers develop new interests. The spectrum of projects that have developed is wide and includes the neighborhood and the community: child care services as well as eldercare, non-stop café, continuing education (sometimes in cooperation with the bureau of labor and other educational institutions), close to home services for the neighborhood like laundry, transportation, and shopping services, senior care, programs for babies, school kids, and senior citizens, as well as the creation of small private enterprises.

The core from which all these projects and ideas emerge, remains the mother center café with its drop-in character. Everything originates from this "non-stop cafe". Working mothers picking up their children from the mother center day care center can eat lunch or dinner with their children in the mother center before going home. Mothers who have reentered the labor market can more easily manage the conflicting demands of work and family by using the pick-up or laundry services of the mother center. In municipal politics mother centers have widened their sphere of influence. In many communities they have become an essential political entity representing the interests of families and children from a self-help grassroots point of view. Mother center women are running for office in municipal elections or consult municipal administrations regarding city development and planning.

Over the last few years mother centers made a name for themselves in international women's politics. They were actively present at the UN world conference on women in Beijing 1995 and at Habitat II 1996 in Istanbul. They became a model project for the EXPO 2000 in Hannover and they received the Dubai International Award 2002 for Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment. They won this award for strengthening the capacity of civil society to revitalise local neighborhoods and revive community life.

Mother centers are a practical example of the empowerment of civil society and of the active commitment of citizens as a third power between the economy and state government.

This book can be used as a manual for self-help. Enjoy!

Monika Jaeckel, Andrea Laux and Gabriele Bryant

Dear women,

this book has been written for you by many women and with much enthusiasm. It is meant to be an experiential report on a movement, the mother center movement, which will hopefully soon inspire you as well, so that many more mother centers will be created. In every district and neighborhood, in every village, on every street corner, for women of all ages, all situations, whether countrywomen or town women, natives, migrants, or foreigners, young or old, first time mothers or those with experience, grandmothers or great-grandmothers, employed mothers or those working at home. Women arise and the world will take notice of you! Come out of your shells that you create so lovingly for yourself and your families. Those shells into which you retreat all too often to seek comfort or in irritation and confusion. Claim for yourselves and your children a place in public life.

Create mother centers!

Who, if not we mothers can provide our children with the wide and colorful range of experiences they need so urgently to find their way in today's society? Who can impart the culture and values of our female experience into this society, into public life? Who validates the work we do? Who comforts us mothers after a hard day's work?

We mothers need to come together, with our skills, with our perspectives. We should become aware of our feelings and support each other. We should pamper ourselves, create and allow ourselves spaces for rest and relaxation and for relating to each other.

The knowledge of mothers, the values they learn and experience in living with their children, are absent everywhere in public consciousness. The experience of pregnancy and birth, of seeing young people grow and develop in our care, gives mothers the opportunity to feel the inner connection between us humans and nature on a daily basis. We should much more confidently put this knowledge and ourselves in the way of the monstrous destruction of nature we all share in today. We should use this precious experience and bring it to light everywhere: first in ourselves and then throughout the world!

Mother centers are a first step, a public space, through which we can make our issues visible, through which we can overcome our powerlessness.

Women, mothers, unite! Demand funding, demand space, raise money, so that our children may see that our work and our culture are valuable .

Create mother centers, many mother centers, everywhere!

The women who wrote this book,

I. What are Mother Centers?



Introduction

At first they were only an idea, emerging from the results of long-term studies in parent education. This was developed into a concept by dedicated staff members of the German Youth Institute (Deutsches Jugendinstitut, DJI) in Munich.

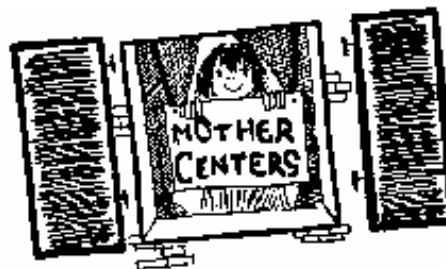
Meanwhile the idea has turned into a movement. From all over Germany and abroad we receive hundreds of inquiries from women eager to create their own mother center.

With this model project the German Youth Institute evidently discovered a real need. The focus on the expertise gained on grassroots level by everyday life in the communities mobilizes hitherto unused potential.

Many women feel left alone in their daily life with small children. Working moms secure themselves an outside range of activities, recognition and their own money. But this often does not offer a solution for what they are really looking for, contact with other mothers, an exchange of experiences, acknowledgement and recognition in connection with having children. Rather it often results in stress, and feelings of guilt when trying to juggle work and family obligations.

Mother centers are a space for mothers to voice their concerns and find an open ear for all aspects of their lives.

When mothers begin to develop a common awareness of their life conditions and seek for ways to change them according to their own ideas and interests, when community communication and networks enable a common representation of interests, then municipal politics and city development, traffic, childcare and school planning have to deal with a new social power from which we all, and especially our children, benefit.



Planning for the mother center project grew out of the experience that mothers experience most institutional programs for parent counseling or parent education as hierarchically structured, stigmatizing or devaluing. Mother centers avoid all forms of academic learning and the hierarchy inherent in a teacher-student setting. They make it possible for mothers to experience themselves with their children positively and with self confidence. This not only changes their own awareness, but also the effect they have on their children, families, and neighborhoods. In order to venture into public spheres and as a first step, many women need that innocuous offer of a simple cup of coffee they can get at the mother center café .

In the mother center there is no threshold to cross to encounter specialists or experts. In the mother center the mothers are the experts. All work is organized and done by them. They direct and manage the operation of the mother center.

In the mother center everything is based on the rhythm of mothers with children. There are no fixed schedules; the mother center is open during the day and mothers can come by whenever

and however their own family schedules allow. Courses and seminars, services, and recreational activities are an incentive to visit the mother center frequently. A crucial fact in all mother center activities is that children are always welcome and that there is no extra stress or cost involved in bringing your children.

Mother centers are about renewing lost networks of kinship and community.

For many women taking part in the mother center is a spring board public activities, be it the first step to employment or a step to a political or social commitment. The mother centers create something for the many women who do not want to put up anymore with the limited and restricting either-or alternatives of full time working mom or full time homemaker, who want spaces to create more options for themselves. The mother center is such a space, and it is developing further in order to make new options and life paths imaginable and possible for women.

Mother centers welcome children. The children see their mothers in a responsible role outside of the family and the effects of this learning experience reach much farther than what regular parent education programs tend to provide.

Mother centers receive daily about 30 to 40 mothers with about twice as many children. These mothers are mostly young moms with small children but also older women who have already raised their children, single-parenting mothers, immigrant women and working women from the population represented in the area. Actively involved in the center are about 100 to 150 women, sometime visitors number about 300 to 350 women. Mother centers are open as non-stop cafes in the daytime during the week, but often also in the evenings and on the weekend. Work in the cafe and the child care center is paid on an hourly basis and all mothers who offer services and programs like flea markets, guitar courses, ironing, mending, sewing, massage, child gymnastics, daily hot lunches, tax advice, etc... receive an hourly compensation.

Moreover there are mothers who are employed by the mother center on a part time basis. Together they form a team that takes care of the ongoing operations and meets at least weekly. The task of the team is the organization and coordination of the



mother center operations as well as the motivation of and support for the mothers who are doing the self-help projects and programs. This team, through the continuity of its work at the core of the center, contributes a lot to the development of an atmosphere of tolerance and solidarity among the participants of the center. In the team meetings the mothers learn to reflect on their own behavior and to become aware of and live with the group dynamics in the center. They learn appropriate behaviors and techniques to solve conflicts, their own and others'.

The rest of the mother center program is designed by the regular visitors themselves, about 30 to 40 women on average, who earn money for their work and the activities they offer. The composition of this group of women fluctuates throughout the year because each woman takes care of a particular activity only for as long as she is willing and able to reconcile it with the demands of her family. This form of organization offers women with small children the opportunity to commit as much time as their personal life allows or even to be "just a visitor" for a while and use the mother center services for their own needs. The active mothers organize a monthly plenary to discuss questions or problems regarding the mother center or their work. These meetings as well as the team meetings are open to all mothers.



Considering the wide range of daily activities taking place in the mother center it is quite amazing to consider the comparatively small expenditure of time and money necessary for such a vital and active meeting place for mothers and children, especially when compared to that of professional counseling institutions. What is necessary are rooms and funding. For the first three years in Munich the mother center was housed in an apartment with 65 square meters of space. Of the two connected rooms one was used as the cafe, the other as the children's room. Additionally there was a small bathroom and toilet. Due to the spatial limitations daily operations were often rather tumultuous, even chaotic at times, i.e. when there were sales or flea markets where up to 80 adults and even more children thronged in the two rooms. But somehow things worked out and the foundation for mother center work was laid in this small apartment. In the meantime the mother center has moved to a location with a children's room of 50 square meters, a cafe with 38 square meters, even an office room with 20 square meters, as well as rooms in the basement for sales, for a barber shop, a lab and for doing pottery. The mother center has since experienced an even greater upsurge and increase in popularity especially among walk-in visitors.

Since the mother centers contribute part of their own funding via the operation of cafes, flea markets, sales and services they need only moderate yearly subsidies (approximately Euro 60 000) to continue their work.

The better equipped mother centers can reach a broader spectrum of the population and are better able to integrate women from different social backgrounds since they can afford to employ mothers especially for this type of integration work.

This is surprisingly cost-effective compared to the yearly budgets of public institutions. But mother centers can't do this work entirely without subsidies. Unfortunately for many institutions who are working in the social arena and thus are potential sponsors, the mother center concept carries with it a confrontation and conflict with the very tenets, principles and structures of their institutional work. Many professionals have unlearned to trust the competencies of lay people, to even perceive lay abilities as competencies; rather lay experts are seen as threats to the profession and its image. In those instances where everyday life competencies are incorporated there is often a resistance to respect and reward them on the same level as professionals. This is especially so in the case of home makers,

so-called "housewives", from whom unpaid volunteer work is expected as a matter of course. Remuneration of their work and skills would stand in direct opposition to the basic societal tenet of unpaid private reproductive work, which includes work in the household, the family and the neighborhood. Many, even those who are speaking of revaluing the role of the home maker nevertheless show great resistance against a monetary upgrading of family work.

Professionals often see themselves as the advocates of the children and shift the focal point of their

work to the interests of the children. Many mothers may mention the interests of their children as a motivator in their first visits to the mother center. However, the power of a mother center compared to many "play groups" or "mother-child-groups", lies in the focus on the needs and interests of the mothers themselves. In the mother center the mothers are the focal point and children are an integral part.

Nevertheless - or maybe even because of it - the children benefit enormously from the center. They learn to deal and associate with each other and they learn to deal with adults in public situations. The ease with which the center's mothers and children learn to relate to each other and with other mothers and children has so far impressed every single visitor. One can do more in the presence of children than has been customary in public. By no means do children have to be shoved out of the way into a child care ghetto so that adults can take care of their activities.

The work with children in the mother center has no preexisting sets of data or experience to fall back on. Until now there have not been any pedagogical concepts or qualifications for dealing with groups of children of diverse ages and in relatively small spaces. Mothers with several children of their own may be the only people with any real experience here. In the mother centers it was decided to make headway in developing concepts and qualifications for the daily life of mothers and children, including new approaches to working with children.



A public culture for and of mothers is taking shape in the mother center, which is developing strategies for conflict and problem solving other than those taught in the world of professional work where such strategies are based largely on the acceptance of hierarchies, pressure to perform, and competition.

To illustrate this here an excerpt from a letter from one of the first mother center initiators:

"In the last few hours I have thought much about what was in the beginning and what is now. I have been able to recognize how much tolerance all of us in the mother center have learned. How much patience we were able to have with each other. How much women are really able to be generous and let differences among each other - even though it may be painful - simply be. Through this, many women have developed an entirely new confidence. Intermediately I had many moments of doubt, especially about this. I believed that our limit of tolerance had been reached and that we would have to

be authoritative, bureaucratic, and disciplining. But in the most difficult instances we have now, after three years, achieved exactly what we understand as tolerance. For that all of us, I included, needed, again and again, courage and support and people believing that other manners of living together are possible. That there is no need for rigid structures or hierarchy, to shape our center to what it is now. Many women in the center agree although they may express it differently. But it has taken a long time and it has taken women who were able to make it through the tough times and who had confidence in better times coming again. However, through our concept, we have also had to exclude women: all those who are not (yet) able to deal with openness and spontaneity. Those who have a middle-class male concept of education, performance, and structure and all those who can't or won't take the initiative to build or enter into relationships. All those who can't wait to let needs and wishes take their own shape and articulate themselves and who instead want a rigid program structure into which they can fit themselves without having to contribute any creative effort of their own. I'm happy that so many women have had the patience to wait, to bear with it, to always allow for the new and the unknown, in order to now be able to enjoy this quiet happiness in the end. It's true: it is possible for us to try out other (and I mean female) forms of living together. The mother center concept has proven itself."

An important part of the dissemination of the mother center concept lies in dealing with the dominating opinions of the professional world and with the deep societal schism between women who have chosen a professional life and so-called "only housewives".

To sum it all up, here a comprehensive catalogue of the main points defining mother centers:

- ❖ In the mother center women are approached first and foremost through their abilities and skills. The fundamental tenet is that each mother can contribute something to the center.
- ❖ At the same time relaxing and "refueling" aren't bad words in the mother center. Mothers need support as well as simple relief.
- ❖ In the mother center grassroots women are the experts. Cooperating professionals work on a contingency basis.
- ❖ The work of mothers is paid in the mother center.
- ❖ To organize a mother center using such innovative approaches which totally contrast with professional attitudes, takes a group of initiators who have experience with working in groups (self-help initiatives) and who most of all have self confidence and a belief in grassroots work that they are able to share with others.
- ❖ Reflective space in form of trainings and seminars to accompany the practical work and to process and reflect on daily experiences are an indispensable support structure for the work in the mother center and the learning processes connected with it. In this context it has been shown that the exchange among mothers from different mother centers is very productive and stimulating.





Total confusion on 56 square meters

A quarter to ten. I've just finished my most urgent errands in the shopping center. The mother center is located one floor up over the drug store and has been open for 45 minutes already. It's time I got there. Christa is offering breakfast today and I don't want to miss out on that.

A row of prams and strollers is standing in the hallway under a new poster that four of the women made themselves. It's really beautiful. Two four-year-old tots clutching lollipops trudge up the stairs ahead of me. They are Lilly's and Karen's Andi and Gertie and the best of friends these days. I think back and grin: six months ago they were still tormenting or biting each other all the time, giving rise to terrible exchanges between their mothers. Real fights spiced with reciprocal accusations of maternal negligence and serious errors in the upbringing of one's children. But even these two women are now dealing passably well with each other. They will probably never be best friends but, as different as they are, you can tell that they have finally begun to understand and respect each other.

Upstairs I run into Margret, and Anna, who is avoiding my gaze today. That's unusual. Margret too only utters a short "Hello" and smiles briefly before her face immediately turns serious again. I keep walking. I know that Anna has troubles up to her ears, with her husband, with her sick mother who is alone in an apartment at the other end of town and who "he" deeply disapproves of, and with her eldest brother who drinks too much... There is a lot of other stuff on Anna's list of troubles, so that I have often wondered how she manages to do it all with her 26 years and the small child. Apparently she has been used from childhood on to be the "mother" for her whole family. And although they project an image into the outside world of the proud and capable young mother of one, many other center women play the same role in their families as Anna. But the way she is standing in this drafty stairway with Margret, it appears that something really bad must have happened. Usually the two never seem to hesitate to talk about personal stuff at the big coffee table where many other women can hear and sometimes even join in with their own opinions.



Lost in thought I hesitantly open the glass door to the foyer of the mother center. Madonna! The coathangers are groaning under the accumulated weight of masses of coats and through the inner door I can hear the deafening noise of many voices of women and children. Whoever said children are louder than adults has never been in a mother center. Although the playroom for the kids is located next to the front door where I'm standing and the cafe room is located behind the far corner to the left, I can

already hear Sandy's alto voice, Vivian's high laugh, and Roberta's accent. Gertrud is also there. Her commanding voice is clearly audible. I'll be able to ask her immediately how the negotiations between our funder and the construction department about our big new rooms are going. I ring the bell twice and wait a while, then I start pounding on the door. A small six-year-old opens the door with the routine of an old hotel porter: Two babies are crawling towards me as I step over various toys right into the arms of Liese, who is standing in the door to greet me. I only wanted to shake her hand but she has to catch me as I trip and we laugh. When we kiss each other's cheeks I notice that Liese's face is hot, apparently she is doing child care today. Just as quickly she jumps over toward the window to catch little two-year-old Kathi who is practicing her climbing skills between a play table and the heater under the windowsill.

The mothers doing child care don't have an easy job with the daily changing hords of kids of various ages and personal characteristics. A professional child care worker, used to fixed groups of children of similar ages, would probably already have given up in this place. Most of the mothers also won't do day care in the center forever, only on a temporary basis. But they always remember how difficult this job is and how much they need the support from the other mothers. This experience has slowly created an atmosphere, in which mothers let the "mother on duty" develop her own personal style of child care. Gone are the times when a professional day care philosophy was expected. Daniela lovingly prepares arts and crafts projects, puppet theaters, games of "ring around the rosy", or story times for each of her child care mornings in order to create a quiet time in the usual chaos. Today's child care mom, Liese, favors more of a simple stoic serenity in the face of churning turmoil. She allows disorder, romping, and even punching, and does more watching than directing or proposing. Liese has developed certain rules for herself to determine how far she will let the kids go in their experimenting and where she draws the line to protect the small ones and where she will step in and redirect events. She works actively only with those who are having problems in joining the free play of others or in thinking up games of their own.

While I'm still standing on the edge of the kid's area and watch Liese in the hustle and bustle, she has gone in and pulled out the two youngest from under a wildly swaying mattress fort and has sat down with them on the rug in the middle of the room to read them a story from a picture book. The other older kids are magnetically drawn to this quiet pole and congregate around Liese and the little ones. The whole scene of 15 kids on 16 square meters turns quiet at once. It's fascinating how Liese has taken the heat out of the wild play that was threatening to come to a dangerous head and all without uttering a single scolding word. I tiptoe along the edge of the kid's area into the cafe room and close the door behind me. Maybe Liese will be successful in keeping that wild bunch spellbound for a while.

At the coffee table the women are sitting very close together, even doubling up sometimes. The smell of coffee is inviting, the machine gurgles comfortably and fills – much too slowly – another carafe. Hanne offers me a sip from her cup. This too is no longer frowned upon in the mother center. Bi opens the



window in the vain hope to let out some of the cigarette smoke, after Thea and Gabi, the notorious Marlboro women, have gotten too involved in their debate to even notice, let alone abide by, the appeals to quit smoking. Bi is looking in the round. For once there are no babies at the coffee table, so she shrugs her shoulders and gives up reminding the two about the new no-smoking rule. The way those two are looking today it would only turn into another endless fight anyway. Bi is still very determined to keep to the jointly made rules but she is no longer a stickler for principles as she was in the beginning. She can bear with and allow for exceptions and has become more popular in the center. Mia smiles at her approvingly, she has watched and seen what went on inside of Bi.



At the second table in the corner two mothers are standing with Ellen, our tailor; something is being artfully tugged and fitted. A three-year-old child runs in from the playroom; crying, she wants her Mommy. Liese looks through the door after her, the mother nods reassuringly, the door closes, opens, and closes again, the door bell is constantly ringing, more mothers, more children are pouring into the small center. Will the new rooms, three times as big and spacious, be ready before the end of the year? You could really get claustrophobic in here. And quiet Elvira is already leaving with her two kids, she can't take this chaos. Mia has noticed and is walking outside with them.

Faith shows up in the door with full shopping bags and a steamer pot. It's eleven. She begins to cook for the daily lunch table for which eight mothers with their kids have signed up. Two school kids have also signed up by themselves without their mothers.

Margret comes back from the cold stairway and her talk with Anna, holding Andi and Gertie by the hand, whose raspberry-red lollipop-smeared faces don't look guilty at all. Margret admonishes: no one has noticed the absence of the two runaways that she came across purely by chance. But that's not surprising because almost all of the mothers, Lilly. and Karen included, are sitting around Ines who is demonstrating how to create puppets out of felt scraps, halved wooden eggs, thin threads, and handpainted wooden heads. Even the best mothers sometimes gladly forget about their kids for a little while, which is why all center women have to keep an eye on all kids, not only their own.

Pia runs away from the table into the play room and comes back with her own little girl, Petra. It's a mystery how she was able to hear her own child in the din but her instinct proves correct: Petra has been bitten by Otto who is one year older. Pia. remains calm and directs Petra's attention to Hilde's laughing baby. She is one of the center women of the first hour and has gotten used to the regularly recurring biting disasters. Even Petra's father is now only getting moderately upset about transient wounds, black marks, and other childhood stigmata, since he has noticed the stubborn enthusiasm with which his "little doll" keeps wanting to go up there to be with the "girls". His wife is relating this with lovingly amused mockery and comforting the mother of the biting child who is new in the mother center and terribly embarrassed by her little Otto. Why did he have to pick this time and place to do something like that? Hilde says it's pretty normal. Otto as an only child is used to getting undivided attention and is simply fighting



with tooth and claw to defend his place in these unknown surroundings.

Slowly it's getting to be twelve o'clock. Kids are getting dressed, shoes are being hunted for, dates are being made for the rest of the week. Two five-year-olds are making a scene, they don't want to go home. Margret plays piggy-back with them, promises that they can come back any day, and accompanies them and their two mothers to the exit. The scene is over. Peter, six years old, with backpack and gym bag fresh from school, comes in to pick up his mom and decides on the spot that he wants to stay in the center for lunch after all. "Mommy can go home by herself!". Monika is here with her baby Miriam. And Peter is in love with Miriam who he is sure he wants to marry one day. He'll even eat Faith's vegetable soup although he actually can't stand those horrid green things. And Faith has an extra lunch portion handy that he can have. Peter's mom gives in. She goes home, actually pretty glad to have gotten this unexpected quiet hour for herself. Peter is independent enough to walk home by himself later.

Many mothers are hurrying now to get home to make lunch for their school kids. Edeltraud asks Faith to put three servings into a plastic container for her. She has ordered ahead and now she only needs to warm up lunch at home. For the others it has gotten, as usual, rather late. "But my household has started to function more quickly anyway since I've been coming to the mother center and am under the pressure to get better organized", says Hilde. And many of the other women seem to feel the same way.

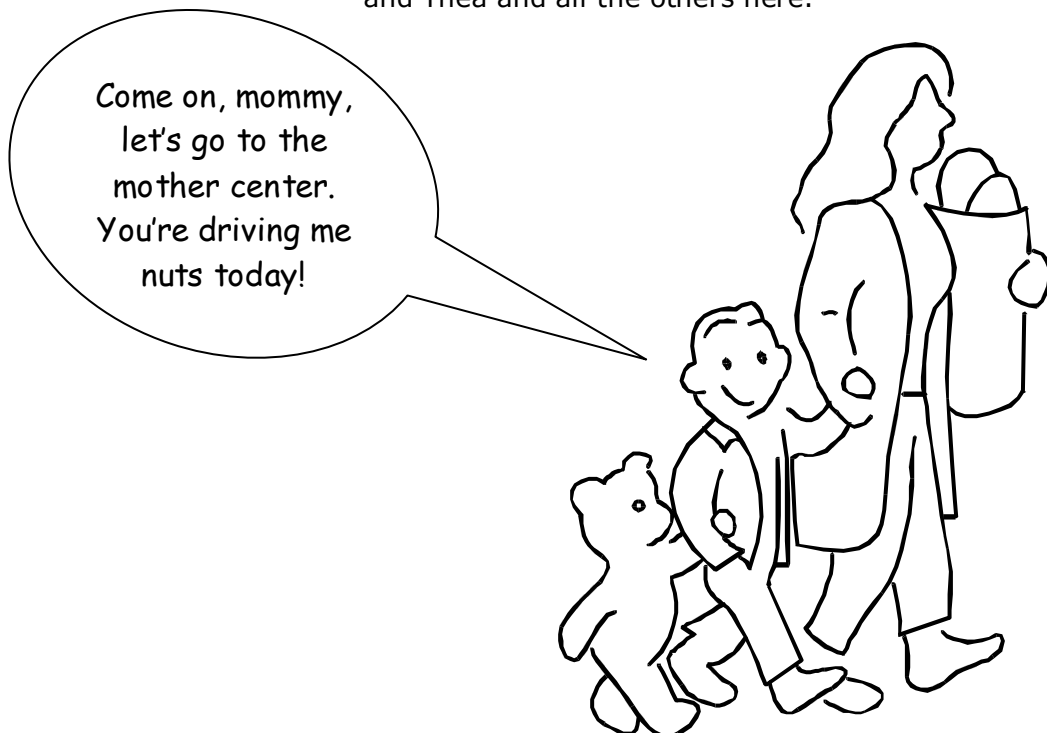
The center has emptied a little, is filled only to "normal" capacity. The aroma of Faith's soup is streaming out from under the steamer's lid. Bi is opening the windows to let in some fresh air. Anna calls on the phone, wants to speak with Margret again. Something must have remained unsaid. Margret takes the phone into the bathroom, stays there, counseling is being continued. Gertrud is waiting longingly for the phone, she has to call in the event announcement to the town gazette, she promised it to them by lunch time today.

The coffee table is being set with soup plates and spoons. Liese is making order in the kids' area, she looks spent, like a woman among the rubble in the aftermath of a storm. Two kids are helping her, one is emptying the toy box again, Gertrud comes in to assist her, slowly quiet is returning to the center, - some relative quiet anyway. Gabi, for the past three months a regular visitor in the mother center and more and more an active part of it as a cook, remarks giggling: "Before I wouldn't have been able to eat a bite in all this noise and confusion. I would have grabbed my child and would have told my husband that these women were nuts who were putting up with this willingly. Well and now," she says to Otto's mother, "now I think it's really cozy here at lunch. Now I even cook myself for 15 people, just as easily as if I were cooking for three." The "new one" smiles back, starts to thaw and to forget that her "horrible" son has bitten tiny little Petra. The "seasoned" mothers have made it easy for her; they have included her in a kind and natural way. That



feels good after her last visit in the mother center, when she felt so ignored and unwanted because no one had said anything to her besides "Hello" and "Good-bye". If Mia hadn't finally called after her "Will you come back?" and smiled at her, she wouldn't be here today. Today she even dares to stay for a "digestive" cup of coffee. Maybe one of the women here can tell her more about the planned fall hikes for families, that were being announced in the last mother center newspaper. Gertrud explains it to her and shows her the sign-up sheet on the bulletin board. The "new one", Otto's mom, is called Andrea. She leaves her address and telephone number, wants to come back again and do some pottery. She has been trained in glazing and can show it to the others if they're interested.

During dessert Bi is able to bring up the topic of smoking after all. The timing is right because everyone wants to let in some fresh air despite the cold. Even Thea and Gabi. The two are repentant and admit that they forgot themselves again over their debate and they vow to do better. Gabi will allow Bi to put her pack on top of the cupboard so that she can't automatically reach for the next cigarette while sitting at the table. Thea thinks it would also be less dangerous for the kids if cigarettes weren't lying around openly. Apparently the time of mutual good will is here. This problem, like the biting issue, would have been the topic of bad fighting months ago: dogmatism along with notices on the walls, with rules and prohibitions like in an administrative office, with mutual recriminations, accusations, and lots of self-righteousness. In the meantime many in the mother center have learned to discuss their issues, sometimes worse, sometimes better – better like today with the motto "Eloquent exceptions support meaningful rules". Bi says she has learned a lot from this for the communication with her boy friend, with whom, plus a child from a previous marriage, she has been living for two years and through many highs and lows. She voices this for the first time in the center in public, maybe because she feels accepted by Gabi and Thea and all the others here.



The Crunch Points

Often mothers from other cities ask what they can do to create a mother center of their own. What are the most important experiences we should share with these mothers?

Mothers as Experts

Fixed activities with set dates and schedules like courses do not fit the rhythms of mothers with small children. They prefer to be able to come to a meeting place, without a specific set of activities or program, without the feeling of taking on another obligation by coming there.

Institutional and professional activities often use a patronizing approach; they want to teach mothers how they can play better with their children or how they can feed the child more healthily or how they can better support the child's development, etc... The mother center approach proceeds on the assumption that women have a lot of knowledge already and that they can bring their knowledge and skills into the mother center. The principle of mother centers is that each woman can do something really well. She doesn't have to be able to do everything equally well but she is an expert in at least one thing and it is the task of the mother center to help her find out what that might be and to develop these abilities. But this is already the second step. The first step for many women is to put up the effort and bring themselves to make that first visit to the mother center. When they are finally there, they want to be able to just sit down and watch a while. If and when they feel that they can take their time, it can be discovered later, in conversation, what they might like to do. It's all about letting-be, acceptance and the recognition of Not-Having-To-Do-Anything.

Since there are no fixed activities each woman is challenged to figure out: what can I do? What can I bring into the group? Naturally it's important not to push but to wait until a woman is really ready and wants to take part.

I want to present an example of how it should not be done: a woman called and wanted to offer a group for pregnant women in the mother center. She said she was a mother and also a social worker and couldn't get a job and that the adult education program would pay her to teach a pregnancy course in the mother center. So she called us and said, "I heard you know a lot of pregnant women. Where do they live? Why don't you give me



their names and addresses? I'm sure you also have experience with doctors. Why don't you share those experiences with me?" And she really showed up with a pencil and notepad and wanted to get all that information from the mother center in order to set up her paid group for pregnant women through the adult education program. We got really mad: "You can't do that! How do you know that the women even want this group? You're offering a pregnancy course and the women are supposed to show up and the mother center is supposed to market it for you." When we suggested that she could participate in the mother center work she asked how much it pays and when we told her Euro 5.- she tried to tell us how exploitative that was.

You can get really ticked off when you have a woman show up who isn't giving anything but wants to get everything from the mothers in the mother center. She doesn't really want to do anything for the women, she only wants a job. Grassroots women deal with their own issues and concerns, professionals are only interested in the job. The women can feel that and they react accordingly.

Control of Space

Appropriate accommodations are essential in the success of a mother center. There are many groups who meet regularly in some borrowed room or other. Church communities may give them a room once or twice a week, many adult education programs offer morning meetings.

Such playgroups or mothers' groups cannot be compared to a mother center. The mother center is open every day. The other groups may not have to pay any rent and they are usually able to determine their own activities in the time that they have the rooms, but they have to leave the rooms as they found them. Such a group will never get any walk-in visitors. In the mother center it's about not having fixed schedules. It's not a closed group of friends meeting, but any woman can just walk in and make contact with someone. That's what defines mother centers. That's why mother centers will keep on growing, because there are always new women who come and bring in new impulses, as well as new tensions, on which to grow. That's what keeps mother centers alive and lively.



This is evident especially in questions of daily operations. Of course it's obvious that you have to clean up after yourself when you're a guest in the parish rooms. Not in the mother center. There you will find a lot of arguments and discussions going on among the mothers about differing sensibilities regarding cleanliness, order, and the taking out of the garbage. This is important in order to find out where there are different needs, to see how diverse the backgrounds in manners and cultures can be. If you have fixed structures and can meet only once a week

without being able to change those structural conditions, whether you fit in them or not, you can't have such a process. In the mother center it's not about whether we fit together comfortably like a bunch of friends but whether we can learn to make compromises, to reach out to each other, to get to know each other even though we may be different.

There is nothing to be said against play groups and mothers' circles. However, when women come and say, "Hey, look at what you women do in the mother center! We think that's great, we want to do the same thing!", it's important to explain to them what's important in making a mother center what it is and not just another mothers' circle like so many others. In the mother centers women make their own culture with all the discussions that are a part of that process. In other groups mothers will always have to fit themselves into a structure determined by public criteria. Day care centers for instance are often not really designed with children in mind, or - if you want - that children aren't made with adults' conceptions of cleanliness in mind. Many mothers with small children simply get that and change their apartments to accommodate their children. When mothers in the mother center have their own rooms they can create this personal culture, with all the inherent arguments about whether the kids can take the colored markers into the bathroom or not...

First of all it's about the concepts that mothers themselves have of living with children. They develop these concepts themselves and don't have to make them fit the concepts of public culture. For example in Darmstadt the initiators had developed specific plans on how to set up and furnish the mother center. The mothers, however, were quick to say, no, we'll change this and that and we'll do the whole thing differently. That was very interesting. It was an important process for all who were involved in the mother center, this possibility for them to make these decisions. For the group of initiators it was a significant experience to allow the mothers to shape the center in the way they wanted. After all the initiators had thought and thought about it and it was really difficult for them to let the mothers change everything in the end. But that's what makes a mother center alive and what lets the participants regard it as theirs. Ultimately it was a big success that there were mothers willing to change the lights, to have their men take care of the wiring, to pick out and cut the carpeting, and this was also really the sign that it had been done right, that the mothers had made the mother center their own.

Mothers are the center of attention

In play groups mothers often say that the children are of central importance. But mother centers are about the mothers. They are to be supported, they are to realize their interests. The children are part of it, but they do not play the lead.

In our society we are used to ask, "Who is the boss? Who is managing this? What am I supposed to do? What's the idea here? What is being done and how can I contribute?". It is new and unusual to be in a situation where nothing is given. In the mother center you learn to ask, "What are my ideas and my vision? How can I bring myself in and realize my ideas?". But that's also a

learning process the mothers have to go through. They are not able to do that right away. Sometimes it also seems to be a contradiction inherent in the women themselves. Although they are attracted to the mother center because things are done differently there, they still get there and ask, "What's the program?". It's as if they were afraid of their own power.

As a woman you fall prey to many insecurities. You are made to feel insecure by your husband, by your children, because you can never please everybody. You are made to feel insecure by the media, by commerce and industry, and because of that you look for recognition and approval from society for yourself as a mother. Many women who come to us because they would like to create a mother center somewhere else won't be able to do it right away. They are most of all looking for something they can be a part of. It's important to tell them about other options because not every mother can realize such a concept as the mother center. We cannot expect that all women who come into a mother center and ask about it will actually be able to create one themselves. But still it is vital that those mothers who are attracted by the mother center learn to understand what points are really important, in order to make theirs a real mother center.

Mother centers are a challenge and a source of insecurity for traditional concepts. We often see mothers come and say, "What, there's no one here from the leadership team? What's being offered here?". Just as the initiators learn to pull themselves back to let others take over, the mothers learn to deal with their own potential to do things in the mother center, to live without a given program. But it's not just about waiting around either. It is not about hanging around lethargically and waiting for someone to do something that can then be criticised and torn apart. It is important to encourage women, to enable them to really develop their abilities.

As a mother you need a space where you are encouraged and where you are given the opportunity to unfold and develop your competencies. At first all mothers need support to get started. Because it's always a big step from a private to a public setting. That's the real work of initiators: helping women find out what they want and what they're good at. When we say that everyone has competencies, there's sometimes an expectation that we are all the same, that we can all do the same things well. It's important to make clear that "each one is competent" does not mean that there are not different levels of experience and skills.

Mother centers are about dealing with differing levels of ability. It's a maternal skill to let another's competencies grow and develop. How can different levels of experience and self confidence not lead to a situation where some grow and some don't? How does one pass along abilities without patronizing? How can an experienced woman deal with one who, as a new mother, hardly has any? Will she be able to just look on and watch? You as the one with experience have to allow things to sometimes go differently than you intended. That is what you learn in a mother center.



Money, money, money...

In the mother center money can be earned. That makes it very different from other programs and groups. In a society in which recognition and approval are accorded depending on the payment one receives for one's work it is important for mothers and their self esteem not to be excluded from these forms of recognition and societal status. Money as remuneration expresses an acknowledgement of the abilities of mothers and homemakers and of the work they do. An acknowledgement they need urgently in order to wear down the barriers that keep them out of public life.



Many mothers have left paid employment, at least for a while, in order to stay at home with their children or they are on welfare programs. To earn their own money in the mother center gives them an opportunity to get back the connection to the labor market. The time in the mother center is for many a practice and preparatory arena for the resumption of employment, often by creating new ways of employment for themselves.

The first two or three years in a mother center contact and communication stand in the foreground. Then commercial activities and interests become more important. Now many women are coming to the mother center just because of the commercial activities. The need for communication, - going crazy at home and needing to connect with others -, is not the only or even the main attraction of the mother center anymore. The satisfaction of this need, at least to a degree, has created room for other interests and perspectives. Earning their own money means a lot for the steps women will take to take their life in their own hands. Earning their own money is often an important argument used to justify mother center work in front of husbands, but it also means a lot for the women's own self esteem. Money is often important just to contribute to the family income, but own money is also important to be able to buy something that doesn't have to be accounted for, to be able to afford something, to become aware of, allow, and take care of one's own needs, is an inspirational experience that encourages and motivates women to develop further perspectives for themselves. It is important for us women to unlearn our modesty. We have to feel deep inside us the passion to win, the feeling that the world can be ours, that we can shape it so that it fits us.



II. Daily Life in the Mother Center





My first visit

I simply went to the mother center , opened the door, said a friendly "Hello", and everybody was glad I had come. From that day on I became a regular visitor.

Today, one and a half years later, I am one of the "women on duty", which is a lot of fun for me. What I like most about my work is that I am always getting to know new people with whom I can get together for breakfast, for coffee, to take a walk, or simply to chat. It's wonderful!

I wanted contact with other people

A year and a half ago I read a notice about the opening of a Mother Centre practically around the corner from me. I thought: I want to go there. The first time unfortunately I had something else planned and I couldn't go, but the second time I made it. I was pleasantly surprised: it looked so nice and homey, less like a cafe, more as if one were visiting someone at home. I was delighted about the little kitchen cupboard there. I felt as if I were sitting in someone's kitchen. Because it always feels a bit funny when you're somewhere for the first time I decided to just wait and see: it was pretty full, almost an entire mother-child-group was there but there were also other people. When I wanted a cup of tea I was asked to get it from the kitchen. I liked that, it seemed so familiar. I really wanted to do something like that myself.

Luckily I told Michaela about it, because that way I found out that they were looking for more people who wanted to take part in this cafe. You could pick what you wanted to do: play group, breastfeeding group, child care, etc... I decided to work in the cafe. Now I only needed someone to do it with me. After I thought about it for days I decided to call Hilde and luckily she agreed to join me. Now we only needed to figure out a day. She couldn't do it this day, I couldn't do it that day. Finally we agreed on Tuesday afternoons.

Then there was a meeting for all those who wanted to do something in the Mother-Child-Cafe and I went. We were asked to make the round and introduce ourselves and to present our wants and desires. And miraculously I was asked to start the round. There wasn't much left open but fortunately "our time" was still available. How lucky I was. So many wishes of mine came true with this:

- ❖ I really wanted to join a new project,
- ❖ I wanted to realize my ideas,
- ❖ I wanted to have a part in decision-making,
- ❖ I wanted to have contact with people.



- ❖ And so I was given the opportunity to do something I know I can do and where I can gather experience.

I think it's good that the mother center is here, not only for the kids, even more so for the mothers. Here each one can introduce her wishes and ideas. Because each one is important, because there is nothing that's fixed or absolute. Everything is still in the process of becoming, under construction, and in constant flux. The center with all its diverse activities could be used a lot more still, but because of this it's also very alive. It's a good practice area for people (mothers in this case) who want to do something. May it be around a long, long time!

Why it's important to be open every day

It was in the first year. I had already heard a lot about the mother center and on a Wednesday I finally went. Actually I had to push myself quite hard to get going. The day was sunny and warm, I could walk with the kids to the mother center. On the way I mentally played through all the possible situations that I might encounter on my first visit there. I was dripping with sweat when I arrived. The sign "mother center" at least gave me confidence that I had found it.



Nothing could be seen from the outside – everything was quiet. I didn't know how to interpret that. My insecurity increased. I took the little one from the stroller, breathed in deeply, and pushed the door handle. Closed! The door was closed! I couldn't believe it but it was really closed. I stood in front of the door for a moment, totally confused. Then I saw the sign "Closed today". Normally it would have been open but today it was closed. Today of all days!

I collected my kids again and went back home. I hadn't felt this disappointed for a long time. It took a while before I went back for another visit. I needed a lot of time to get over this experience.

Sabine's first counseling

Sabine comes running excitedly into the basement "Guess what! I just did my first counseling over the telephone! None of you were there and when I answered the phone I could tell immediately that the woman on the other end was having problems, that she needed to talk. But I was by myself, otherwise I would have just passed on the phone. So I had to deal with it myself." Sabine is really excited, but she also seems proud and satisfied. "What did you do?", we ask. "Oh, nothing really. I mainly listened. The woman talked and talked. First hesitantly, but then it just poured out of her. At the end she thanked me for helping her so much." "How did you feel about that?" "I could understand her very well, I often have similar problems."

"Maybe that's just how you helped her: your understanding and empathy– even over the phone – and the time to listen to her."

Sabine now feels much more courageous and able to deal with the next telephone counseling.

Counseling in a Mother Center

Over the years I have heard again and again from psychologists or social workers how much they feel pressured to achieve, to be successful. Many of them are afraid that their clients could be disappointed or dissatisfied and talk badly about them to other people. I don't have these fears because I'm very careful and I don't want to achieve all that much in my counseling sessions. If, for example, a mother has problems and needs to go to the welfare department but is afraid to, I don't offer to accompany her, even if I do have the time and do know my way around there better. I don't think much



of that approach to help someone solve their problems. It doesn't really help because the next time she has to do it again she'd have the same problem with it and that would only "prove" to herself and to the world that she is incompetent and a nobody. I think it's better to prepare her, to go through the thing with her, so that she can deal with the visit herself and in her own way. Because of my own practical experience I can go through it with her point for point; how the officials will react, depending on what she tells them, and what she can do to get them to be less curt and more helpful. To encourage her I tell her how it was for me, for example how my first social worker after meeting me at the entrance to the building, had me climb four floors with him before telling me that he couldn't help me right then. That's how I learned to prevent this from happening to me ever again. Since then I always call first to verify the appointment and to find out what papers, if any, I need to bring along, etc. That's how she sees that everyone can have a bad experience with these things the first time and that she can come and talk to me afterwards so that we can figure out how to go from there. It's important to me to let the woman know that setbacks are completely normal in the beginning and that she can learn from them and gain confidence in herself. If the visit should go wrong after all, at least she doesn't feel like she has to give in and sell herself short. Confidence in herself, and the confidence to try and to learn from setbacks, is what I try to give. To try and give more than that would be irresponsible. This way I can't disappoint anyone either. In my work in the mother center I simply can't run after all the problems I hear about and I can't constantly put out fires for the two or three women who are experiencing emergencies at any given time. It's not possible, I can't do it. Therefore I also don't take on this expectation that I should be dealing with everything, taking care of everybody. It's useless to make myself out to be "supermother" and then be unable to pull it off.

When I started working in the mother center I thought about what would be a possible and doable goal of counseling: one option would be to counsel the three or four women who came in

first very extensively and thoroughly, which would mean that all others would have to be fobbed off with halfhearted telephone calls or superficial questioning. The other was creating an atmosphere where women dare to talk and to think out loud, to try and to practice, where they gain the confidence to look at their problem in a new light or to try a different approach to solving it. I don't know if this slows down progress for them but at least this way many can be helped rather than just a few. They can take their own steps and protect each other in the same way. Because dealing with problems as I have explained it is not hard or difficult. Through venturing further and further in little steps and with lots of practice everyone can grow personally. I am basing this on my own experience and I'm trying to pass that on. I believe that if you experience people in their daily life it's easier to find ways to offer small assistances, so that they soon feel better, braver, more secure and confident. In my line of counseling work it's most important to me to show other mothers what they can do and what they can change for and by themselves; in little steps just as I have done it myself in my own personal development throughout the past ten years.

How one acts as woman and mother mirrors who one is at home and elsewhere. In the mother center a woman will make basically the same mistakes and experience the same problems as in the rest of her life. Only here the patterns are not quite as established and rigid yet. That's why it's easier here to change your course of action if you get a little help early on. As long as the difficulties between one mother and another are still small and haven't gotten stuck in some rut yet they can still try to reach out, to change things. Personally I'm convinced that this is a way to learn a lot more about oneself in relation to others and to also be able to apply this learning to the same old situations, meaning back in the family, in the relationship with one's husband, in discussions with one's children, etc. In the mother center this can be tried and practiced in a kind and calm atmosphere until one feels secure enough to use it in those situations where everything seems totally stuck, where it means a lot for one's personal life.

I want to try to demonstrate this with an example: A few days ago a mother comes to me. She is totally upset and tells me that her son has been failing in school since he has a girl friend.



Everything is the girl's fault. In that moment I'm not thinking at all that I ought to be solving this problem. Instead, while I listen, I try to think about what I can say that would not challenge her opinion because she would not be ready to listen to anything like that in her current frame of mind. With my questions I want to introduce some other aspect, so that she can rethink her anger. In this particular conversation I finally asked about school. How's it going, which school is he going to and how is he doing generally. And then I heard that the school is awful, that the mother dislikes the school too and that the son has to fight a lot there. Then it was really easy to ask, "Well, don't you think that that's where a lot of the other problems are coming from? That that's why he doesn't feel like learning?" Then we talked about how it's really not easy for kids to find their way in the school system. I told her about my own kids, what they tell me about

school and how difficult it is for me to encourage them again and again to assert themselves in class and with their teacher. After such a conversation you can tell that the mother is not quite so stuck anymore in her anger and hatred of the girl friend, but that she has become able to see the real difficulties of her son again. When such a fresh point of view has been gained, then you can try to talk from one mother to another about what possibilities you see to deal with the son and the girl, other than with anger and recriminations.

I think two things are fundamentally important in such a counseling session: first of all I don't stand in anyone's way or try to stop them when I can see that they need to just get out all the anger and rail at someone. Second, after everything has started to loosen up a bit, then I try to help the person by asking questions or by sharing my personal experiences to get her to a wider perspective of her problem, where she can see other sides of it too and can start to think about the whole thing holistically. I'm not aiming for any more than that!

The third step I only make when I can tell that I can push the conversation a little further. Then I'll talk about the possibility to talk with her and the son and the girl together. But I don't plan for that and I don't push it either, I'm very careful there. Nothing is worse for me than offering a mother in such a conversation more solutions than she can practically use when she's back at home by herself. That would be discouraging and it would also make it hard for her to come back and talk to me again. I don't want to make her feel insecure, but to give her the confidence that it feels good to talk about stuff like that!

When you live and work in the mother center like me you have to allow for the women who come here to also bring their problems with them. They have become 20 or 30 years old in their own personal way. And there are very few possibilities to really change anything basic. That's not our task either. When you're sitting with each other and some problem comes up it's just important that there is a good atmosphere and that the other woman can feel good about being able to talk about her concerns freely. That creates trust in the mother center and gives a durable feeling of security and confidence. The mother with the son and the girl friend can go home feeling that now she can talk to her son in a better way. She feels a little better and the next time the situation at home or her attitude toward her son may already have changed on its own or maybe something totally different is going on that she will want to bring to the mother center because she knows that it's good for her. It's important to me that mothers feel at home here.

To demonstrate what I mean by "at home" I want to talk some more about that same mother. A few days ago she came in one morning looking rather downhearted and you could tell that she wasn't feeling good. But the two of us weren't able to sit down and talk because the telephone kept ringing and something was always going on. At twelve, when she had to leave she came to me and gave me a big hug, wordlessly, before she left. I thought to myself, "I know perfectly well that I can't help in many situations, even if I can tell there's a need, but apparently I can offer her a place where she can relax here." When you're able to create such a feeling of well-being in the mother center, an



ambience of safety develops, slowly and conversation by conversation. An ambience where the women don't really need anyone to specifically sit down and talk to them anymore. I felt incredibly happy at that moment!

You can tell how those same changes also happen at home for many women. They come in and say "Oh well, I've never been able to really talk with my son, because I never dared to say anything. And now he tells me: You've become totally different since you've been going to the mother center. He doesn't talk back to me anymore either, with smart remarks or bad language. And that's a big step for me, it's almost the most important thing, because then everything – although maybe not without fights or problems – can develop and continue in its own way."

It's not only important for us mothers that we dare and risk; it's also important that we find out what we want and what we don't want. Often as women we're not really clear about that, even to ourselves, and so we project those things onto our husbands or we feel guilty. For example, when the conversation is about going out in the evening, many say: "My husband doesn't want me to; he wants to stay at home in the evening and he wants me to stay with him." Katja, who used to say that about her husband one day talked me into getting a quick cup of coffee somewhere. We went and sat down in a pub in the area and we talked. We were still talking at eleven thirty that night. She finally said, "Oh goodness, now I feel really bad. I'm sure to get in trouble when I get home this late." I asked her why she hadn't called home before and asked if her husband wanted to join us. She answered that he would have been sure to come and join us because he really likes going out to a pub and sitting and talking with friends. And it turned out that she is actually the one who prefers staying home with him in the evening. She doesn't like going out with him and other people because he always takes over the whole conversation; then she doesn't feel like talking anymore and the evening is spoiled for her. When she realized why she had wanted to be alone with me to talk and why she risked trouble with her husband, she had gotten somewhere. Katja told me a few days later that they had been able to deal with it better than before, because when she came home she made herself tell him what she had realized earlier.

It is possible to effect a whole lot of change in a mother center if there are only a few women there who are aware enough of their own personal development, so that they are able to help others with those little mental blockages. Then even those mothers can feel welcome here with their children who would never take the risk to go anywhere else and whom you would never find in any other meeting, initiative or social work program, because there they always end up on the fringes and get discouraged. I've become sure by now that the work in the center can only continue if at least one woman has gotten to that point (and others too sooner or later) where she can become aware of these blockages and can help loosen them before they harden. This awareness of insecurities and conflicts, this constructive dealing with difficult moments, that are ever ready to turn into resignation, frustration, or anger at a moment's notice, and the fact that it's possible to turn them into encouragement and clarity instead, has to be lived and modeled by at least a few women.

To me this way of having conversations early on and in a good atmosphere, is very important, because otherwise you end up with a big fight in the center, sooner or later. A fight that only those women survive who don't have many problems in the center or outside anyway. And to me this work is about starting with little steps of encouragement, so that the mother center is a good place for all women. It's wonderful to see that with time many mothers in the center develop this way of communicating. And that they become able to talk to other women who are experiencing a problem or a conflict or who simply feel too scared to attempt to try anything by themselves.

And I have to say it again and again: without women who see this as an important task and who are able to make it happen, you can't have a mother center. Not the kind of center that is able to welcome also those mothers who are afraid to go anywhere else and whose self esteem is still in its very beginning. Those mothers are not able to simply relax and feel good with a cup of coffee, merely because there is this room for women with child care included. There's simply too much stress and tension in some women for that. And that's why we need to work on it consciously to create this good atmosphere in the daily life of the center.

The ordinariness of these reflective talks among women, the fact, that there are no appointments set or special settings created for them, seems to be the decisive moment in mothers being able to experience these counseling conversations as soothing and free of fear. "Maybe some of us wouldn't even call it counseling," says one of the mothers, "because you experience it like an ordinary conversation and only with time do you become aware that it's something special. Only much later do you actually realize how much you have learned to look at problems from more than one side before coming to a conclusion. It has changed me a lot because in conflicts with my husband or with other women here, I am now trying much harder to see the other's point of view. I've become much more tolerant through this!"

I Can Recharge My Energy Here!

Before I used to be rather shy and reserved. But that changed after I made my first acquaintances and friendships in the mother center. In the last three years I've become more self-assured, even at home with my family, and in dealing with other people in general. The women in the center and the discussions with them somehow energize and stimulate me. There's always something I can take home with me. My range of vision has widened incredibly. I never experienced anything like this in my former profession or in my family life. Of course there were some difficulties with my husband and with my family, including my in-laws. Before I would have just swallowed all the comments and the criticism and either accepted them or repressed the anger I felt. Now I am better able to deal with these problems and it shows in the improved relationship with my in-laws. My greatest achievement is that I can talk about my personal problems, that I can open myself. Before I got here I used to think that my problems were nobody else's business and that I was able to handle everything by myself.



Talking it over with someone else first...

Andrea hadn't been coming to the mother center for a long time, at least for half a year. I saw her often in the market where she sometimes sold flowers. We usually chatted a bit then: "How's it going? How's your daughter Lucy? Why don't you come by again?" She didn't come but this way we kept in contact.

Last week she called suddenly. I was a bit surprised, but then I felt very happy about this sign from her. "I'm having big problems," she said, rather angrily. "Imagine, Ms. W. from the Youth Welfare Department told me today to make up my mind and either to put Lucy in foster care or give up working and take care of her all the time. When I asked her why, she said that Lucy was showing signs of disturbed behavior, that she seemed totally apathetic. Just picture that! This woman is so young and inexperienced and besides, she doesn't even know Lucy!" Andrea is talking a mile a minute. She is really angry and upset. It's too much for me to take in on the phone. I don't really understand what's going on and I don't want to say anything wrong. When she's finished relating the whole story she asks, "Tell me, could they take Lucy away from me?"

I suggest that she come by the mother center so that we can talk about it more calmly and in depth. She was calling from a nearby phone booth. I was momentarily worried whether she'd show up. But she came with Lucy whom she had picked up from day care after work.

Three mothers and some kids were in the center. I had to take care of some other stuff first. Andrea started talking with the other mothers of whom she only knew one from before. Still very upset, she related the incident. The other mothers reacted quite dismayed. Finally I joined them and Andrea continued with her story. She thought that her day care provider had complained to the Youth Welfare Department that "Lucy is too well-behaved when shopping and plays so much by herself. That she is so different from the other kids." I watched Lucy. She behaved perfectly normal. She played actively and focused with the other kids. She still knew her way around the center and got some toys that she offered to share with the other kids. She had grown and I thought that she talked quite a lot for her three years. Last winter she had been pretty whiny. Now she organized her own play and only called on her mother to help her carry a heavy rocking horse outside. She made a very positive impression on me. Obviously she had developed splendidly.

One of the women said, "This is really too much! A single parent is trying to make her living and not depend on welfare from the government and the government is accusing her of neglecting her child. As if all the mothers who stay at home were better mothers!" She herself is staying at home with her child. "I think every mother should be able to decide for herself whether she wants to work or stay home to take care of her child." The other mother only remarks, "Yeah, they think they can push us single parents around any way they want to."

Andrea then talks about her day care provider, who has two older kids of her own. Since they have started going to school she has taken in day care kids because she was feeling lonely. Lucy liked going there but Andrea had not been able to connect with the

woman. "I just can't talk with her. When I drop Lucy off or pick her up we say hello, but nothing much else."

I started to realize something: was this a case of two different life concepts colliding, two women unable to understand and accept each other? I express my thoughts out loud. The other women develop them further: Andrea wants to have her daughter and keep on working too. She wants to earn more money than she can get from welfare and she wants to spend a few hours each day without a child. In the evening she wants to be with her daughter and she doesn't want to give her into foster care. The day care provider is not employed outside the home. She has always stayed home because of the kids. The family lives off the money the father earns. The two women are really very different. We had already heard of such conflicts through the day-care provider support group. Maybe something similar is at the bottom of this.

Andrea realizes it herself, "I should really talk with her. I wanted to but the call from the Youth Welfare Department had upset me so much that I had to talk with someone else first. I think I'll try again tomorrow." We encouraged her to do that and suggested that she invite the day care mother to the mother center, since a conversation here among several women might be more relaxed.

I go home. Andrea and Lucy are staying in the center. The next evening she calls me again. She has talked with the day care mother. She is glad about that although the results weren't very satisfying. She is thinking of a few more ideas for a solution. Maybe she could also put Lucy in a day care kindergarten. She wants to call me back when she needs to talk again. At least she is no longer afraid that the Youth Welfare Department could take Lucy away from her.

Helpful Conversations

Many institutions offer "education" or "counseling". In the mother center we "care and take care". Counseling is given and taken depending on personal sympathies, more in passing. Women wait until the woman they like and trust is in the center and then approach her. This leads to conversations and interactions on many topics including women's issues, marriage and child raising, consumer advice, political questions.



While relating her birth experience, Inge suddenly began to talk freely and deliberately about contraceptive methods and in the small circle of four or five women sitting there this worked out without any qualms or misgivings. I'm sure that had this happened in another setting, planned or staged, sort of like: "Let's meet tonight at eight to talk about our women's issues...", nobody would have shown up.

If I tell a mother it's good to remain calm when her child does this or that, of course she'll agree. But it's a whole different thing if she is present when another mother reacts with such calm when something happens. In the mother center mothers learn much that they can apply to other situations.

Different life styles

Hanna is a single parent, she has left her little daughter with two gay men who share the apartment where she lives. I feel proud somehow that I know women with such a different life-style. I guess I'm still pretty simple minded and bourgeois at heart. What's on the floor belongs to everybody!

What's on the floor belongs to everybody

A grandma came in for the first time with her grandchild. She put her full shopping bags on the floor. When she was ready to leave after an hour there were only four rolls left of the ten she had bought. It took her a while to come back, but she did, and didn't leave her bag on the floor anymore.

Oh, the Luxury!

What a day! Almost intolerable. Before lunch already everything that could go wrong did. The kids woke up cross and ill-tempered. George dawdled and missed the schoolbus. Which was somehow Mom's fault, of course. The little one bruised his knee in kindergarten and managed to cry and whine about it for hours afterward. Nothing got done at home, I simply seemed to have two left hands today.

In the afternoon I was so sick of it. I couldn't wait for the mother center to open. I didn't care about anything else anymore. I just wanted to sit down somewhere and not be responsible for anything or anybody. When we got there I yelled at the boys to go play with the other kids and leave me alone. Afterwards there was constant screaming and yelling heard out of the playroom. I knew why: my kids were trouble today. But I pretended not to hear them. The order- and cleanliness gang was already throwing me dark looks but I pretended not to notice. I must have been successful because nothing else happened.

I drank one cup of coffee after another and slowly my mood lightened. Later Jessica came by and we started to chat and she got me to laugh out loud. I enjoyed every minute of the rest of the afternoon to the fullest. It was rather late when I grabbed my sons. By then they had apparently calmed down themselves and they told me great stories of their games when I put them to bed.

The mother center did wonders for us today.

Woman Talk:

We talk about children, women, men.

There is none of the stress I usually feel in conversations when men are present.

I think that despite all the contradictions, a conversation among women will be more equal than if there are men involved.

A Wonderful Experience

Tears are running down my face. I am so delighted, so happy. I've finally done it! After 39 wonderful, scary, happy, and uncertain weeks I finally know. For three hours I was lying here, groaning with closed eyes, hoping, enduring. Bearing the pain of the past 39 weeks. Now I have won!

Beside me lies wrapped the most beautiful and wonderful prize. Beside me lies my baby girl Claudia, tiny, ugly, red, and so very beautiful.

And this uncertainty: is she really, really healthy? Can the doctors tell already? How happy I am! I could do these three hours over again a hundred times. I want to celebrate, not sleep. Who could sleep now? We drink champagne, end up waking the women next to me. Look here, look! I'm a mother. Finally I'm a mother!

My husband leaves. It's late and the nurses have been throwing us dark looks. They don't know that I can't possibly sleep now. There's a lot of pain between my legs. But no aches or pains matter now.

It's two o'clock. How I would love to take my tiny little baby into my arms. This sweet little human being! She will never have to suffer one bad moment, I will always be there for her. I will always be tolerant and understanding. I will keep her from all evil and I will open her eyes for beauty. We will always, always, love each other.

Six o'clock. Finally, at long last, I will see her again. My sweet, little baby. I want to hold you in my arms forever. But what's that?! Why won't she drink? Come, sweet little angel, drink! You have got to be hungry! I feel so scared. Why won't she drink? Is she really okay? I remember all the stories I've heard or read in these 39 weeks. What are people trying to do with their horror stories? They probably think they're giving us important information.

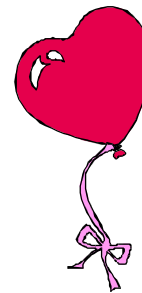
The doctor said she was healthy as a horse. But how many others have been told that and later the kids turned out sick or handicapped anyway. Someone help me! I've read too much! The nurse calms me down. It's okay, she says, she'll drink sooner or later. Oh, good!

I take my little baby doll into the changing room. I admire her tiny body, count her fingers and toes, check out everything. Then I feel weak and roll her little bed back into my room and place it where I can see her all the time, even when I'm laying down.

If only this pain would go away! Later the doctor comes and tells me that it'll be okay, he's seen worse, he says.

When I went home I was sort of newly born too. I had to relearn how to handle myself. I came home, all the happiness of life wrapped up in a baby blanket. I had met many mothers in the hospital. Some of them I knew from school and we had planned to get together again.

The first days at home with my baby, I cried a lot because she wasn't drinking. Then I noticed the mess. I was living in a two-hour rhythm: feeding, resting, cleaning up, pumping milk from my breasts. I couldn't manage! The mess around me got bigger



and bigger and I got more and more anxious and the baby cried more and more often. It was a vicious circle. And I had many visitors those first few days. People, who weren't even friends, kept coming into my house and seeing my failure as a mother and housewife. If I went out to walk with Claudia and people looked into her stroller they told me, "Oh, she's so cute and so little! She can't be any work. But later, when she's bigger, you'll see! Little kids, little worries. Big kids, big worries." I would have liked to give her away then. I didn't want her anymore. At night my breasts were leaking and I kept having to change the sheets. Dirty, smelly nursing bras and diapers everywhere. And a good mother doesn't let her baby cry! But Claudia cried and cried and cried. She screamed. I sat in the kitchen with the faucet turned on full force and waited until she slept.

This was supposed to be my life? Now I was finally free to do everything I had always wanted to do. Learn French, do pottery, knit, meet interesting people, maybe work part-time. But when was I supposed to do that? In the half hour Claudia slept during the day? In the evening when I surveyed the mess out of bleary eyes and waited for Claudia to suck the last remnants of energy out of my breast?

Then I got sick. A kidney infection with high fever. I had Claudia beside me in bed. I had to take care of her but was terrified of falling down on her. I was terrified of dying, at night, when Klaus wrapped cold towels around my calves to lower the fever. During the day I was terrified of living. After a week I still had the fever. I had lost 10 pounds and was hardly able to stand up anymore. That night we called a doctor because I kept hallucinating that I was dying. He wanted to put me in the hospital. But a good mother doesn't leave her two-month-old baby! I refused to go, I'd rather have died! So I got lots of drugs and had to drink the most awful kind of tea by the gallon. I got better and things continued where they had left off.

Our friends, all without kids, withdrew from us. We were too focused on the baby, they said. Klaus began to drink. My calm and even-tempered husband became aggressive. I had crying fits, yelled at the three-month-old baby, when she screamed and didn't drink. I didn't know what to do anymore. I suddenly understood mothers who suffocated their children with their pillows. I wanted to run away. Where were the many friends from before? They had stopped coming by because the baby was always the center of attention. They had stopped coming by because Klaus got abusive. Maybe my parents would take me in! My mom had raised three kids and she had often talked about wanting to leave my father. I could go there! Hesitantly I tried to talk to my mom. When she realized what I wanted she told me that this was just the way things were when people have kids, that it would get even worse and that I might as well get used to it now. I started thinking about leaving Claudia on some doorstep and running away. But I thought about it too long and ended up going back home with her. Klaus continued to drink. We argued and fought constantly, for days, weeks, months. One time we were even hitting each other. When he sat in his easy chair, totally drunk, I felt like killing him. In my diary I wrote, "If this is supposed to be my life, I want it to end right now."

I tried to talk to our old friends again. I told them that I couldn't manage with Klaus anymore. Again and again I tried talking to him. He had a few days vacation coming up soon. We had to get out. I grabbed this chance and booked us a room on an island in the North Sea. Claudia turned one year old. My husband and I sat in the garden and talked. We took long walks on the beach and talked. We ran for miles in the morning and talked. We made love every night, despite the separate beds, that squeaked so horribly that Claudia woke up every time. Things were working again between us. I filled page after page in my diary with excuses and explanations for his behavior. I wrote there that I had married the best husband in the world after all. We came home and Klaus was a changed person: quiet, calm, loving. He didn't drink that much anymore. I found out later that he kept drinking in secret. But at least he didn't let me find out. I had my peace and quiet back.

I loved Claudia more than anything. But again and again there were moments when I screamed at her. Then I'd hate myself. In the meantime I had met a few other mothers with babies and we got to together for coffee sometimes.

I had gotten used to the job of housewife. I declared war on the mess and disorder, straightened up all the time, cleaned and ironed constantly, and vacuumed twice a day. I was glad when I had people visit me in the sterile environment I was so proud of. But I felt so unhappy.

One morning I read in the paper that a mother center was to open in the neighborhood. Claudia was now a year and a half and this center seemed like an incredible opportunity to get away from my perfect housewife life. I took all my fears and stuffed them in a box at the very back of my mind. Then I went there and told them that I liked their ideas and wanted to be a part of the mother center. It was fantastic! Immediately I was part of the organizing committee. I read, wrote, drew up plans, spent whole days thinking up new ideas. I took over coffee duty and I got to know lots of women. I didn't mind having a mess at home anymore. I didn't mind scrounging the refrigerator for leftovers instead of cooking up a three-course menu for lunch. I felt my self-esteem growing again. I felt like I was somebody again. Suddenly I had patience with Claudia. I played with her. I didn't feel the need to scream at her anymore. We put together a program, we went to workshops. I had never experienced anything like it. Women who understood each other, who felt the same things, who hugged. I felt safe and accepted. I felt really wonderful. Today, three years later, I can say that the mother center was what helped me to become a confident, independent woman.

A Market of Opportunities





Thrift Store

Vivian and I, both 47, get a lot of fun and excitement out of operating the thrift store in the mother center.

There's a lot of work for us. For instance, when Mary or anyone else brings in clothes, we have to check carefully whether we can accept them or not. They have to be in very good condition for us to be able to re-sell them. Mary will tell us what she wants for the clothes but usually it's up to us. If, for instance, we generally sell outdoor coats for Euro 22.-, we have to keep that in mind in deciding how much to pay a woman who brings in another coat, since we wouldn't be able to re-sell it for more than the others. If we can accept the clothes, Vivian and I put price tags on them. We make up an index card with a number for each supplier. This number goes on the price tag, so nobody besides us knows who the clothes are from. The supplier gets money only when the merchandise is sold and 20% of the sale price goes to the mother center as a commission. We keep the clothes about 6 to 8 weeks on average, then we give back what we didn't sell or have it picked up by women who have relatives in other, poorer, countries. Often we also have an exchange of sorts when mothers bring in kids' clothes that their own children have outgrown and then they stay and try to find other clothes in bigger sizes. Vivian and I have been doing this for almost three years and we really wouldn't want to miss it. But it's not all we do, there's more involved. We don't work in the store constantly, we also take care of visitors and of anything else that needs doing. We see the thrift store as one of many activities in the mother center. Most important to us is the interaction with all the women here. We try to create a good atmosphere so that they experience a sense of well-being here. Because our own kids are already grown we are able to be active like this outside of our homes and we'd be delighted if other women our age would come and join us.

On the Way to Becoming an Entrepreneur

My dream of opening a record store or a small arts and crafts shop is more and more becoming a reality. In the mother center I will soon be able to realize everything I have been dreaming about. I want to operate my shop using the example of the thrift store. Women will be able to give me their handmade works of art and I will sell them for them.

My interest in retail activities began with my love of shopping. I love to look for bargains and really unusual or special items. I've always bought more than I needed myself because I thought that other women might enjoy these items too. The things that I didn't need myself I resold at cost, simply so that other women could benefit from my bargain finds. In order for me to get something

out of the deal I started to do crafts, to sew, and to knit. I made a profit selling my works but business was rather slow because I didn't always feel like being productive. I actually prefer selling to making stuff. Before our child was born I worked as a sales clerk and I really loved that job. But now, with a child, I wouldn't want to get stuck in those long hours again that are so common in retail and that are only possible when you don't have a child.

Now I want to work increasingly towards the goal that women who like to do crafts or sew, to produce something, can bring their works into my mother center store and that I can be their sales representative. That way all of us get something out of it. I'll be offering and selling their stuff whenever the mother center is open. If necessary, I'll also organize sales promotions on the weekly market so that we get more walk-in customers. And my bargain finds will also be a special part of "my" store.



I really like this whole idea because in the mother center I save myself shop rent and all the tax worries too. After all we do these activities together for the benefit of the mother center. And I don't have to invest a lot of money. My child is also taken care of when I don't have time for her. And if I don't feel like working I'm sure I'll find someone to take over for me. I really like having my store in the center. I would have never dared to do something like this on my own.

Emergency Service



It all began before the mother center even existed. I was lying on the sofa at home with a broken foot at the same time that my husband was laid up in the hospital. Who would take care of me and my little daughter? A neighborhood acquaintance with a daughter the same age came and took care of what needed to be done and shopped for us. She didn't want any money but wanted to help on a reciprocal basis. Unfortunately I never had the chance to do the same favor for her. So I kept feeling as though I was in her debt.

The mother center came about and in the course of time I heard other mothers tell similar stories. So why not create an emergency service in our mother center? A notice on the bulletin board was put up to inform interested women. After a few weeks we met in the mother center. We wanted to get to know each other and discuss our ideas for the emergency service. We agreed that the whole operation of it should be done by one person, me. I set up an index with names and telephone numbers of the emergency mothers and their preferences. Some only want to do shopping and housework, others only want to do child care, and

some even offer to stay overnight. People who need this service call me and I set them up with the appropriate emergency mother depending on their needs. Payment is a bit of a troublesome issue. We have a fixed payment scheme of Euro 5.- per hour, Euro 30.- per day. Unfortunately, although it's never very much, I often have to chase after the money. Every three months we meet to talk about our experiences, problems and solutions.

Additionally we have set up a babysitter service using a stamp system, meaning the mother pays the babysitter with a stamp and gets it back by doing babysitting herself.

Peer learning

I was suddenly not buying that magazine "Our Child" anymore. Before I had been waiting and watching for it every week. Now I don't need it anymore. I also take myself and the kids to the doctor less often and we're still fine. You can learn a lot from other mothers.



Information

Besides counseling in personal areas of life there is also very practical advice available in the mother center. There is assistance with heating cost statements, household budgets, banking, cosmetics, health, as well as an information service run by one of the fathers here for questions regarding family issues, labor market reentry policies, and legal issues.



The Lunch Table

Some long time mother center mothers have been cooking lunch in the center regularly for some time. This has given other mothers the impression that these senior women don't give the new women who have just started coming into the center any room. Some of these new ones like to cook too, would like to earn some money with it, and see cooking as a first step to becoming an active part of the mother center.

On the other hand there are always those days in the center when it's really difficult to find anyone at all to cook. Of course, the long timers who jump in and take up the slack, feel hurt by the allegation that they push others out of the way to make a lot of money for themselves. It would be better if these more experienced mothers could take themselves back a little any time there are some new would-be cooks around.

At their meeting the lunch team set an upper limit of Euro 3.- per portion for adults (which includes a contribution to the mother center). If it's more expensive, many mothers, especially those with several children, can't afford to eat lunch very often in the mother center. That's why we appeal to everyone to watch for bargains when shopping. Of course, that's not always feasible, because not every cook has a car and can do her shopping in the

wholesale market. The expectations in the center towards the lunches will always be very diverse. That's why a certain tolerance and generosity are necessary.

Two Meals for the Regulars

About one year ago my sister-in-law and I cooked twice for the regulars in the mother center. We had thought up something really special: Cole-soufflé and Cornstew. The first evening we put our soufflé in the oven and asked the women where to find plates, glasses etc. They told us to, "Just look around, you'll find everything." No assistance or introduction was forthcoming and that added to our own insecurity. I'm not a very entertaining hostess and I don't always run around smiling either. Well, I did try to introduce our dishes pleasantly but I don't know what impression the others had. We ended up selling about five meals. Two of them were evidently still cold in the middle – the fault of that stupid oven. The other evenings, when we had been guests, way more food had been sold. The hope that the sewing circle women, who were supposed to come in later, would want to eat something also didn't materialise. Darn it! We were pretty frustrated. Maybe next time would be better!

The second evening we came into the mother center with our corn stew. We only needed to warm it up, - no "au gratin" stuff like the soufflé – so nothing could go wrong, right?! Two nice women were there and told us, "You might want to go downstairs. The sewing circle women were complaining last time that nobody came and asked what they wanted to drink." We asked, "What? Were we supposed to do that? We didn't see anybody do that when we were here as guests. And anyway, they could have told us about it themselves!" "Stupid cows!", I thought. Then I went timidly downstairs and asked what they wanted to drink. They looked up from their sewing, seemed uncomfortable, and didn't really come out with it. After I had asked about three more times, I finally got an order of a few cokes, waters, and beers. Then I asked, "Who wants something to eat?" They asked, "What's to eat?". "Cornstew with beef, tomatoes, and beans", I said. One of them called out really loud, "Yuck, you can eat that yourselves!" That really knocked me for a loop. After this, of course, none of them

wanted to eat any of our food. I went back upstairs in a daze and vented my frustration. Again we only sold a few meals. Some of the sewing circle women later at least tried a few spoonfuls and discovered that it tasted a lot better than they had imagined, but unfortunately by then they weren't hungry anymore. We vowed to ourselves: "Never again!" Now I only cook lunch for the women and kids in the mother center cafe and woe to those who dare complain!



Sewing Circle

Since spring I've been looking after the sewing circle in the Mother Center. In the beginning it was difficult to find another woman to do child care. Several people took turns doing it. Since August Elisabeth and I are organizing the sewing circle on Thursday afternoons. We both bring our children, who are two and three years old. We want to specifically address women with small kids in order to enable them to work on something and be productive in the presence of their children. Additionally the kids are supposed to find play mates and the women to see visible results from their work. And the results really are pretty good: inexpensive new, altered, or mended children's clothes.

By talking directly to the women who meet with their kids in the park close by, word-of-mouth advertisement in our circle of friends and acquaintances, and through our small showcase, we're trying to publicize our activity. At first a lot of women came who were already familiar with the Mother Center- through other activities. Slowly we started to also attract new women. These sewing afternoons are open to everybody, no one is obliged to come regularly. We have a circle of regular visitors and the kids are happy to be able to play with each other. . We collect a fee per afternoon to cover expenses.

Each afternoon we have up to seven women with kids between 6 months and five years of age. The great difference in age among the kids is problematic but Elisabeth is minding them with great calm and serenity. She reads them stories, mediates their arguments, and carries the babies around. There have never been big problems with the kids. The older ones sometimes mother the younger; they build, paint, climb around on the mattresses, watch the sewing, or hang onto their mother's skirts. When the kids are happy, the tranquillity necessary for sewing also sets in.

Since the basic knowledge of the participants is pretty scanty but they really enjoy sewing, we started out with a small and unambitious program. Each one sews a skirt after her own ideas, but all come together to go through each individual step of the work. We plan to do a small introductory sewing course on four afternoons so that later everyone can work a bit more independently. Of course, coffee and conversation are always part of it too.





Mending Shop

The sewing and mending shop has really taken off among the women. First and foremost there are those who need zippers renewed, especially in jeans. Because the sewing machine can sew almost anything! Shortening and hemming of pants and putting knee patches on kid's pants are much in demand also. Meanwhile word of mouth outside the mother center is that "up there" sewing and mending is done at very reasonable rates. Thus every Monday morning we have an older gentleman come in with several items that need new zippers, buttons, or general mending. He is always so happy when we're able to help him out. I think this gentleman is very glad that we have this service in the mother center. On some days we are busy without pause from 9 am till noon. Some other days, of course, are a little quieter. We also have women come in only for a cup of coffee and to enjoy getting out of the house.

Income for the Mother Center

The mother center receives part of what is taken in through commercial activities. There are several methods of calculating the split depending on the situation in the mother centers. If the women's earnings are under a certain limit, a case-by-case decision must be made on how to split up the proceeds. In the case of knitting, for example, no commission is taken, because such work-intensive products would become too expensive and would leave little in the way of earnings for the producing women. There is also no commission when a "business" is just being started. In most of these cases the common pot for hourly fees is used until income from the business has stabilized. After all, the entrepreneurs are carrying a lot of personal risk .

These are some of the current methods for calculating the share of the mother center:

→ Example: Thrift store.

Here women have the possibility to sell or buy used clothes at reasonable prices. The mother center receives a commission of 20% on each sale, the rest goes to the woman who supplied the merchandise. The two women who operate the thrift store are paid by the hour.

→ **Example: Flea market** or “Mom and Pop Store” in the center.

Women produce wares at their own cost and sell them in the mother center. The mother center receives 20% of the total turnover, the women keep the rest. Their earnings depend on demand.

→ **Example: Cosmetics and hair care.**

Women offer their services in the center at fixed prices. The prices are discussed and decided on jointly and also depend on the demand for the services. The mother center receives 20% of total earnings.

→ **Example: Mending and Ironing service.**

Orders are paid on an hourly basis at Euro 5.- per hour. The women get half, the mother center retains the other half for electricity, heat, etc.

Whichever method of sharing proceeds is used depends on the project and the women involved. We are interested in using the 20% rule for as many of our commercial activities as possible. That ensures independence for the women and fills up the mother center's funds to pay hourly fees for other necessary services. The task of the mother center is to support women in deciding on and developing their commercial project, to encourage them to bear with the inevitable start-up problems, and to help them find appropriate markets.

IV. Money



Marvelous! I Can Earn Money Here!

When I first saw a real live payment taking place, I had already been a regular visitor in the mother center for some time. Until then I had thought these payments were only for a few privileged women. But Thea told me that any woman can earn money for taking on a responsibility in the mother center. I got in on it, like so many women, through child care. A short while later I took over a nutrition course. In time I added more and more responsibilities, so that my income grew to about Euro 300.- a month. My first purchase with my self-earned money was a really beautiful dress, that I wouldn't have been able to afford otherwise. Later I bought bicycles for my husband and me.



Then the mother center team approached me with the request to take on a regular part-time position that had become available. I was very surprised and also proud that they wanted me in their team of employed women. This was a great opportunity to work while still taking care of my two small children and I didn't want to miss out on it. I convinced my husband that the mother center offered ideal working conditions for mothers with small children and that I wouldn't have to neglect my family. I've learned that work is not only effort but also fun.

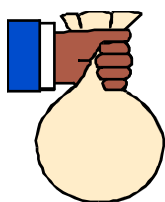
Totally mine!

After thinking about it for a long time I was being convinced to offer a guitar course. I felt insecure because I had only been playing myself for about nine months and didn't think I was ready and able to teach others. During the preparations I found out that I could earn a little money with this. A nice idea because I hadn't earned any money in six years. It was a nice bit of pocket money



Warning: Offspring could be hazardous to your income.
As a mother, you can expect little or no salary and even less pension.
(Figures based on federal laws.)

and has become really important to me in the last six months. Because I've allowed myself the luxury of taking private guitar lessons myself. An hour per week just for myself, without kids or family, is really special and does a lot for me, paid by money I earn myself in the mother center. It will never be part of the financial cutback discussions we regularly have at home, like the newspaper subscriptions and other items. This hourly lesson cannot be jeopardized by anything. And if someone wants to do anything about it, it's going to be me and me alone, no one else. I'll have to say that that's a great feeling and that it bolsters my self esteem incredibly.



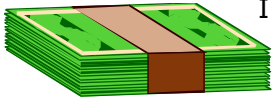
Who benefits from volunteering?

I am a nurse in the municipal hospital and I like my job. It's fun. My husband makes good money too. I could really offer to the city to work as a volunteer. But would they use the money to create a new mother center?

Special Bargains

I am the "finance woman" here. The topic of money in the mother center is still a red flag for me. The two years of work here have not been able to change that. Although I have become able to better handle my irritation with the budgetary ideas of the other women. Of course I still want to tell them how to make money for the center and how to use the money we have more rationally and effectively. I can still only feel satisfied with myself when the daily income covers all the expenses as well as my earnings. But through many conversations and discussions with other women I have learned to accept that the making of money is not the primary focus of the mother center and that other women simply have other ways to deal with money than I do. Still I really have to hold onto myself at times. For example when another woman organizes something or goes shopping and, instead of looking for bargains, buys expensive, regular merchandise. Or when I see how much more money could be gotten out of this idea or that activity, But I've learned to bite my tongue before saying anything. In the mother center I've learned not to project the expectations I have in myself onto others. And I do want the women to make their own experiences because they start to feel very insecure if I constantly know everything better. That's happened a lot already. And that's why I'm really grateful to my friend when she lets me know that I'm doing "it" again. Sometimes I still get angry when they say that I'm stingy or money-grubbing but, in the interest of the mother center, I think that my ideas and actions usually end up being proved right. Right now I've taken on doing the shopping myself and I can look for bargains to my heart's delight. Sometimes I hear that the cheap coffee or beer I like to buy don't taste good, but I've begun to be approachable about it. We now have "good" coffee and beer too, although it's a bit more expensive. But on one thing I refuse to negotiate: beer is now Euro 1.20 instead of Euro 1.00.

It's Not Nice to Talk About Money



I want to relate an incident that illustrates the unresolved, conflicted relationship women often have with earning their own money:

At one of our first trainings many women who had just started to participate in the Mother-Center came together. Since they all worked on different days and at different times they had never all met each other before. But now they got to know each other. There were about 20 to 25 women who were supposed to contribute to our round of talks. One of the questions was: "How do you feel about the money you earn for working in the Mother-Child-Cafe?". Every one of the women declared that they didn't want or need the money, some were willing to give it back, others wanted to use it to buy something for the café or for the work of their groups. Inge, a young mother, who had taken care of child care on Tuesday afternoon, arrived late for the meeting. When she was asked the same question and she replied, without having heard the others' response, that the money was very important to her and she listed her reasons the atmosphere changed. We started the next round with the same question again and this time the answers turned out completely different. The first woman who answered stated how proud she had felt when she filled up her car with her first self-earned money. Except for a few all women felt positive about the money that they earned and they reported what all they had already done with it or were planning to do with it. Through Inge's straightforward and unbiased answer the women now felt okay with being honest about their feelings and acknowledging their right to the money. And the women who "really needed" the money had no inhibitions to say so.

This incident illustrates that women often feel that work like child care in the Mother Center isn't "real work" although it's very exhausting, when there are many children and you have to clean and wash up afterwards. They tend to feel that it is work done in passing just like their housework. Because they have some fun doing it, they feel embarrassed to take money for it. But actually they are all really happy about the money. It validates their work and the work of all women.

Conflicts About Money

We want as many women as possible to enjoy earning their own money in the centers. The scarcity of funds gives rise to some conflicts. The small fees we can pay causes some women to grab all the paid responsibilities in order to accumulate an acceptable income, leaving no opportunities for compensation to the other women.

Because of our financial situation our center enjoys a great volunteer effort by some women which leads to additional conflicts. We end up having two factions of women: the ones who work only in paid activities and the others who are willing to go beyond that and put in unpaid effort. That creates friction. The unpaid volunteers are irritated with the "paid-only" mothers because they feel that they do more for the same money. The "paid-only" mothers feel overtaxed and pressured to perform.

The controversy is ongoing and a happy ending is not in sight. However, the overall tendency now is to show understanding for the opinions of both sides. We are developing our capacity for tolerance through this issue. It's not really important anymore that one side wins. Both opinions can exist side by side. Before there was a tendency to try and push out the "paid-only" mothers. But that's not really the point anymore. Right now we have a mixture of acceptance, of trying to motivate the "paid-only" faction into more volunteer commitment as well as increased efforts to raise more funds for the center.

When I met my husband I was employed, earning a steady income, and used to a certain freedom. I was afraid to lose this after the birth of our child because then I would stop working and I wouldn't have my own income anymore. We had a lot of conversations and discussions about it and my husband and I agreed that he would pay the amount I had been earning into my own bank account.

Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June
50€	50€	50€	50€	50€	50€
500€	500€	500€	250€	250€	250€
25€	—	—			

also
April
250€

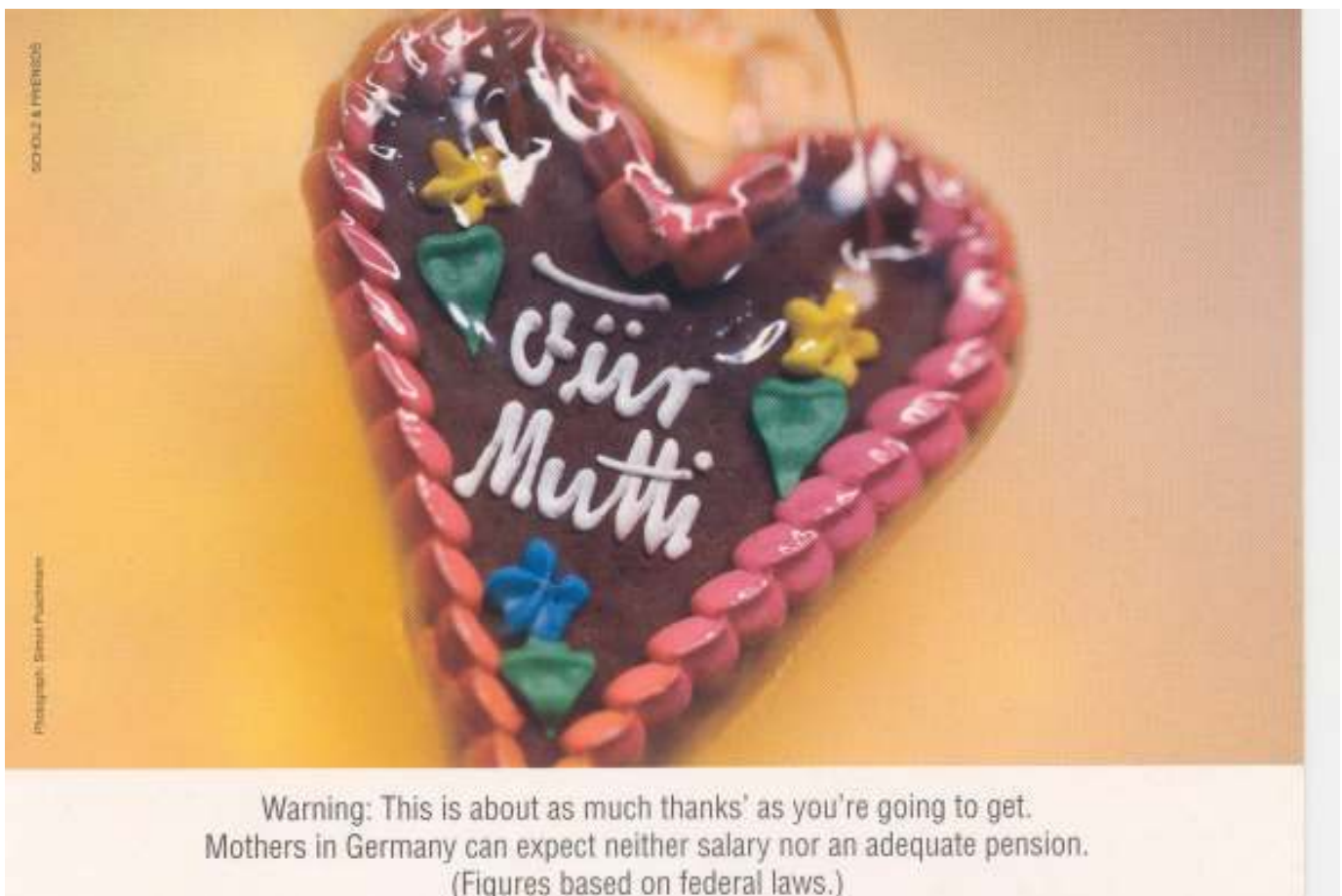
I really like not having to ask for permission to take care of my personal needs and desires. I have the same, if not more, financial freedom that I had when I was employed. As well as the responsibility...

Of course I haven't advanced my career and my salary level has stayed the same. But I'm not really ready to start a wage dispute. A relationship depends on mutual goodwill. However, I'm still glad that I took the money question seriously from the beginning of my marriage.

Am I Worth My Money?

Earning money in the mother center doesn't offer only advantages but also generates fears and worries. Most women haven't been employed for years or maybe never. They are often very unsure if they are working hard enough for the money. If, for example, courses are offered during the summer, there are often only a few women signed up. And then the woman giving the course feels bad because she's getting the same amount as when the course is full. These guilty feelings also happen to the child care women when they are unsuccessful in keeping their wild bunch under control. When the kids want to run to their own mothers the child care women feel that it's because they're incapable of their job. But everybody should really be aware that the child care women work the hardest of all for their money.

Why do we always have these doubts and guilt feelings? Employees in regular businesses aren't always working at a hundred and twenty percent either!



But of Course Women Work for Nothing!

Dear Ms. V.!

I have been working with the topic of volunteerism, meaning unpaid work, theoretically as well as practically, for years. And I feel I have made some interesting observations.

For a person to be able to work as a volunteer presupposes financial independence and job security. That I myself have been able to volunteer for many years already is a privilege, not a merit. It does not give me the right to make it into an obligation for all others. But the fact that I must work as a volunteer, in order to better societal conditions, has largely determined my political standpoints.

The perpetual lack of political acknowledgement and appreciation for volunteer work and the increasingly loud demands for more unpaid work for society I find immensely alarming. Especially because they are being made by people who are themselves in safe positions and also because this unpaid work is particularly demanded and expected from women. I cannot think of any instance where men have been expected to do unpaid social work in addition to their employment. But in the case of women it is expected as a matter of course, whether they work at home or are employed outside.

A mixture of both would seem to me a good solution for everybody; always provided that economic security and independence are assured (I am referring particularly to an independent social security pension scheme for women).

The model of the mother center can illustrate some of the issues involved: Here women have the opportunity to earn their own money, although it may only be a small amount in most cases. This has nothing to do with independent economic security. Nevertheless many women from so-called lower income levels are accomplishing a great amount of volunteer work here. Mostly they are doing it without making much of a fuss about it, in passing so to speak. All the work of managing, organizing, administering, and executing events like bazaars, seminars, lectures, children's activities, is done by volunteers, without pay. In the mother center only the activities dealing with regular operations are remunerated with a very small hourly wage of Euro10.-.

Through my long years of experience in volunteer associations I am able to judge the work done in the mother centers. And it is comparable to that of the board of directors of any large association. But these associations almost always have regular paid employees for this type of work or they are able to pay much larger hourly wages.

In the mother center the decidedly effective merger of paid and unpaid work has encouraged many women from lower income levels to become an active part of society and community.

Dear Ms. V., I am writing in so much detail about this topic because you have asked me how you can support the idea of the mother center. I believe that it is especially important right now to help bring the context and the importance of remunerating mothers for their work into public awareness. You could do so much for all women everywhere.

About the Morality and Immorality of Money

"In public mothers will always either be praised to the heavens or told that everything's their fault. But nobody wants to give them money for something that's just for mothers." This bitter remark of a mother center woman after long, unsuccessful funding negotiations with municipal and state offices stands in the beginning of this article because it illustrates in plain terms the prevailing opinion that "mothers and money don't go together".

In view of this we want to reiterate, without any qualifications or reservations: work in the mother center is paid work. Mothers here have the opportunity to earn their own money. In the following we want to portray our experiences with this concept:

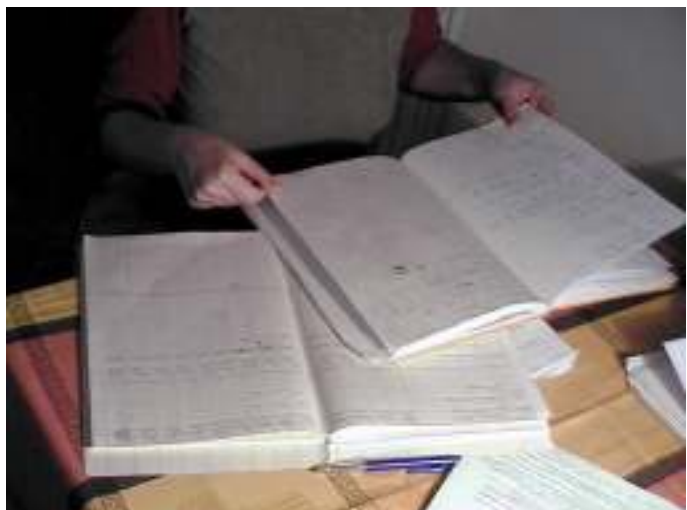
From the beginning there were women who had just been waiting for the opportunity to make some money. They didn't have to be convinced. Others had a harder time with it. "I'm so glad we have the mother center. I have so much fun working here and I really don't need to be paid for it." were comments we often heard. With the effect that it seemed as if there were two kinds of mothers in the mother center: those who worked "for the money" and those who had "higher motives". This also underlined the fine distinctions between those who could afford not to take the money, because of a well-earning husband at home, and those who needed to take it.

In many conversations and discussions we became aware that a false female modesty was at work here. Why shouldn't mothers take money for something they do, just because they happen to enjoy doing it? In the professional world a highly paid job is always valued higher than a lesser-paid one. Your work and your person are devalued if you sell yourself below your worth. Why would you be worth more if you work without pay?

To avoid the division and social score-keeping between paid and unpaid women in the mother center, we asked those who hesitated to simply accept being paid. If, afterwards, they still didn't feel good about it, they could return the money as a contribution to the mother center. Right now we have no more controversy about whether payment for work is justified or not. Everyone likes to be paid, even those who "don't need it".

"It isn't as if my husband weren't generous, but the money is still the issue where I feel my dependency. He always tells me to just take the money and buy what I need, but when I do, I still feel like I have to justify how I spent it. He's just a thrifty kind of guy and I feel obligated to go along with his ideas. But when I earn my own money it's up to me how I spend it."

Money stinks in this society. In the mother center too we saw that along with the money there entered a professional notion of performance and competition. The money that the mothers get for their activities changes





their concept of working for the mother center. They feel more recognition for their work and their skills but they also feel obligated to be judged by their performance. "Since I get money for it, I feel much more in doubt whether I'm able to do it all, to achieve. It's funny, really. Before, it was natural, I had no doubts about it. And now I feel anxious." And you hear comments like this as well: "She's getting paid for it, so she should do it. Me? I'm not rinsing any coffee cups around here."

What do the part-time employees or the team women do for their money? Are they really present and active in the mother center during their contracted 8 to 20 hours a week? Can their performance be measured? Does one of them accomplish more than the other? Those were also questions that were starting to be considered and that made for a foul atmosphere at times. "When you get money you feel like you have to constantly demonstrate that you're busy. "Through the attacks on and the doubts about my work I really feel like I can't sit down anymore for a cup of coffee or to chat with someone. You have to show performance and if you do something outside of the mother center itself you feel like you have to make sure and tell everybody about it."

Thus a concept of work crept in that judged visible kinds of work higher than those having to do with the atmosphere in the center. To create a comfortable atmosphere, to greet and welcome women who are visiting, to make sure they are feeling good, is sometimes more important than making coffee or washing the dishes. But often the performance of an "on-duty woman" is measured less on how comfortable or lively the center was during her tour of duty but on how messy or orderly she left it for the next mother. Every homemaker is confronted daily with this measuring standard because much of what she does becomes visible only when she fails to do it. In the mother center this was being perpetuated.

The ascertainable presence during paid hours and the results of the work become legitimizing criteria and become endowed with extraordinary weight. In this line of thought paid work should not be any fun or be aligned with any personal preferences. To have a personal conversation with someone, to spend time at home thinking about something that mothers and children in the center might enjoy, is not seen as work.

Because the performance of some women is visible and measurable and it should be possible to differentiate among them, there was a push to specialize. Each team woman was supposed to pick and mark off her area of responsibility, so that her performance could be checked. This sometimes caused an artificial division of tasks that had no longer anything in common with the natural goings-on in the mother center. The unequal valuation of the kinds of household and community work that don't offer themselves to this kind of performance criteria, was carried and perpetuated from the professional world into the mother center. Competitive thinking began to creep in and some were scrutinized for their productivity and efficiency: "This one always gets a full house, no one comes in when that one's on duty." Or, "This one does a lot more and gets the same money as that one who's only doing what she has to."

Through the financial performance valuation a professional output notion entered the mother center. Most mothers have experience in firms with time clocks, with strict hierarchies, control mechanisms, and rigidly divided areas of responsibility. And they use that experience to check on each other. Without intending to, host institutions also create additional performance pressure by issuing work contracts containing fixed weekly hours, papers and records defining areas of responsibility, and demanding that each team member has her proper sphere of duty recorded. But sometimes the administrators in the host associations, used to the invisible character of social and psychological work, see these contracted guidelines in a much more relaxed manner than the employed mothers themselves. The women often take what is written in these contracts and records too literally. They think that their work must always be successful and be able to withstand any scrutiny. Which of course leads to a perpetual spiral of ever-increasing expectations.

Additionally the differences between personal life- and family situations are becoming cornerstones of competition among mothers. "If your kids are a little older or if you're a single parent, of course you don't have to leave right away, you can sit and wait until the last mothers are ready to leave on their own. Me, I have to leave at twelve thirty at the latest and then I only have half an hour left to cook lunch. Or on Friday afternoons my husband comes home early, at four. It's six until I get home and it matters to me whether I'm home at six or at six thirty. It doesn't work for my family situation if I stay any longer. If the other mothers were simply able to accept that and say: the situation with little kids is like that, the situation with teenagers is like that, and that's why one can stay longer and the other has to get home at certain times, - then the whole thing wouldn't be a problem. On the contrary, we could complement each other splendidly. The problems come because we start to set up rank hierarchies where one is better and does more than the other."

"When I signed up to be team mother they said: What? Who does she think she is? Has two kids and thinks she can be productive in the mother center too. I really feel like I'm constantly being watched if I'm able to pull it off."

The basic concept of the mother center as a place where mothers get a space to grow, while having their kids along, is threatened by these notions and behaviors coming out of a professional world that is hostile to women and children. They contribute to constant and lively debates in the mother center. This was very obvious in the discussions about the team. Team women in the mother center are employed for eight hours per week and together with the part time women they form the committee that takes care of the overall issues-of the mother center. It didn't take long before people started to look for performance criteria to judge how qualified or unqualified certain interested women were to join the team. They listed the qualifications a team woman should have: she should be willing to work more than the hours she was paid for (an expectation that the professional world has of top managers), she should be sociable and a good mixer, she should be able to handle the host institution, to write reports, to see what needs to be done and take care of anything, she should



show total commitment etc...Needless to say, the ideal person in whom all these characteristics are joined, never existed.

You can look at the whole issue from a different angle and proceed on the assumption that in the mother center each woman should have the chance to be team woman for a while. She can make important experiences in that time which will help her personal growth and also contribute to the welfare of the center, since many women learn to take on overall responsibility. Then team women have to alternate. It is left up to each woman to decide if this assignment appeals to her or when she can best reconcile it with her family situation. Such a concept only works when it's clear to everyone that the assignment of team woman can only be taken on for a limited time period. That means that each one should also be ready to give up this function again.

And that is hard to do, since in a way a job in the mother center is a dream job.

"I would really have a hard time going back to cleaning or taking some other mindless, boring job."

"I don't think I could go back to the office. I'm spoiled for that already. To be ordered around by the boss again. No way! A job that isn't any fun, that you only do to make money, destroys your soul. In an office no one comes and asks how you're doing, why you're not talking today, what you're thinking about."

In the mother center we deal with this with forward looking strategies. Many team women try to use the time of their employment in the mother center to create professional options for themselves that will make them independent of the center employment. Of course it doesn't always work out that way and it is an important task of the center women to support each other and to allow an atmosphere of diversity and freedom that will benefit everybody, if not always in the same way.

In the constant confrontation with these problems all involved find themselves growing in their awareness. The problems never will end. But our confidence that we can learn to deal with them is growing.



There is enough money – it only needs to be redistributed!

We women always have been and always will be expected to work for free. That's why I really get angry when women are called on to volunteer their time and energy for social or other projects as a matter of course. And usually by men who earn a good and secure income themselves.

Using the example of sports I can illustrate how unfairly and with what double standards funds are distributed: For sports arenas millions have been spent since the beginning of time. Sport stadiums and halls are luxury facilities furnished with every convenience in mind. In every little community there are expensive facilities for sports, although often denounced by the public as "politicians' monuments". No one can make me believe that it is necessary in the interest of the public's physical or financial health to make such extravagant use of our tax money. This is nothing but a luxurious bribe used to keep a strong lobby of sportsmen happy for election time. The whiny excuses of "It's so sad, but unfortunately we just don't have any money!" is an unconvincing phrase as long as millions of public funds are spent to build sport stadiums while no monies are available for mother centers.

V. Kids



Beginning of the Week

I can tell what day it is as soon as I wake up. Mommy runs around busily and smiles at me. She dresses me faster than usual. It's Monday! Playgroup Day! Mother-Centre Day!

After breakfast she puts me on the back of her bike and we're off. I am Anne, two and a half years old, and I'm full of anticipation. We're the first to arrive. I like it that way because then I'm allowed to help Mommy. We open the shutters and the doors and clean up a little bit. Then Mommy goes into the kitchen. She gives me a cup and I carry it carefully to the table. Then another cup and later the plates, spoons, and the sugar container. Now the door opens and the next people arrive. A big hello from the mommies; we kids kind of hang back and check each other out cautiously - although I know most of them well and I have lots of friends among them. Usually we have a great time playing together. Everybody's nice, I'm not afraid of any of them. Not even of Amber, Monika's dachshund.

My favorite thing at the moment is to paint. But when the play pillows are being put on the floor or when it's story time, I put away my crayons. And I love the jungle gym! We kids like to climb up and down it all day long! Sooner or later mommy goes into the other room to have a cup of coffee. Sometimes I get tired and I don't want to play anymore. Then mommy puts down her knitting and takes me on her lap. I snuggle with my bottle and enjoy being close to my mommy.

The morning is over much too quickly. We clean up all together and although the mommies are maybe a bit faster at it, we're all busy helpers. After many good-byes and kisses and "See-ya's" we go back home on our bike.



The New Terrorist

Dear Mother,

Imagine, our dear little Sebastian is the newest little terrorist in the mother center! Can you picture it? I can hardly believe it myself but he's attacking all the kids there. He bites and scratches them. When you hear kids crying somewhere you can be sure that Sebastian's the cause of it. This morning he even threw a glass of water in another little boy's face! I can't stop him. Thank God, most of the other mothers in the center are very

understanding. When I think back to my first few weeks there: Sebastian was just six weeks old and how protective I was of him! Nobody was allowed to touch him, least of all another child. I anxiously and jealously guarded each hair on his tiny head. And when he started to walk the older kids were often pretty rough with him. One day I got into a big fight with another mother because of that. I yelled at her to pay more attention to her little "terrorist". As soon as Rosie would show up at the mother center with her kid, I'd immediately leave. In those days I really thought that Rosie and her kid were being mean on purpose. And now the "terrorist" is mine! But now at least I can really understand the other mothers who want to save their kids from Sebastian. I try to just talk with them and tell them my story of two years ago. Most of them end up not being too angry at us. You know, that's when I realize how important a place the mother center is. Where else could I make these kinds of experiences and observations? I can see that most kids go through some sort of phase just like Sebastian and that they also grow out of it again. And by watching mothers with older kids I can also somewhat prepare myself for the things I see going on at that stage of the game.



The Dirty Bathroom

The perpetually dirty and stained toilet was being heatedly discussed again. The arguments over whose fault it was went back and forth across the table. The mothers with small babies were most upset and argued that it was the responsibility of the child-care women. And those women thought that the smaller kids should be accompanied to the bathroom by their mothers. But the mothers with smaller kids, some of whom were just training their kids to go by themselves, argued that they couldn't stop that training just because they happened to be at the mother center. We finally agreed that we'd make cleaning supplies available in the bathroom - out of reach of the kids of course. And each mother who went in there and saw that it was dirty again, would simply clean up.



We have made such progress. The problem is not the fault of the kids anymore and it's not the fault of the mothers or the child-care women either - it's a responsibility all of us share. Before we would have had to set up an official cleaning list to resolve this problem.

The Coffee Table

Ms. Smith meets Ms. Brown in the mother center cafe. Both women have brought their kids, who are approximately of the same age. The morning passes with agreeable conversation over coffee and cake. A date is set up for the next afternoon at Ms. Smith's house. No one bothers to ask the kids if they want to see each other again. Their cooperation is being assumed since no fights had broken out between them in the play room.

The next day Ms. Brown is on time with flowers, child, and the child's favorite teddy bear in tow. While the two women are happy to see each other again, the two kids hide behind their respective mother's legs, clutching their plush animals. The women exclaim, "What's going on? You're not usually that shy!"

After coffee has been served and the ice between the kids has started to crack somewhat, the women withdraw into the living room after admonishing the kids to play "nice". The conversation is going well. At the point where the local food prices are being discussed, the kids have to be calmed down for the first time. Then, when a knitting pattern is being examined, horrible noise is heard from the kid's room and the two antagonists have to be separated again. And when conversation has finally reached the topic of the impossible work schedules of one's spouse, the Smith child suddenly emits a blood-curdling shriek. Ms. Smith tries to remain nonchalant and remarks, "Oh well, he tends to be a bit of a baby sometimes...". Ms. Brown agrees but watches nervously as her own child rubs at a scrape on his cheek and whimpers. How should she respond? Should she be a comforting or a reprimanding mother? The insecurity of the two women turns into slight irritability.

A new effort is made to get the kids to play nicely together and they leave the room. While the women light up a cigarette, they each think, "If that was my child...". They make desperate attempts to excuse their children's behavior: "We rarely have visitors with kids." "I have really never seen him act like that." "It's just that he loves his teddy bear so much." "Unfortunately he is an only child..." while at the same time trying to politely criticize the other's child rearing methods.

When the mothers finally go into the play room they are surprised and feel slightly shamed to see the two kids sleeping peacefully side by side, clutching each other's teddy bears.



Kids are a Part of it.

Kids are as natural a part of the mother center as the mothers themselves. On some days there are many of them, other days are quieter. In the afternoon the older kids, the ten-year-olds, come and enjoy the play room in the basement for their sometimes wild games and large-scale building activities. Some even come without their mothers; they know the way and they know that they are welcome. We see this as a relief for the mothers. While the kids are playing here under supervision, their mothers can enjoy some quiet time at home or do something by and for themselves.

Here, in this mother center, we don't have a real kids' program, apart from a few special activities. This has been the cause for many arguments. Many of the mothers thought the kids should be occupied and their development encouraged according to a systematic curriculum. Of course they didn't want to be the ones administering it, they expected the mother center to provide this service for them. But it's really difficult to find volunteers for something like this because child-care in the mother center is among the hardest jobs we have here. There is no comparable professional work situation: taking care of up to 25 kids from babies to almost teenagers is something no professional care taker has yet been asked to do. If anyone is capable of this work, then it's women from large families, because they have personal experience with this type of situation.

There are lots of kids who have been coming to the mother center with their mothers since they were babies and who practically grew up here. Looking at these kids, you can see plainly how good the unconventional mother center life has been for them. They are more active and livelier, better able to stand up for themselves and better adjusted to live in groups than kids of the same age but without mother center experience. In the mother center kids are stimulated in many different ways. They have a choice of adults to talk to while their own mother always remains available. They have an ever-changing assortment of play mates to choose from and are incorporated in the most diverse ways into the activities in the mother center: Two-year-old kids sometimes help the kitchen women with the dishes before going



back to their mommy's lap for a rest. One mother scolds her kids and some other mother may console them again, etc.

In the exceptionally free, open, and unconventional atmosphere of the mother center the kids' aggressive phases tend to develop explosively. Which can be a big problem for adults. In our society there is rarely room for open disagreement and fighting. In the mother center a "hitter", "biter", or "screamer" cannot be hidden. Everybody experiences the child and is forced to deal with his behavior. The personal experience of seasoned mothers is, once again, a big help here. They can remember the development of their own children and their own feelings and responses to these same problems. And most importantly they know that these are just phases that will pass again. This helps to look at these difficult times as something perfectly normal.



How do we deal with children's aggressions? Mothers tend to feel responsible for the behavior of their children and to seek the fault in themselves. However, the kids simply use this type of behavior to get attention and biting is often the most effective weapon in their arsenal. Experience shows that in very small groups where the caretaker can give attention to each individual child, these behaviors tend to occur only rarely. Other kids, who are not aggressive in these ways, have other ways to get what they want. They sometimes cover their mother's eyes or mouth to get attention and demonstrate ownership. The children all have to learn that their mother wants time and space to do something for herself. And we have to learn to deal with the fact of children's aggression. More tolerance seems the most effective way to do this.

The kids themselves don't have as many problems in the center as the grown-ups do. The kids argue and fight, come to their own arrangements among themselves, and end up being best friends again more often than not.

The following bits of advice have proven invaluable:

- ❖ Don't instruct the child how to behave in the mother center before your visit.
- ❖ Don't judge aggression negatively, it is part of the healthy development of a child.
- ❖ The child-care women will call for help if and when she feels she needs it.
- ❖ The hard work of child-care has to be recognized and valued with a word of praise or a gesture of appreciation.
- ❖ The mothers of aggressive kids should deliberately stay out of conflict situations.

Childcare – Different Every Day

Among the daily activities in the mother center child-care is especially worth mentioning because this area is so important for the atmosphere in the mother center. Whether activities for mothers are possible, whether the general climate is good, and how much mothers feel supported all depend on successful child-care.

It is remarkable that here too we were not able to make use of previous experience since the care of children of diverse age groups has as yet not been practiced anywhere outside of large families with many children. So we had to make our own experiences and learn from our own mistakes. Some of our child-care women have by now become real experts. They know which activities work best to get the different kids to play at something together, to prevent chaos, to integrate shy kids and get them to come out from behind their mother's skirt folds, and much more. We all have simply gained a lot of practice and experience: The more mothers took over child-care over longer or shorter periods of time, the more understanding and support grew among the women. The more kids went through their different phases, the less recriminations over lack of upbringing and allegations of behavior problems were heard. The personal child-rearing experience of expert center mothers was also very helpful in contributing to a climate of calm and reciprocal support. And the more the kids became friends and learned how to live and play in groups, the easier it was for their mothers to become aware of their positive developments.

In the beginning the expectations in child care were very high and sometimes they still are, mostly in the case of new visitors or of those who have never done child care themselves. It is really hard work to be the liaison between the child-care women and the other mothers. The problems that come up with the children are again and again the topics of discussions in daily center life and in the plenaries. This contributes to a perpetual process of reflection about one's pedagogical behavior since the conflicts among the kids and the difficulties with child care in the center tend to mirror

what goes on in the daily life of the mothers at home.



The following experiences of a child-care woman are meant to document the insecurities, difficulties, and learning processes that are part of the mother center and its child care activities:

„When I started to do child care in the mother center I often felt very insecure. What were the expectations of the other mothers and visitors? Did they expect that I always

kept things quiet and under control or could I sometimes let the kids run and romp and scream and yell? I had no idea what was expected of me. Even today, I still tend to see it as a failure on my part if a kid that I'm supposed to watch insists on being with his mom in the coffee room. But sometimes it just can't be helped and there's no convincing him or her to come back to the playroom with me, even with the nicest toys or activities. I think insecurity is a big issue in child-care because there is so little recognition for the work from the other mothers.

Another big problem for me is that the kids in my group are of such different ages, from babies to six-year-olds. There are hardly any activities that all of them can participate in. If I concentrate on the babies, the older ones romp around and destroy the constructions of the smaller ones. Sometimes they get really aggressive. Which is partly because our play-room is so very small. Biting, scratching, hitting, spitting, all that aggressive behavior, worries me a lot. I try to help by working intensively with the three- to five-year-olds and just keeping an eye on the little ones. When the bigger ones have something to do they usually leave the smaller ones alone. But then I have also been criticized because I didn't do enough with the little ones. I just don't see how I can play with four or five crawling babies and do arts and crafts projects with the older ones at the same time.

In the beginning I racked my brains for days thinking about activities I could do with the kids. Now I have a pretty good idea about which activities work best. The most popular ones are activities where they can get their hands in and make a mess, anything to do with glue, water colors, finger paint, fabrics, salt dough, potato stamps, Play-Do, etc. For Christmas we even baked real cookies, they loved that. Of course sometimes they'll get themselves really dirty with the paint or the glue. But I think it's stupid when the mothers then try to indirectly criticize me by remarking to their kids, „Oh jeez, you really made a mess of yourself today!“.

Another load on my mind is the constant worry that something might happen to the kids. After all, it's not always only about bite marks or bumps, something really awful could happen. On the other hand I really have fun doing child-care. It's ideal that I can bring my own kids on the job. And of course I'm happy about the money too. My own, self-earned money, it's simply wonderful!“





I'm Not Always Strong Enough

As a mother you're no longer a woman. For adults without kids you're a non-person. Once you have a child no one wants you to visit anymore, unless they have kids of their own. For most of your old acquaintances you become a mother and nothing else. And for them being a mother means that you're supposed to keep your kids away from them so your kids can't mess up their house. Kids are in the way of conversation. Kids are in the way of work. Kids are in the way of most adults most of the time. As a mother you become a police woman, you're supposed to defend the rights of other adults against your kids, not the other way around. You're always supposed to play the tough mother, forbidding everything, scolding all the time, so that the other adults won't be bothered by your child. That's the kind of mothering people expect. But to me it's not good mothering if I'm constantly restraining my child and forcing it to adapt to the adult world just so that it'll be easier on other people. I don't want to play the role of enemy to my child. I wanted a child because I like being around kids. I like being around kids as much as I like being around adults. It's great to become a mother but motherhood can throw you into a total crisis of confidence where the only positive thing you can see is your child. It's as if you were alone with your child in some oasis or paradise while outside it's the law of the jungle and you have to defend your young one constantly like a lioness against everything and everybody. And because you don't have the strength to do that you end up retreating into the comfortable nest of your home and remaining isolated with your husband and child. Sometimes I just don't feel strong enough to bother the world outside with my child, to defend my child's needs against a world of adults pointing their fingers at me.

A New Culture

In the mother center kids aren't pushed out of sight or presented neatly and prettily. In the mother center mothers and kids conquer their own public space, together and as a matter of course. Kids are simply a part of everything all the time – or not, depending on their mothers' wishes.

I am always impressed when I enter the mother center and I think, "Only mothers can live like this, it's really a special ability." You can only learn this if you enjoy living with children and after you have learned to adapt to different needs and changing situations, learned to take others' needs seriously, especially when these others are smaller and weaker. It's not simple "laissez-faire", it's part of a life philosophy, part of the daily life and culture of mothers.

In the mother center you encounter a social structure found elsewhere only at really big extended-family gatherings: kids of every age in perpetually changing group compositions, depending on when their mothers come and how long they stay. The longer a center exists, the better the kids get to know each other and the other adults and the better they learn to live with each other. A neighborhood culture is created and nurtured. A masterpiece of social learning and behavior in day to day life. Of course this does

not happen without conflict. Kids learn very fast to deal with these conflicts and to avoid the sharp cliffs of living together. The better all the adults involved learn to deal with this unusual situation, the more tolerant, socially responsible, and caring they become, the more peaceful and harmonious will be the daily experiences of the children. Kids are perfect mirrors for the atmosphere in the center. Since we're not all angels and since there are many open and hidden conflicts among us women, sometimes things get pretty heated and other times they're more peaceful. Both are important, both are normal. Both are part of daily life in the mother center.

VI. Conflict





Avoidance is Not a Solution

One of the central issues in daily mother center life is the capacity to live in groups and to live with conflict. Conflict is an inherent and normal part of any human group experience. But in today's society where people live increasingly isolated lives, we don't naturally learn how to handle conflict anymore as part of our social learning. There is a reluctance to acknowledge conflict or to settle it openly. Conflicts within families are also supposed to be kept secret and to be settled behind closed doors. Conflict in our society is simply seen as equivalent with embarrassment. There are no positive models that would show us how to live with it and with each other happily and effectively at the same time. The many forms of therapy we see these days have their roots in this basic problem.

For most women it is especially difficult to address conflict. They don't want to hurt anyone's feelings and don't want to risk getting theirs hurt either. There is a lack of confidence in oneself and trust in others. We need experiences that show us that we can argue and fight profitably, that conflict can help us get to know ourselves and each other better, and that it can help us to become more cohesive as a group. We have all experienced how conflicts that are kept under the table cause tension and proceed to poison the atmosphere in our groups. But those experiences have not shown us how to better deal with the vulnerabilities, bad moods, or hostilities among us. Avoidance of conflict is the rule in our groups but not a solution for our problems. There are some typical friction points in our group dynamics where conflicts flare up again and again. Unofficial hierarchies and authorities for instance: Some mothers can get their point across better than others, who take their revenge through accusations. Or mothers seemingly tolerate that someone stands up and makes decisions, only to then jeer from the sidelines.

Another such friction point lies in the cliques, the tight girlfriend groups some women tend to want to cluster in. They like each other best and they feel safe and secure in their little cliques where they all know each other and where each has her special role. They are afraid of newcomers who threaten the balance of their group and who could get some new and unfamiliar dynamic going again. But it is the purpose of the mother center to be open for new women, to create an atmosphere where they feel accepted and good about themselves. The clique members may all feel very safe and happy inside, but the ones outside feel excluded and hurt. Insider-groups can develop very quickly. The mere fact that some were at the same seminar together can lead to the creation of a clique feeling that excludes others.

Another item that can spark conflict is the infamous gossip and rumor mill. Everyone talks about others, but everyone also feels hurt when they find themselves the subject of gossip. The trace of spite and venom that is often part of gossip poisons the whole atmosphere in the center, especially when people uninvolved in the rumor chain itself allow themselves to be influenced by it. Factions develop quickly. And the taboo against open conflict, against fights and arguments endows these negative patterns with even more destructive power and hurtfulness.



Like every group the mother center also has its grumblers and nags, those people who will always find fault with everything and everybody and who emanate spite and resentment. This type of behavior is usually based on feelings of inferiority, a big problem among women.

Mothers are able to hurt each other a lot with judgmental comments about the upbringing and behavior of others' children. Detrimental labels develop: Which mother is a good mother? Whose child is a problem? Who can let go of her child and who overprotects hers? Which mother knows how to raise kids and which mother always thinks she knows more than others about everything?



"When you're alone at home with your child you have no problems with any of that. But as soon as there are others around, the comparing begins, and you start to feel really insecure. I saw it happen to Rita, who lives in our building, when she came into the center one morning. Tammy, her daughter, is indeed a bit small for her age, but suddenly Rita was totally stressed about it. I hardly recognized her. I had never seen this usually very calm, relaxed, wonderfully serene mother so agitated as on that morning. She got totally obsessed by the fact that her child was smaller than the others and that Tammy didn't feel like playing with the others in the playroom, but wanted to stay with her. I thought: who is this woman?!"



The mutual inspection and judging of children is one reason for a certain fear of some mothers to get together with other mothers. There are all those norms about how a child is supposed to look and behave. There are the mothers who think their experiences are the yardstick against which to measure other mothers and their children: "I had no problem with that! I would never have tolerated such a fuss! My child wouldn't dream of acting like that!"



Another cause of conflict in the mother center is the issue of the mutual evaluation of each other's performance in and commitment to the mother center. One attraction of the mother center is that all activities there come from the mothers themselves, that there is this great, active, diversity of ideas. At the same time the mother center is also a place where mothers are to be supported and their burdens lightened, where mothers can relax, find to themselves again, and let themselves be pampered a little. The needs to be active and productive and to be taken care of and pampered may conflict but they also exist in one and the same person at different times. To be able to deal with these conflicting needs in the mother center demands a lot of reflection and tolerance.



Through the many activities in the mother center a climate can develop where visitors get the impression that they have to actively contribute to some activity or project in order to be welcome. But a mother center really depends on a comfortable and accepting atmosphere and a lack of performance pressure and expectations. In such an atmosphere, where mothers feel that it's okay to just drop by for a cup of coffee without any pressure, timelines, deadlines, or expectations, often the most intensive and fruitful conversations develop. Everybody enjoys such an atmosphere but creating it and nurturing it is not seen as real work. This is the cause of conflicts among the so-called

"activists" and the so-called "consumers" in the mother center. Active mothers who express resentment and discontent over the fact that other mothers seem to do less is often a signal for impending burn-out: "What is she doing during her duty-time? She just sits around and chats!"

In these cases women suppress their personal and legitimate needs and wants for relaxation and pure enjoyment. They take revenge for this suppression by projecting their own performance pressure onto others, especially those who "dare" to relax and let themselves be pampered. But isn't it only logical that the best activities and the nicest programs would be meaningless if there were no consumers for them? It seems that the capabilities for building and maintaining connection and relationships are made use of everywhere in such a thoughtless manner that they have become devalued and are taken as a matter of course. Because of this many women are developing feelings of burn-out and of a defiant wish to refuse further service and cooperation. Since so many women tend to repress their legitimate need to let themselves relax, be served and pampered, the mother center sees many cases of burn-out. The crucial balance between giving and taking, the ambivalence of mothers when it comes to allowing themselves a luxury, to allow other mothers theirs, is an eternal favorite among the conflictual issues of day to day center life.

Individual and Group differences are further causes for conflict. Why do we feel threatened by differences? Why at the same time do we always feel that we have to differentiate ourselves from others? Why does it bother me when other women have different characters or different ages, when they live or talk differently from me, come from different backgrounds, or have different interests from me? In the beginning of our center we had really rigid demarcations and even exclusions among the mothers. At the same time we were all trying really hard to present the image of having a perfect happy family. Problems at home were not allowed to be visible on the outside. There was a great tendency to mutually pretend that we were living in an intact paradise. And a great reluctance to admit to problems when something somewhere didn't seem to want to go quite so perfectly, be it relationship problems or problems with alcohol, financial trouble, or illness and depression. Those who did not have a lot of money themselves but managed to proudly make do through hard work and frugality could be quite cool and dismissive toward those who had to apply for welfare. The demarcation was as subtle as it was ironclad, especially from those people who were putting a lot of their strength and effort into making it and not falling over the edge, with the threat of sickness, unemployment, or family crises constantly staring them in the face. There were also envy and resentment, and a lot of suspicion, toward mothers who lived in privileged situations, as well as a tendency to exclude them.

Happily, to the same extent that the feeling of belonging grows and confidence in dealing with the public life of a mother center develops, such problems, fears and insecurities get addressed and overcome: "In the beginning we were always wondering what we would do if we ever got women with "social problems" in the mother center. These days we're not even sure anymore just exactly what constitutes a "social problem". That one mother has kids with different fathers or that another had and still has

problems with alcohol? Those things have been long accepted in our day to day life and don't even seem all that strange anymore."

"An atmosphere has developed where we dare to pass along problems to others or to admit that we don't know how to deal with a situation. We now have a lot of warmth and understanding for each other's different stages."

"Through the mother center I have gotten to know people who I really wouldn't have spontaneously talked to otherwise. In the mother center you get to know people from all walks of life and from all backgrounds. I'd have never thought I'd ever be faced with such a diversity of life stories in my own life. And now I have to wonder what I would have missed out on without this mother center. You get to really know and like each other and it gives you so much!"

Life in the mother center means training and trying out one's own capacity for group life and for tolerance. Mothers already learn that from living with their kids: looking at and accepting another person as independent from yourself, as their own person. We need to bring this capacity to our dealings with each other.

The classifications that are carried into the mother center from

the outside world, from the professionals, the host institutions, the media, or the municipal administrations, create problems. Our own dreams of a harmony, that we have in reality never seen anywhere, but that is now somehow supposed to develop in the center, also make life difficult for us. The extent of the emotional disappointment that accompanies inevitable conflicts, is directly connected to the very high expectations we have of our project: Here, finally, life will be free of conflict and full of harmony! The learning process that life will never be free of conflict, that, on the contrary, it is important to learn how to live with conflict, is a great part of the whole mother center experience. It helps enormously that the mothers have a common interest in the maintenance and further development of the mother center and that they can fall back on their motherly capabilities and skills in living with other people.



The Ten Commandments Of the Mother Center

- I. Be tolerant*
- II. Show equanimity*
- III. Do not exert pressure on others
nor accept it from others*
- IV. Do not be envious*
- V. Endure gossip, even if it is
about yourself*
- VI. Love chaos*
- VII. Recognize that other children
are special to their mothers too*
- VIII. Be spontaneous*
- IX. Do not be afraid
of anything*
- X. Come back*

Help, I'm Supposed to Relax!

We don't want any stress in the mother center. It's supposed to be comfortable and the women should be able to just come in, relax, have a quiet cup of coffee, and chat.

Practical experience however has shown that for women, feeling good is not necessarily the same as sitting down and doing nothing. They may be able to just sit and relax the first few times they're there but after that anxieties begin to show. Most of them have to fight for the time they spend in the mother center. They have to fight their own guilty conscience that insinuates that they're neglecting their households and families by doing something for themselves. Or their husbands and families pressure them with questions and complaints: "Why do you keep going there all of a sudden?" "You're there more than you're at home!" "You're neglecting your children." "You are asking too much of your children." So the women feel that they have to use this "stolen" time productively to get rid of the guilt.



Additionally the both mother center and many of the women here have changed a lot since the beginning. Then we were open only a few mornings each week and we always sat down comfortably with a cup of coffee in order to get to know each other and to plan things out. That period is over however and that atmosphere cannot be recreated for the new women because the pioneers of the first hour have developed different dynamics in the meantime. They have fought for the center and they have higher expectations of it than a mere cup of coffee and some chitchat. They come here because they want to achieve something. They want to move things, to work, to realize and nurture projects.

Then the women get in conflict again and this time with their kids. When the mothers work in the center they are concentrating all their focus and enthusiasm on their projects. The kids can tell that their mothers have changed and react with agitation. It's no good telling the mothers not to feel stressed. The stress is there. As a center worker you can only put out the general question "How are we dealing with the stress?" It's your job to validate the mothers. You have to reassure them that they are not harming their children; that it's good and important for the kids to learn to accept that their mothers have their own interests and areas and to let go of her. That's all well, but when the same mothers experience after a few weeks how well their kids have adjusted, how they are now able to let go and feel at home with the other kids away in the play room, the next problem has arrived. It can be really painful at first for the mothers to see that their kids are not missing them and that they don't need them around constantly anymore. Doing something for yourself as a woman in the center is a wonderful experience but it's also a process fraught with conflict for mothers.

New women who join the center come face to face with the pioneers, the activists, who feel that they ARE the mother center. Seeing this feeling of belonging to something greater than

oneself, the new visitors feel the urgent desire: "I want to do what they're doing, and have what they have, too!" The newcomers don't realize that the women of the first hour needed months and sometimes years to find and establish their place in the center or to bring their projects to the point where they are today.

In my one-on-one conversations when I see, for instance, the jealousy of a new mother towards an active center mother I can talk to the newcomer before her attitude hardens. I can explain to her how much time it took for the other woman and how hard she had to work and to try herself to get where she is today. I can show the newcomer possibilities for her to bring herself in and to become an active part of the center. If you can catch the beginnings of conflicts in the day-to-day life of the center you can try and stop these budding feelings of envy and jealousy and help turn them into something productive. It doesn't have to get to the point where two or three newcomers close ranks against the initiator generation and start to talk like: "They are up there and we're down here", "They have all the power and don't let others share", "They won't let anyone in" or "They want to have everything to themselves." No woman here starts out really resentful or angry. Most simply don't know how to find out and realize what they would like to do. As a new mother in the center you can get frustrated easily and sometimes that frustration is then projected onto other women. Those who seem to know their place and go about their business, while you're sitting there behind your cup of coffee, talking only to those who are in the same spot you're in. I went through the same thing at the time when I was slowly emerging from the intense toddler years of my kids. I only knew what I no longer wanted but wasn't able to express yet what I did want.

We all can only feel good in the mother center if we learn to deal with these many forms of stress openly and with good will towards each other. And I think it's really a central task in the mother center to create and nurture an everyday atmosphere where we can sit down and talk.

I Don't Want to Do Crafts!

There must be something really special about doing crafts projects. All kinds of women seem to love doing them. Only here in our mother center we don't. Why not?

To find out I went and dug around a bit in my own past. I used to also do crafts when my kids were little and I wanted to have some peace and quiet. I went to crafts courses because I wanted to get some space and time away from my kids. To go to a course was the best possibility to get out of the house in the evening and to meet other women. I did crafts with the kids too, for Christmas or Easter, and in the summer we did stuff outside with finger paints. I liked it, it was nice and you could always learn something new. But at some point I started to not feel good with it anymore and it got to where it just totally exhausted me. Today I just don't like to do it anymore.

But in the mother center we still wanted to do some crafts because it's such a good project for everybody! Two or three

women got together who had ideas and started to realize them. In order to have a common goal we planned a bazaar. Once a week several women met and it all seemed to work out well. But as soon as the bazaar was over none of the women wanted to get near the scissors or the glue again. No more crafts. We still had a lot of ideas and suggestions: pottery, macramé, ikebana, dolls, etc. And there were still expectations! But we just didn't get any more craft groups together.

Today, there is still this expectation around that there have to be arts and crafts projects in a women's center. After all at city and county fairs and fiestas there are always stands where women sell crafts. I've yet to see any men's clubs bring out the handicrafts.

Well, so what?! Here we simply don't do crafts. We don't know why and we don't really care. We don't feel abashed because of it. The women who would like to see crafts on the program we advise to wait for a bigger interest group. And some things they can also do in small groups of two or three. Maybe we'll have another period here where we'll all be into crafts again. After all things change all the time in the mother center!

And Then Everybody Was Picking on Me!

I found my way into the mother center through the breastfeeding group. I hadn't breastfed my first child and I wanted to do it for the second one. In my pregnancy exercise group I had heard about a breastfeeding group here. I asked about it and got the address of the mother center. "Just go there, there are other mothers who are breastfeeding, they'll give you advice!" I was told. I really wanted to do it right this time. So I asked Grandpa to drive me there with little two-week-old Edgar in my arms. We didn't find the mother center at first and ended up in a paint store. They looked pretty surprised when I asked for the breastfeeding group! But at least they knew enough to tell me to go next door.

I felt pretty nervous by then. To be safe I put Edgar back in the car before I tried the other door. When I entered I saw that there were really two mothers there who were nursing their babies. I sat down with them and they told me how the group worked. I asked how old their children were. When I heard that one of them was six months old I thought to myself, "Hey, I can do that too!"

So I started to go there every Tuesday morning with Edgar and my older daughter Judith and I felt really good about it. One day I saw a notice on the bulletin board about the activities planned in the mother center. One of those activities was a mother-child seminar by the German Youth Institute. I asked about it and how much it cost, - the deciding factor for me- , and I was told that the costs would be covered through a flea market in the mother center, so that participation in the seminar would be free. I decided to go and talked to my husband about it. He said, "If you feel like it why not?" so I signed up for it and thought everything was okay since my name was the fourth or fifth on the list. But when I asked about it a few days before the event I was told, "What? You wanted to participate? But there are no more places available!" I felt really bewildered and asked, "But why? I signed up; why isn't there a place for me?" The answer was pretty vague

and somehow the list could not be found anywhere. I could tell by then that something fishy was going on here, something directed against me. I called up another mother I knew, who was going to the seminar and asked her if she knew what was going on. She also reacted evasively. But I didn't give up until she finally told me that there was some thing going on against me in the center.

There were two women in the mother center that I had known for a long time and that I never got along with very well. I assumed that the bad talk came out of that corner which was confirmed. The same day some woman from the mother center called to tell me that the list had been found again and that everything had been cleared up and I could go. I told her that I had found out about these women having a problem with me and that I needed to think about going. I felt really miserable. In the evening I talked with my husband and told him why I didn't want to go. He didn't think I was making a good decision. "If they're trying to push you out, you should go anyway and show them!" he said. We went on all night and he kept arguing until I ended up thinking I'd do it. But it took the support of my entire family: I told my mom, I told my mother-in-law, and I told my dad, and they all encouraged me to go. For the entire time before the seminar I kept fighting with myself. The evening before I still said that I didn't want to go. But my husband remained firm in his opinion and told me not to be home the next evening when he came from work. He gave me big hug and told me "You can do it!" I left with those words in mind and a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

It all started out rather confused when I arrived. The room assignment got pretty complicated and I felt rejected by everybody. I held onto my kids the whole time. And then the first group meeting! When everyone was supposed to tell about what she did in the mother center and how she felt, I got up really fast, wanting to get it behind me, and I told them about my situation. The discussion leader listened to me and decided to make my situation the topic of the meeting. Every woman there was supposed to say how she saw the situation. What followed felt to me like an endless round of personal attacks on me. It ended only when finally one of the mothers got up and said that she wanted to quit with the negative stuff and she wanted to say something positive about me. I felt so astounded that women who didn't even know me had such a negative impression of me. I was thought to be arrogant, a show-off, a know-it-all, and apparently other mothers felt patronized by me. I was stunned; I had no idea how I had given others that impression of me when I had always

thought to be the exact opposite. I finally understood the power of gossip and how it creates a totally negative picture of a person without any input from reality. I also understood that my own behavior was an obstacle to how others saw me. I often didn't realize that I could hurt others with my candor. One woman told the round about an instance I remembered and that I was now able to see through new eyes: She had problems with her little daughter who didn't want to go to sleep. I'd never had problems like that with my kids and so, with total self-confidence, I had talked



about how that kind of thing would never happen to me, how my kids always went to sleep. And in a little aside I had implied that it was a question of simply raising your kids right. She had heard the aside and felt attacked and criticized. I was very dismayed because I really liked this woman and hadn't wanted to hurt her feelings. I put myself in her shoes and I could understand how she felt. What she said got a lot of things moving inside me. I thought about it all the time. I still remember it today when a mother talks about problems with her kids that I haven't experienced with mine. I'd never say anything like that again because I have learned by now, from the mothers in the mother center, that not all kids and not all mothers are alike, that they can't be lumped together.

But back to the workshop: At first I felt deeply hurt and rejected but I tried to listen to the criticism. It was really hard. I wanted to justify and defend myself because I just couldn't see myself the way they saw me. Finally the mother who had wanted to say something positive finished and added that she, were she in my shoes, would have already left. And I understood that some of the women saw me differently, that I wasn't all alone. I only cried much later, in the evening, when one of the mothers came to me and expressed how sorry she was about what I had had to endure. I felt really angry at all of them and thought, "They're nuts! What do they want from me?! I don't need this crap! I'll call my husband and go home!" After this combination of tears and anger I felt a little better. I felt relieved and filled with new energy. When I put the kids to bed some of the other mothers came and gave me a hand in a very kind way. I started to feel more accepted and like I belonged.

During the following week I talked to some of the women. In individual conversations some things got cleared up. I especially remember one long good conversation that took place in the sauna. Since that time things have been getting better and better. Even during the rest of the seminar week there were many situations where we did something together and got to know each other better and that made for a different climate. It must have been because in the closing meeting even one of my "archenemies" got up and said that she was sorry about what had happened with me and that she had learned not to be so quick to judge someone. I had learned a lot too. It was definitely worth it to deal with this conflict openly, to get over the fear of it. I have also learned to listen better when someone is talking to me, not to give advice too quickly, and to think before I speak.

I went home with mixed feelings. On the one hand I was pretty exhausted. On the other hand I also felt relieved. I decided to keep working on what I had learned in the mother center. In the meantime I have been elected to be part of the team! There are still conflicts in the mother center but we try to talk about them a lot sooner. Wish us luck!



When Mothers Use Their Kids to Settle Their Disagreements

Characters:

- Andrea: active center mother of the first hour, she comes to the center every single day, does various compensated jobs, and is the mother of one child: Andy
- Andy: Andrea's son, four years old, he's a handsome, lively and precocious little guy who knows how to get his way through charm and cunning; he gets into lots of mischief without getting caught and walks around in the center like a crown prince, fully conscious of his mom's status.
- Petra: a more sedate mother and regular visitor who likes to sit and chat with a cup of coffee and who has a small but really rambunctious son from whom she needs regular relief: Peter
- Peter: four years old, he is always getting into mischief and gets caught for it; he exhausts not only his own mother but also every child-care woman the center has been able to throw at him; he is known as a black sheep and a problem child.
- Pia: Petra's eldest daughter, nine years old, she likes to be in the mother center a lot, a quiet, helpful child who's already used to be the good, responsible girl.

The story:

The children, little Andy and nine-year-old Pia, are playing in the bathroom. Suddenly screams. Andy had wanted to hit Pia with a stick. Pia defended herself and slapped him. Andrea hears and comes running. She grabs Pia by the arms, shakes her and yells at her. Pia is already feeling sorry and starts to cry.

Now it becomes an argument between the mothers, between Andrea and Petra. Pia cries harder because she feels bad about the grown-ups fighting over her. As she stands beside her mother sobbing, Andrea walks over again and tells her roughly, "There's no need to make such a big deal out of it!"

Pia's mother has had enough, she starts to cry too and tells Andrea "You're really impossible. One time it's Peter, then it's Pia. In your eyes there's always something wrong with my kids!"

But Andrea doesn't even respond. She seems to feel good about defending her son. She seems to expect that Pia, as a nine-year-old, understands when she gets the short end of the stick because she is the older child after all.

One could get the impression that Andrea takes it out on Petra because she feels guilty. All she'd really had to do was say, "Yes, I should have stayed out of it. Kids will fight and after all, nothing happened."

More and more often, after an argument in the center, mothers pick up the phone again at home to apologize or to ask for another talk, instead of getting caught up in vulnerabilities, accusations, and rumors. They make sure that they understand what the other one means to say or they call back later to ask for a one-on-one conversation. Mothers who have been working in

the center for a few years say that they have learned to fight “the good fight”, that they have gained the confidence to speak openly and that they won’t stop talking until they have come further in their understanding of each other. Many women who started out disliking each other, who judged, rejected, or avoided each other, have learned to deal with each other with more understanding, respect, and tolerance, and have in some cases even become friends.

That Old Work Ethic!

Liselotte and I used to get a lot of recognition for our mother center program. The leisure activities we organized, like visits to the zoo, to farms, or to the fire department, were well attended and the women and kids had lots of fun. We planned new things constantly. But as we got closer to winter and had to stay inside we thought about separating the mothers from the children, at least from time to time. I offered playgroups for the kids while Liselotte tried to get a women’s group together for talking and doing craft projects. In a short time I had gained the trust of the kids and the women in the coffee room thus enjoyed lots of peace and quiet. For months I worked hard for the play group, I made plans and collected toys. But at long last I missed the contact with the other women. When I expressed that, some of the women agreed to take turns with me. The kids had gotten very used to me by then and were all over me when the mother center opened in the afternoon. When other women came to play with them, in order to give me a break, the kids kept running to me. I didn’t give the women a chance to make friends with the kids either. I always had lots of advice for them on what they should do and how they should do it. I kept sticking my nose in and didn’t give the kids a chance to get used to the other women. I demanded perfection and I couldn’t let go. I wasn’t really used to do something just for myself and it was difficult for me. I got angry when I saw how Liselotte enjoyed herself all afternoon, how she sat there chatting with other women, while I washed the dishes, played with the kids, and cleaned up. Today I’m also able to just sit there, to enjoy myself, and to take care of my own needs. But at the time this subconscious jealousy of mine gave rise to our first serious conflicts in the mother center. Many other women behaved just like me. First business, then maybe pleasure – no matter how awful or tired we feel. Because of them I felt validated in my expectations that Liselotte should behave more like me. In reality I would have dearly loved to be able like her to just enjoy myself for a whole afternoon.



Hierarchies in the Mother Center

There are some everyday situations that we face again and again in the mother center, that create a perpetual repetition of conflicts, but that nonetheless still manage to surprise and rattle us. It should be really clear to us by now: There is no perfect world, even in the mother center.

Here is a typical example: How do we handle offering particularly attractive activities for which there aren't enough places for everybody? How do we pick who gets to participate? An example would be the seminars and workshops that offer women a chance to get away from home for a while. Usually there aren't enough spaces for everybody who wants to go. With these kinds of difficult situations envy, jealousy, resentment, and pettiness suddenly surface among us. That simply comes with the territory. They are important energies that must not be denied, but acknowledged and taken into account instead. Which is difficult for everybody.

With such questions the visible and invisible hierarchies in the mother center emerge: Who has the information, who passes it on and to whom do they pass it on? Who has influence and connections and who is willing to use them? Who is always in the right place at the right time? Who makes the decisions and whose decisions are respected? Who can assert herself and is able to express her wants openly? Who has trouble making herself heard and usually ends up feeling pushed around, left out, run over? Is the decision-making process straightforward and open or underhanded and indirect?

These hierarchies and processes are as subtle as they are complicated. A notice on the bulletin board, visible to all, does not guarantee that everybody reads it or feels addressed by it. One mother may have no problem at all with putting her name on a list for an activity she's interested in, another woman needs to be addressed and motivated personally. At this point the first step of the selection process happens already.

Is it realistic to expect total fairness and equality in a situation where such decisions have to be made? Should we really fall back on formal rules and procedures, should we institute a public meeting and an official vote to make this kind of decision? That is also not an acceptable solution because it is so bureaucratic. Inflexible rules and procedures make the decision making process often much too rigid, awkward, and time-consuming. They leave no room for real life by suppressing our emotions. But those feelings are just suppressed, not eliminated. They remain present and manage to influence the proceedings and the climate nonetheless. Furthermore an expectation is created that no one will have any reason to complain anymore. Any dissatisfaction is squashed and we forget what a wonderful relief it can be to be able to complain, to be jealous and petty.

Women who are able and willing to mediate in these situations or to provide assistance with the decision-making process are sure to be stepping on someone's feet and to leave themselves open to criticism. Those who have no problem with that will often turn into the kind of women with natural authority. But where can they go to relax and regenerate? Who can they talk to?



Our solution, despite all its inherent dynamics, is to keep talking, talking, talking. It helps if we deal with information openly and honestly even though it may make more work and take more time. The more women feel that they are a part of making the decisions, the more feelings are brought into the decision making process. There is a lot of personal growth to be gained from these group processes. And if they don't always turn out perfectly, don't give up hope. These situations will come up again and again – new game, new luck!

The New One

I'm really not that new in the mother center. I've been a regular for a while now. But still I felt like a newcomer recently when I came to the center in the afternoon. Usually I'm only there in the mornings when I'm on duty. Although I know the afternoon crew well, - we've been to seminars together and celebrated together - , I still felt like a stranger there that afternoon.

I have trouble describing it. I felt uncertain, I didn't know what the women were thinking and I didn't understand or like how they acted. On the table there were pieces of pie and cake from the bakery, still in paper bags, the kids were being fed way too much candy, the flowers from the morning had been unceremoniously shoved into a corner and there were dirty dishes everywhere. I prefer things clean and orderly. At home I put a lot of effort into keeping my household neat and tidy, my kids have rules of cleanliness too. Although I realize that things are different in the center I still try to get some of my ideas through there too.

The whole behavior of the afternoon women was different from that of the morning crew. The kids were sent into the basement to play and sometimes some woman would go down and play with them. But most of the time they were all sitting around the table, chatting about totally trite and trivial stuff. Even their language was different from that of us morning women. Things seemed pretty lively and funny and they did include me in the conversation but I still felt like a foreigner in a strange land.

When I walked home I felt very critical and angry. "They can't do it like that!", I thought. "That was terrible! No atmosphere! Nothing going on, no activities, no one to talk to walk-in visitors."

I was wildly determined to do something about it. I started to go to the center more often in the afternoon. I wanted to see exactly what needed to be changed. That's when I noticed that the same visitors were usually there, chatting comfortably and easily with each other. I got the impression that they felt good about being there but I myself still felt uncomfortable and like things just weren't right for me. The conversations didn't hold any interest for me and I didn't feel like sitting there just to knit or do some crafts. I mentioned the mess on the table but no one else there had a problem with it, they liked things the way they were. Slowly I realized that maybe I was the one who needed to change in order to feel comfortable there in the afternoons.

I thought about it: The duty women did the best they could, they created the kind of atmosphere they liked and felt comfortable with and they had their group of regular visitors who apparently

were quite satisfied with the afternoon program. Some of the women confirmed that without intending to when they talked about going to the mother center in the morning and feeling peculiar there. "I just didn't feel comfortable, those women were so different from me. That's why I like to come here in the afternoon when Tanja and Nina are on duty. That's when I like it here."

In the meantime I've come to understand the whole thing better. Each duty woman or even the regular visitors spread their own atmosphere around them and you can try to influence that but you can't change it in any basic way. If I want things the way I like them I have to take part in creating that atmosphere. Depending on how much or how little my ideas and attitudes match those of the other women that will be more or less difficult.

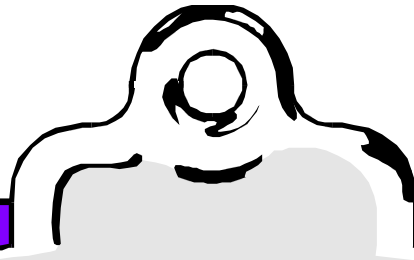
Since I then I've been able to let go of my criticism. I can now visit the mother center in the afternoon and discover not only things I have in common with those women, but also interestingly new and different things and ideas.

Younger and Older Women in the Mother Center

We, a group of women between 20 and 40 years old, met each other during the very beginning of our mother center's history. Together we made our plans and ideas become real but very soon we separated into younger and older women. Our common goal was to offer opportunities for conversation and relaxation to the women who visited the mother center. But soon we heard the older ones complain, "The women only sit there and let the kids do what they want." Our older women didn't bring kids to the center, instead they worked and cleaned constantly. They weren't used to relax, to let their hands be idle. Often they heard us younger ones complain how the tedious monotony of being at home was driving us nuts, how we didn't see any prospects for us as homemakers. But the older women – expert homemakers for the past fifteen, twenty, or more years – felt criticized and didn't




understand our problem. A nice clean household, nice well-mannered kids, – what else could a woman wish for? If putting one's own needs aside was the way to get there, then it must be right. It took a long time and many discussions for us to hear them say how they really felt inside. How they had given up everything for their families, their husbands and their children, how the kids were grown now but they couldn't get back into their old jobs, how they yearned to end their isolation, even by going out to clean other people's houses for a few hours. With tolerance and awareness and lots of goodwill on both sides things are now working out a lot better between us "Lazy Youngsters" and the "Crotchety Crones".



My Mother Centre from A till Z

- A:** I was afraid to go to the mother center. I thought it was just for the they wouldn't welcome any outsiders. I've been a housewife for the past two years and I've become kind of isolated.
- B:** I have lots to talk about in the evening now. Before, only the men were talking about their work. Now I feel important too. I'm somebody too now!
- C:** Before we used to just hang out in cafés or at the mall, just to get out of the house, see something different, talk to somebody. Now I can go to the mother center whenever I want to and I always meet people, ones I know or new ones.
- D:** But I find I can't let off any steam anymore in the mother center. The others ones always try to give me advice. I've often gotten angry about it, but I keep coming anyway.
- E:** I always want to be consistent and say what's wrong even if it's about the mother center.
- There is so much gossip and rumor. Usually I either speak my mind or I just make a joke and let the whole thing go.
- F:** I thought I was different because I can't afford to spend money like married women. I don't feel accepted because of that.
- G:** When I don't like something I try to change it, to make it fit my needs – maybe I'm a bit inconsiderate sometimes. But I do it simply because I know that in this space I am allowed to change things. I wonder if the new women are aware of that and would like to try it too?
- H:** I heard that some women feel excluded by the title "Regulars' Meeting". They think it's just for those women at the heart of the center but everyone is welcome at the regulars' table. I think we should change the name, maybe call it "Women's Meeting".
- I:** Nah, that's sure to sound too emancipated to some and then they won't come either.
- J:** You can name it whatever you want, those who want to come, will. Sooner or later. I think the most important thing is that you can come here with a friend. Most women don't like to try stuff by themselves
- K:** But we're all adults! I think newcomers have to bring something to the center though, you can't just expect everything from the active center women.
- L:** But the women on duty can approach the shy visitors, talk to them, ask them about why they came.
- M:** The duty women talked to me when I first came, no one else did.

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- N:** The duty women sure have a lot to do: they're supposed to make coffee, create a comfortable atmosphere, offer a schedule for the active workers, watch the kids, make telephone calls, clean up, approach new visitors, watch out for repairs, endure the anger of the smokers and of the non-smokers, listen and console, give advice, referrals, and information, find lost items, bake cakes, etc.
- O:** I always get upset when some women won't do anything and be it only to open their mouths and say what they want. That's why I simply do stuff the way I think it should be done.
- P:** Well, and then there are always those really anxious women who want to satisfy everybody all the time and always run around serving everybody. And those who don't like serving but who like to talk to visitors.
- Q:** I noticed that those women who've been working here for a long time also would like to feel mothered a bit sometimes.
- R:** Are you only important if you do something? Isn't it enough that I'm here?
- S:** Yeah, people are only willing to talk if it's something big or if it's about the mother center, not about the daily little boo-boos. But those little things are what's really frustrating. I want to talk with other women about my everyday concerns and especially with women with the same concerns.
- T:** That's right, the active women are valued higher than the rest of us. I always feel like I'm supposed to look up to the active women, show respect for all the great things they've done.
- U:** It's much simpler for me to talk to women I already know. Just my little group of women.
- V:** I like to talk to the active women because they're more like me and share my interests.
- W:** I want to be recognized and loved for who I am in the mother center.
- X:** It creates barriers. Why can women only be loved for what they do, for their work? I'm disappointed.
- Y:** I don't necessarily expect of active women that they work a lot, but that they're interested in the mother center. I expect that they show commitment outside of their paid hours, that they participate in the various common activities, and especially that they come along to the seminars even if it's exhausting.
- Z:** But there are also very effective duty women who do not show great commitment or enthusiasm.

A Question of Generations?

At first I was meeting only young women in the mother center. Then a weeklong seminar for mothers and children was offered. Although most of the others brought their kids along, I didn't bring my daughter. There were also women whose kids were already grown and out of the house. For me it was a new experience to deal with these women. I had a lot of prejudices. I expected to hear them talk like my parents with their old-fashioned ideas about child-rearing, marriage, and relationships. But I realized quickly that I began to like the older women more and more the longer I got to know them. If there is good will on both sides to respect and try to understand each other, age becomes unimportant. I also learned how intolerant and inflexible some women my own age are, who feel shocked by informal manners and don't like being addressed by their first names!



Keep Going!

I had been in the mother center's diet group for a few months when I participated in my first plenary. A big problem was on the agenda – once again no one could be found to clean up. I felt sort of obliged to help out and signed up for the weekly cleaning schedule. Everybody was really happy with me and I got started. After I had cleaned up a few times I came in one Friday and they told me bluntly that some other women had taken over the cleaning. So I could go back home. I swallowed hard and wondered if I had done something wrong maybe. But no one had said anything to me. I felt so flabbergasted that I didn't even dare to ask any more questions about it. I almost didn't go back to the mother center at all. I had to deal with the whole thing all by myself because I hardly knew anyone there. If the same thing happened to me today I would simply ask someone about it and demand an explanation but at that time I didn't really feel like I "belonged". That was a really difficult experience for me in the beginning. But since I had so much success in my diet group I was able to tell myself to just keep going. I wanted to create something new for myself and I didn't want to give up so easily. I really wanted to make a go of it.

So I tried my hand at other things and helped out in other areas, for instance with child care. Slowly things got better for me. I got to know the women better and they in turn got to know me better. I went to several seminars and workshops, participated in many activities. I should add that I am about 20 to 30 years older than most center mothers, most of whom belong to my daughter's generation. In the beginning this kept me from going to the mother center at all, although it had always attracted me. Like many others I thought that it was only for young mothers. I also didn't want to be treated with deference by the mothers there or have the women feel constrained in my presence, as if they couldn't talk freely when I was there, or have them feel patronized. Those were fears I had.

Sometime later I talked about this whole issue with one of the younger mothers and she confirmed that she had had some of the same fears about me being there. In the meantime we have both found our fears to be unfounded. One of the milestones on the

way there was the basement party the mother center had. I was surprised to have been invited to something like that at my age, but I was also really pleased and of course I went and had a great time. By the way I also found out that the clean-up thing had also been really innocent, nobody had criticized my work, there were simply two others willing to do the cleaning and so my helping out was no longer necessary.

Age is really not all that important with all that goes on in the mother center. It is more important that you have fun and that you enjoy being with people and that you're open to people. In the meantime the women in the mother center have let me know in so many ways that I belong there and that I'm needed. I can only say that it's been worth it to keep going. So many things that seemed problematic or hard to understand turned out differently and cleared up by themselves.

Auntie Anna

How horrible: someone in our mother center steals! Who would have thought that! Anything but that in a place where we're supposed to be one for all and all for one. But Lisa's sure that there's money missing from the coffee fund. Who could it have been? Well, we don't want this to get talked about too much but everybody knows all about it anyway. What can we do? We have to do something. Many of us are upset, some are cautious, and others demand strong measures. The atmosphere is getting heated.

What to do? I don't know; I have no experience with something like that and no idea what to do about it. So I call my Auntie Anna. She's been around, has a lot of experience. I tell her everything, including how insecure I feel. Auntie Anna has been through this kind of thing often she says, and mostly it turned out not to have been true after all. And in other cases there were good reasons for it. She tells me to be careful. Often these things take care of themselves. She says she's seen cases where accusations were made up by someone with an axe to grind or someone who needed attention or recognition. And it never hurts to let the other women know that we each carry responsibility for each other.

Auntie Anna has restored my peace of mind yet again. I manage to remain calm, to not let myself be pulled into the escalation and I reassure myself and others that nothing is eaten as hot as it is cooked.

Auntie Annas are great women, they are needed everywhere. They can be the most diverse women with the most varied backgrounds. But they all know what they're talking about. They know about people and about life and they know the issues we deal with. I have known a variety of Auntie Annas. Some I was very close to, others I asked for advice because they knew a lot about one area or another, and others simply showed up in my life, without me knowing where they came from and what they did.

Once I had an Auntie Anna that impressed me a whole lot. She was a very kind older lady, with lots of life experience. She

managed to give me confidence in my own capacity to make decisions and to achieve success, without letting me give up my natural caution and responsibility, and all without me even being aware of it. I didn't ask for her help often, only when it all threatened to come down around me. When I did talk to her about my problems she'd tell me one of her endless stories. Afterwards I was often a bit angry because she never gave me any patent solutions or recipes, only a whole bunch of new aspects under which to examine my own behavior.

Auntie Annas listen and they make us feel better. They always have confidence in us and encourage us. They believe in the good in people, especially the good in us who come to them for help. They are experienced and kind, yet they never pretend to know it all; they never doubt us or are suspicious of our motives. And when we really don't know what to do or where to turn anymore, they even give us good advice.

The stealing issue was solved by putting the coffee funds into a box with a lock.



Intolerance Unlearned

„Since I've been coming to the mother center“, says Christine, „I've often wondered why we women are so intolerant against each other.“

I am visiting her at home. I want to know how she feels now that she has been actively involved with the mother center for the last year.

It's afternoon and we sit in the living room. It is a room that radiates a wonderful warmth and comfort with its rampant plant life, big photos of the kids, bookshelves next to the sofa, and the lovingly set coffee table. Tired from work I slip deeper into the pillows of the armchair. Christine's kids are outside playing. We have time and I feel like listening. Because when Christine has time to think about things she usually has lots to say.

Christine is what sociologists call a middle-class woman, with a degree as a biologist and four years of professional work experience. Her husband is self-employed and works from his office at home. She sees her marriage as a very equal partnership. Their general attitude is liberal, they are focused on raising their children in a healthy way, and they are always open for friends and visitors. Tolerance is very important to Christine. So I'm curious why she feels that this is such a big issue in the mother center. Will she criticize the other center women? Is she disappointed about the inevitable and sometimes



ill-natured gossip and rumors? I don't have time to figure out what I expect, only to feel surprised, as Christine starts to talk about herself instead.

„I think,“ she begins, „as a homemaker you tend to get intolerant after a while, because you're not really seeing anything beyond your own family, while the kids are small. The longer this goes on, the more all the tolerance you show your kids gets lost when you look outside of the family. Your intelligence keeps telling you that you're not the center of the world but in day to day life you experience your own way of life as the norm. And the small circle of friends that you manage to keep while you're raising small kids has the same life style you do. The same ideas about relationships, about child-rearing. There are no big differences of opinion for you to deal with. As long as your kids aren't yet going to kindergarten or to school, your range of vision is about as wide and as long as the street you live on. Your world may include the little side street where your girlfriend lives with her kids, but it definitely ends at the next main road. And as a mother you're supposed to live happily in this small square on the map. That's how it was for me until about a year ago. Even on those totally dull and endless afternoons when we all fight with the housewife blues, I didn't really rebel against my situation because I knew I couldn't take my rebellion anywhere. While the kids are so small and helpless, you kind of build up a barrier in your own mind. On this barrier you write: Danger beyond this point! Do not think any farther than this! You keep yourself from thinking about what might be going on outside your own small world. You're afraid that if you did start to think about it, you'd get really frustrated and you wouldn't be able to go on anymore. So you lie to yourself to keep functioning and to keep your small little world safe and intact. You tell yourself that you're really happy deep down inside. And in order to keep looking at your present life style as normal, you deny your desire for the bigger and more diverse kind of life you used to live, when you didn't have kids and were working outside of the house.“

„My girlfriend Katja, who also has a child the age of ours, found a new boyfriend and he moved in with her. When this guy didn't seem to fit in with the rest of us, I felt I'd choke to death if I didn't go and tell her what I thought and try to convince her that he's no good for her. At the same time of course I didn't want to put my foot in it and I didn't want to alienate her. I couldn't risk losing this friend in my situation. So, for about a year, we both allowed a certain distance to develop between us. We kept a superficial kind of contact from door to door and took care of each other's kids but other than that we really more or less avoided each other. Only now, that both of us have been active in the mother center, has our friendship been regenerated and we've become close again.“

Very different lifestyles and backgrounds have become so accepted and even commonplace in the mother center that it is hard to remember how in the beginning the founding mothers, - then mostly in their 20s and 30s, well educated and with professional experience, married, and with young children, - were quite a closed shop.

Many women tend to show a cliquish behavior when they are just starting to get involved and active in the center. Christine explains it like this:

"Let's say, your children are getting to the point where they don't hang onto you at every waking moment anymore and you have more freedom. You might start to plan taking some courses or maybe just walking a bit farther than to the end of the street. That's how many women, I included, end up in the mother center. These small beginnings: daring to leave your own four walls behind again, to venture out in public by yourself, act like a tonic on many women. You begin to get an idea of the possibilities. You experience it like a new beginning, just for yourself, without the kids or the husband. I remember that I felt really exhilarated inside. I felt full of my own strength, and I thought all the other mothers in my circle of acquaintances, in the mother center, in the courses, must be feeling the same thing I was. I thought they were all at the same point I was at. I wanted to show them and share with them my strong feelings of revived self-esteem and of boundless energy. And if they didn't feel like I did, I thought I had to help them get there. But unfortunately that didn't work and was even seen pretty negatively, as if I was on some missionary trip. The women resented that and they got defensive because they had a different way of life and just generally did and felt things differently. So I got criticized, I felt rejected, and I was told that they didn't need or want my ideas and opinions and that they found me generally rather unpleasant to be around. I know today that the criticism was pretty correct because I probably did seem terribly domineering and intolerant, and as if only I had all the right information. The women probably felt that I was really looking for myself in them. This is something akin to what will happen to every woman who becomes active in the mother center: the more she dares to speak up in the circle and become involved in the group, the more difficulties and uncertainties she will experience at first. There are the visitors who don't start out full of drive and energy to get involved, but who only want to hang around and watch, protected by their visitor status. They vacillate between distancing themselves and trying out new activities, while talking amongst themselves and keeping a beady eye on what's happening. They watch those women who are actively involved, pass critical judgements on them and form opinions and – hopefully – they may finally find one they want to model themselves after."

"In the beginning, when I heard how they were talking about me, I reacted pretty typically and distanced myself from them and from the mother center. If they didn't want me there, - well, I didn't need to be there! I felt pretty insecure and so I tried to make myself feel better by telling myself that I, Christine, didn't need them, that I didn't need that stupid mother center. After all I had



my own very nice and interesting family and my big circle of friends and acquaintances. I know now that I must have seemed pretty snobbish and arrogant at the time. But luckily the pull of the mother center ended up being stronger than my petty pride."

"At some point I began to stop reacting to the gossip by getting upset and looking for the fault only in the others. I started listening to the criticism and to question myself and my convictions, which is something one usually only does when the going gets tough and not when things are still comfortable. There were quite a few weeks and months in the mother center where there were difficulties between me and the other women and where I asked myself again and again if it had something to do with me. Did I do something wrong? Did I express my personal opinions too strongly? Was I aware of what the other woman was saying to me? Was she right in criticizing me? I looked at the difficulties as a challenge to myself, a challenge to grow, to try and develop new ways to deal with others in the center. And I learned that these difficult exchanges were very positive for me, that conflict and argument were not only negative. I have learned a lot for myself in this last, critical, year. I know my weaknesses and I no longer only see those of others. To have gotten to this point gives me a lot of confidence in myself, not only in the mother center, but in all areas of my life. I now experience a whole new tolerance and openness, a great feeling!"

What Christine is trying to illustrate with the story of her personal development in the mother center has been experienced by many other women. They too have experienced the personal attacks, the deep feelings of insecurity and uncertainty, and the tendency to distance or to cluster into cliques of women with similar views. They have also experienced the questioning of oneself, of one's behavior and its effects on others, the growing ability to admit one's weaknesses and errors, the new willingness to have open and positive exchanges with others, and the development of a feeling of true self-assurance and tolerance in the end.

"It's also part of a certain mentality with us," she says, "because whether it's appropriate or not, criticism always comes easier to us than approval. That's also how we treat our kids much too often. And just watch them: the moment they get scolded they cower and become small and obedient, because they feel that they're smaller and weaker. Later, when they're amongst themselves and they end up being the bigger ones, they do the same thing to the smaller kids. We are setting a bad example. When you get criticized at a time when you happen to feel tough and strong, you'll just deny and reject the whole thing, you'll feel like you don't have to listen to that kind of thing. But if it gets to you in a situation where you're feeling weak and insecure then you feel hopelessly small and miserable and you swallow it and withdraw like a little mouse."

It's not enough to merely substitute ritual appreciation for criticism. To be appreciative on principle means to change one's way of seeing, to become aware – beyond all prejudice – of the other's qualities rather than her faults. It is the willingness to not simply react to the way she is behaving at the moment, but to approach her whole person. To deal with criticism productively also means to not only react to it but to see it as an impetus to



reflect on one's own person, to learn from it, to discuss it openly, and also to reject it if it is not justified

"When you're visible in the mother center as one of the active women, you need to be able to just leave the criticism standing in the room without immediately feeling personally attacked and questioned. There are situations in the center sometimes where criticism develops its own disastrous momentum and nothing that's said by anyone makes any sense anymore. Sometimes I notice that what I say sometimes doesn't make any sense. And so I tell myself that the other women have the right to sometimes not make any sense either. This helps me to remain calm in dealing with the exaggerations and distortions that tend to occur in the middle of an argument."

Now Joey, Christine's son, uses his arsenal of weapons like ropes, plastic swords, paper snakes, and loud protests to effectively end our boring grown-up talk.

What We Want

- ❖ Safety, warmth, comfort, tolerance, community, relaxation, activity and passivity, entertainment, ideas, pampering, relief, recognition, mutual exchange, discussions, respect, change, happiness...
- ❖ Resolve conflicts, deal with each other, move something, express our feelings, let ourselves go, eat together, sell homemade foods, do gardening...
- ❖ Permission to have impossible kids, permission to be lazy, permission to be in a bad mood...
- ❖ Luxuries like cosmetic treatments, massages, a hairdresser...
- ❖ A snuggle corner, a work corner, carefree and comfortable furniture, changeable seating arrangements, funky stuff, a reading corner, a quiet corner, lots of room for moving around and dancing, a shower and a bathtub, a dishwasher, a bed, a washing machine, a pinwall, a roofed terrace, a lantern outside, a play ground for the kids, cozy lamps, a crafts room, a corner for games

VII. The People around us



Just a Bunch of Gossiping Women?

One day one of the council women called me on the phone. We had applied for a subsidy from the municipal government for our mother center. She said:

"We don't really hear good things about the mother center."

"Oh?," I said, "What do you hear?"

"Well, we hear that the women are just hanging out, drinking coffee and smoking..."

"Oh," I said, "and what's wrong with that? Women, just like everybody else, need a place where they can come to talk about their issues and interests, things like kids, relationships, housing, school, health care, etc."

She replied, "That kind of housewife prattle they could do just as well at home. They could invite their neighbors over for coffee. I see no need to waste public funds on something like that!"

Now I began to get angry and I said, "Why do you think I used to be so crazy about tennis before? Only to meet other women and be able to talk with them. For days I'd sit out there on the terrace, drink coffee and chat with other mothers and housewives. That was really important to me. And those tennis courts were also built with big public subsidies, right?! And besides, maybe you should go and take a look at the kind of tiny apartments most people live in around here. Maybe you can figure out how many women and kids you can get in there for a comfortable chat, especially if you live in a house with people who work night shifts. There's always someone sleeping and needing quiet."

She didn't say anything for a moment and I began to think she'd gotten my point.

But then her next argument came:

"The women learn things there they'd be better off not knowing."

"What on earth do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, they come home with a whole different idea of themselves and they start to talk back at home and their husbands don't know how to deal with that. It creates a lot of troubled marriages and families. And what good does it do them? There's nothing they can do about their lives anyway."

I didn't know what to reply to something like that. I felt shocked. Never had anyone, let alone a supposedly politically aware person (and a woman to boot!), said anything like that to my face.

So I didn't say anything. I just remembered the very real growth I've seen women, and along with them their families, experience through the mother center. I have seen how much more thoughtfully they deal with their lives and their families and I hoped the day would come when even this council woman would be open to find out how women really think and live - by talking to them.



We Don't Fight At Home – We're Just Frustrated!

I went to a soccer game with my husband, Gunther. He plays for our local club. I go there for him because it makes him feel good when he knows I'm there. Since the baby arrived, it's not that great for me anymore. It's pretty exhausting actually because I always have to watch the baby.

Anyway, that evening we wanted to play cards with our friends and the baby had to be put to bed. I asked my husband, "Could you take care of him for me? I feel so tired today." My husband just replied, "Why me? I just finished playing an hour and a half of soccer. You know how exhausting that is. Put him to bed yourself, it's your job, after all." And to him that was totally okay. I felt so stunned I couldn't say anything, only try and swallow the tears that were coming. This is something I'm hearing more and more.

My husband thinks he's working hard all day and can't take care of the baby in the evening. When I have a problem with that and tell him that I'm working hard all day too, he responds, "What are you talking about? You're only sitting in the mother center, chatting and drinking coffee." When I point out to him that he doesn't mind the money I earn in the mother center the reply is, "That little bit! What's that supposed to be worth? And besides, why don't you take a good look around here! The ironing basket is full. Your job is this household here!"

After these fights I always feel really awful. I constantly feel guilty in my relationship. My husband only takes care of the baby if and when he feels like it. He refuses to be responsible for any regular childcare duties and pushes them all onto me. Yet he manages to complain that he'd like to do more with the baby, if only I would let him. But as soon as some of the more unpleasant tasks appear on the horizon he retreats into his role of the hard-working provider.

He's really a tolerant and understanding person, but sometimes he just loses it. I guess he's noticed he's not the only or even the most important person in my life anymore. Before I used to stay away from all kinds of clubs and associations because I just didn't care for the politics involved. But I feel great in the mother center. I can really do stuff there. I am very happy because I've had so many positive experiences there. But I've also noticed that I tend to be in the mother center constantly when there are problems at home. When things are okay between Gunther and me, when we're able to talk and he doesn't try to tell me what to do, I enjoy being at home.

I have to fight for my time at the mother center. Friends suggested I should join a sports club rather than go to the mother center. If I did that it would be no problem to go out every evening. The ironing would not be an issue. Gunther is gone a lot more than I am and he demands it as a matter of course, that I serve lunch by twelve on his soccer Sundays.

I think our problem is the attitude Gunther has about his and my work. And this attitude is of course not open to be questioned or challenged. I used to talk about these problems only with other women. Then I'd feel very validated and comforted but nothing

changed in my situation at home. Nothing changed about Gunther and his attitudes. Back at home I kept my mouth shut and withdrew into myself and after I had let off steam somewhere else occasionally things seemed better again for a while. He got his validation for his patriarchal role from his mother, his mother-in-law, his sister and his father.

I am beginning to see where it's all coming from. I sit him down more often these days and try to get him to really listen to me. We talk and talk all day long but never about us or about our feelings. He tries to resist, he doesn't like conflict. He evades me and says he doesn't want to fight or argue. But to me that's not a fight, it's a necessary discussion. It's necessary for us to get to really know each other. He always tell me "You're like this...you're like that...you're so..." But he's never right, it's only the picture he's made of me. I think only when we will have learned to really talk to each other about our needs, our wants, desires and feelings, will we be able to really show each other understanding.

I never again want to be in that "My-husband-lets-me" situation. I hear it from so many other women. I cannot accept dependency like that anymore. A good relationship means to me that neither one has to give up his independence for the other. Gunther and I have been together for ten years. We haven't gotten very far yet, but I still see a lot of possibilities for a road walked together.

What Happened To My Marriage

It was always the same old story, whether it was about the overflowing ironing basket, the unmade bed, the spiderwebs in the corner under the ceiling, or the kids' bad grades. Everything was always my fault, even if something totally different was the real issue.

In the beginning we were so normal in every respect. We had three kids, one right after the other. My husband had his career and earned the money and I took care of the household, - as I had wanted to. But at some point our storybook life began to change. My husband's job took on more and more importance and everything else became less and less important to him. He worked ten hours a day, hardly saw his kids, and on the weekend he went back to the office to work some more. At home of course he couldn't find any peace and quiet with three little kids around. And I was working myself to the bone too, day and night with the household, the kids and the husband. An equal partnership was out of the question. Our roles were distributed rigorously: he was responsible for earning the money, I was responsible for everything else. With the result that he got lots of recognition for his work and his achievements and that he was the one who decided how we spent the money he earned. I was treated as my husband's appendage. Nobody knew or cared who I really was. But I wasn't satisfied with that anymore. I became rebellious and started to go my own way. In a women's group I discovered abilities in myself that I remembered from my days in school, but that I had long since forgotten. My husband really liked my new rebelliousness at first. After all, I was happily busy. I had people to talk to so he didn't have to listen to me go on anymore about my daily life. I learned about politics and the economy so I

became an interesting conversation partner for my husband. Until he discovered that I didn't wait for him to speak to me and that I didn't necessarily share his political views. But it got really bad after people in town started to know me under my own name and not only as Soandso's wife anymore. His supremacy was in question. I wasn't dependent on him anymore. This made him feel terribly insecure.

During that time I lost my respect for making money. Arguments like "He takes care of his family" didn't impress me anymore. I had tested my own market worth. With the education I had from before my marriage I found myself very much in demand on the labor market and knew I'd be able to take care of myself and my kids alone.

Societal recognition as "his wife" wasn't important to me anymore, although I do realize how much better still the social position of a wife is than that of a single woman. My activities in women's groups gave me so much recognition and validation that I slowly developed an independent, strong personality.

Of course I was under constant heavy attack. My husband tried to keep up his role as patriarch with lots of tricks and pressure tactics. The wives in our former circle of acquaintances fought me as a women's libber, a man-hater, a destroyer of families, and I heard plenty of jibes like "the poor children..." or "the poor husband..."

Supported by many true friends and the visible success of my involvement, I endured even when it got really bad and our marriage seemed about to be over. Today our lives haven't become any easier but we've become more aware. My husband is still the conservative type and sometimes he'd really welcome some housewifely care, but I know that deep down he's also glad about this growth process I initiated through which he has discovered new and important ideas for himself too. I've noticed that he looks down on men who behave as he used to do.

Have Fun, Mom!

Our regular plenary takes place every Thursday evening. I am always there, because this is my time, for myself. My husband thinks what we do at the meeting and at the mother center is great and he's happy for me. The kids have also gotten used to the idea that mom goes out some evenings. Before I leave I kiss them goodnight and they always say "Have fun, mommy!"

I also earn extra money for myself with the child-care I've been doing every Wednesday afternoon for the past year. Sometimes my seven-year-old daughter is not at all happy about my extracurricular activities. But I explain to her that I'm on duty at the center and that that's the same thing as daddy going to his work. Often she's with me when I pick up my money on the first of the month. When I buy her new shoes with my money, she's happy, of course. One time, when she was upset that I was going to the center, I reminded her of that and she said "Okay then, let's go quickly, I need new boots!"

*Mom, you may
not go to the
mother center for
one whole week!*



Fathers and the Mother Center

Of course there are also men in the mother center. You hardly see them during our normal business hours, because they're working at their jobs then, but at our family gatherings and barbecues, at our flea markets and bowling parties, or at the Sunday family café, they are there with us. When it comes to those handyman tasks we're especially happy about their support.

What do they think about the mother center? There are as many different opinions, as there are men. For many of them it's a threat. Why? Because their wives are discovering something for themselves, because their wives are moving away from them, even if it's only bit by bit. Because the men often don't really know what a mother center is, they conclude that it's all about coffee table chatting and gossip and they're afraid their wives could be talking about their private home life. Often they're jealous that their wives have a place like this that they don't have.

But there are also men, and quite a few of them at that, who are happy about the mother center. They're happy because their wives feel a lot better since they've been coming here.

For many husbands life has become a lot easier, they don't need to feel guilty anymore about going out some evenings since their wives now also have friendships and contacts outside the house. After Lizzi went on our mother's day trip, her husband went on a day-long bike trip on the weekend, something he's always wanted to do. Lizzy never knew that. Now he felt free to tell her. Both feel free to do things on their own now.



Mom's Stupid Mother Center!

One day, I don't remember when exactly, I heard that a mother center was supposed to start here. Mommy went to Munich and then to Salzgitter with her friends. I didn't like that at all. I was used to mommy going to Berlin from time to time. But now to Munich too? No, that was too much! But it got even worse. Suddenly she was gone in the afternoons! I really didn't like the way mommy had other interests besides me and I felt abandoned. After all I was mommy's baby!

Although I didn't realize it then as much as I do now, I have something to thank mommy and the mother center for: bangs that were always way too short - courtesy of the mother center hairdresser who just never got it right - and a babysitter-job I liked a lot. I babysat for a year and a half. I didn't get a lot of

money for it but I didn't care. Two times a week I had something important to do; I was needed, it was my responsibility. Plus I usually got something good to eat in the family where I babysat. I had always been fascinated by little kids. Now I was allowed to feed, diaper, dress, bathe and rub lotion all over "my babies". That was really the nicest thing I got from the mother center.

But I really mind that mom keeps talking about "her girls" all the time and half kills herself for the mother center while here at home chaos reigns. I often envy my girlfriends whose moms always cook, wash clothes, clean up and take care of their kids. But usually those girlfriends envy me for the way my mom is. I often talk of "that stupid mother center", but I guess, deep down I know that it's really not all that stupid.

It's Good for My Whole Family

When you really want to work with and for other mothers in the mother center, you can't treat your life like a company employee would, and separate it into home and office, public and private. You have to keep the whole picture in mind. And you have to get your family, your kids, to the point where they can see the whole picture along with you. Otherwise you just can't do it. And it's not only about those situations where you get home late from the center and dinner won't be on time. It's a more fundamental change of thinking. I want to try and illustrate what I mean: When I get home from the mother center today, my kids are there and of course all I'm going to be is their mother. But still they aren't really my "kids" anymore, today they're more "people" to me; people with whom I can talk, about what I'm thinking and feeling. I don't only talk about the problems and experiences at the mother center but about all my thoughts and my whole effort at understanding. At first I was surprised that my kids were so open and interested in talking with me and in sharing their own problems and issues too, about their friends, their teachers, or others.

I've heard people tell me that I expect too much from my kids (they're between 13 and 17). But I don't believe that because I think they're already thinking a lot about the same topics I am thinking about, about relationships between people and about all the problems they're fraught with. After all this is something they'll have to deal with in their own lives. Many adults aren't able to understand or talk about these things because there was no open and honest conversation at home and so they never learned to think about and discuss behaviors and reactions and feelings and their meanings. For me raising my children and learning about relationships has become increasingly the same thing.

I know I have high expectations of my family but they and I, we think it's beautiful that we can talk about anything, whether about their problems or mine, whether about school or the mother center, and that we have developed a whole new understanding of each other. Because of this there is no more conflict for me between family and mother center, between my time with and for my kids and my time with and for the women in the center. It has become one in my mind and because of that it's not hard or

difficult anymore, although I really have a lot of work here in the center and at home with my three kids.

At the same time I got so involved in the center my husband entered a phase at work where he had incredibly much to do and was gone a lot. We both know that the other needs some moral support and this is something we're working on right now in our relationship. Yesterday for example my husband and I both really had a good time. I came home from the center, totally exhausted. He was exhausted as well, with his head full of stories about his work. So we sat on the balcony and had a beer together and first I told him about my day and then he told me about his. And afterwards we felt so good. That was so nice and those are the moments when I feel that it's great to have a relationship. There we are with our expectations and our insecurities and all the things we're dreaming of but aren't able to realize, and yet we also have this very real partnership going on between us. Yesterday even our kids seemed to pick up on the atmosphere and they left us alone to enjoy each other.



Supermarket Survey

When we went and asked people on the street for their opinion about the mother center the answers ran the gamut from "I don't have time to sit around there. It's okay for women who have lots of time, but I don't need a mother center," to "We always take care of our own problems, a mother center would not be any use to me."

The facial expressions went along with this attitude: mild, slightly disdainful smiles in reaction to my questions. I started to feel really uncertain. Somehow most of them had a totally wrong idea of what a mother center is.

At our next events, flea markets and bazaars, we will have to try and inform people better and make sure we tell them more about the actual work we do.

What's a real job?

I saw how my husband had to organize his life, strictly separating between work and family, and I just didn't want the same thing for myself. I wanted a job where I could combine the two, where work and family could run parallel, equally valuable courses and where I could use my experience as a mother. That's why I simply widened the range of my home job and began to include my immediate surroundings in my work. I began to become more politically aware and I got involved in my community, in the school, in municipal politics, in women's groups. I began to speak publicly for the interests of mothers.



In the mother center house- and family work becomes visible instead of taking place discreetly behind closed doors. It doesn't matter what is being done, whether it's ironing, or counseling, or negotiating with politicians about the funding for our center. Everything gets a different worth than if I was doing it at home, alone. They just can't overlook us or our work as easily anymore. Some women in the mother center don't like to talk of their activities and responsibilities as work, as a job. When I ask them what's the difference between work in the mother center and work in a "real job", they say, "Well, this is fun here!" Strange, that the idea of fun does not enter the concept of a "real job". My husband on the contrary is beginning to see that we are creating another kind of job world, a kind of work environment that includes taking care of the daily issues of life. He sometimes jokes and says we are post modern in our ideas and work culture, ahead of all the rest.

But even for those who still think traditionally, the mother centers are real stepping stones for "real jobs." We often are seen as keeping women out of the traditional labour market. The opposite is the case. Being confident in one's abilities is the major factor for reentering the work force. It's not so much about professional abilities, but more about simple self-confidence, communicative abilities, and social ease. This is what gets learned in the mother centers. We have noticed that mother center women tend to find jobs rather easily.

The Mother Center as a Gateway into the Public Sphere

In our society access to the public realm is managed through paid employment. The world of work to most people is where public communication takes place.

In the public sphere people behave with ritualized politeness or aggressive anonymity, but there is no real encounter or exchange taking place. People retreat into their private sphere in order to have real contact with other people they know.

The mother center is a place where women can practice and renew their dealings with the public realm outside of a work situation. It is a place for encounters of the unconventional kind, where the ability to deal with people from another culture, another class, with different lifestyles and ways of thinking, can develop.

"The work in the mother center is important in my family. It's like having a job. It's not the amount of money I'm earning there, but the possibility to become involved again in public life. That's what gets me the recognition of my family. And I'm able to take better care of myself when faced with their expectations and demands, because, after all, I'm out there too."

"In the beginning my husband had a problem with that kind of public life intruding on our family life, but it's really not all that bad. It helps him lose his inhibitions toward other people. He has the tendency to retreat a bit too much, even from the neighbors. He doesn't like it when I have friendly contact with the neighbors. The mother center has caused him to change a bit in that regard."

"In the mother center we have to get used to being visible to all and to have everybody looking at what we're doing and how we're doing it. In the beginning this made me very anxious but now I think it's good. You learn to be open for criticism and you can grow personally."

"In Germany children aren't supposed to be seen or heard in public. We're not willing to abide by those rules anymore. Recently a bus driver tried to refuse to let us enter the bus because we were six mothers and ten kids. Well, we gave him an earful!"

"In our part of town you have to count with us now. When they didn't take us seriously recently when we complained about the broken glass on the playground and that we couldn't let the kids play there anymore, all of us simply went to the responsible city office together. That was very effective!"

"Life in our part of town has changed. When you walk along the streets now you always meet someone you know. There is more neighborhood somehow now."

Out of the Mouth of Children

My son asked me, "Mommy, when are we going to the mother center again? I want to be around people."

VIII Education and Training



Friendship, Fights, and Fits of Laughter : Our Workshops

Seminars, trainings and workshops offer the mothers in the center an opportunity to learn more about themselves and others and strengthen the group feeling. The diversity of activities offered in the mother centers sometimes causes a problem with the flow of information.



At mother center workshops we can take the time to collect all extant problems, address them, and look for solutions together. These workshops and seminars have resulted in many constructive approaches to solve communication problems and ideas like the comments box, the bulletin board, the talent exchange, the mother center journal, the action committee, or the mother center newspaper, have been created there.

How to criticize constructively and without hurting someone's feelings? How to learn to voice uncomfortable feelings? How to deal with gossip? How to learn to accept our differences? How to deal with women we don't like? How to learn to evaluate and change our opinions, attitudes, and prejudices? How to integrate outsiders into our groups? These are some of the important questions and problems that we deal with in our seminars and workshops.

Women aren't always aware of their own competencies. It often takes a lot of patience and encouragement for them to learn to be conscious of their abilities and qualifications. In our seminars we see time and again the necessity to strengthen a woman's belief in her own competence.

One approach is to talk about the existing insecurities and uncertainties: how do I feel as the rookie in the mother center? What does the mother center mean to me? How do I feel about the activities I have taken responsibility for? What should be changed in the mother center? Is there anything keeping me from expressing my ideas and suggestions?

Women who are encouraged to act from their own competencies without the social reassurance and without the status of an accepted degree or diploma tend to feel a bit insecure, at least at first.. Mother center seminars and workshops give women an opportunity to learn to trust their abilities, to experience their own courage and to feel validated.



Mother center seminars are experiences that give mothers a boost, give them some energy back. For some the seminars are an opportunity to get more involved in the mother center project or to get to know themselves and the others better. The seminars boost motivation and morale, they build self confidence and they work to dismantle blockages in communication:

"It feels so incredibly wonderful now when I'm with the others. I remember when I was supposed to say something and my heart started to pound and I couldn't speak. But then I gathered all my courage and opened my mouth anyway. I stuttered, but it was okay. After two or three more days I loosened up some more. It's really great to participate in these workshops. It's so immensely good for my self esteem. To know that I can go to these seminars and that I actually have something to say."

"For me it was great to learn that I can stand being the center of attention. It has been very good for me to deal with questions about my own personality and to hear how others experience me. That's often very different from what I would have thought."

"After the seminar the conflicts that had developed increasingly in recent weeks didn't look quite so terrible anymore. It was so great that we could address our conflicts and problems."

"I am now less afraid of doing something by myself every now and then. I learned that I didn't have to hide and that the whole world is still open to me."

"For me it was just beautiful to have a big piece of unbroken time all to myself. To be able to leave my child at home and to see that both child and husband managed really well without me."

We have seen that the topics or techniques are not the most important. Primarily it's important to create a space and time for openness and sensitivity, for new experiences. To create a positive atmosphere where constructive ideas and suggestions can be developed and decided on. To make conditions conducive for this process is important.



We select conference sites where mothers and children can both feel comfortable, where there is a family-friendly and relaxed atmosphere. The setting should be beautiful. There must be caring and good customer service. It's also very important to have quality child care so that the mothers have peace of mind that their children are well taken care of and that they are free to participate in and enjoy the workshop. That takes experienced and enthusiastic child-care people because there tends to be great age-diversity among the children and child-care times can be unconventional, for example in the evenings. Relaxation through sauna or massages are a vital part of our seminars and workshops. The sensitivity in dealing with people, so necessary in mother center work, is best learned and practiced in a culture of mutual generosity, where we can allow ourselves and others room to feel good and where tolerance and generosity can grow.

To have time to oneself, to get served for a change, to relax, to find oneself again, to get reacquainted with the feeling of leisure, regenerates energy, curiosity, motivation, and courage to be open for new experiences.



They are important prerequisites to get out of our well-worn ruts of thinking and behaving. They give us a boost and the energy to become active, to get involved again. Often they are the same prerequisites needed to find the sources of one's own creativity. At these workshops and seminars, songs, theater plays, drawings, poems, posters, slogans, short stories, aphorisms, and more have been created. Many mothers have discovered unsuspected talents in themselves.

The willingness to address personal problems and fears, to clear up conflicts, to be receptive to criticism, develops most easily in a relaxed atmosphere. An atmosphere where a feeling of belonging together enables people to admit to their competitive feelings. An atmosphere where there is time for individual conversations, time to wait for the right moment. An atmosphere where we can be generous with each other, accept each other in our differences, instead of clinging pedantically to our own ideas of order or proper lifestyle or proper child-raising. An atmosphere where we can come up with constructive ideas instead of resorting to the same old nagging and grumbling. Such an atmosphere, such a space can only develop when mothers learn not to begrudge themselves or others things that feel good to them.

Most educational institutions and their seminars tend to be school-like and uninviting in their structure and atmosphere. They intimidate rather than motivate. The famous comfort that women create for their families at home and for each other in the mother center gives us a different qualitative standard that we try to realize in our mother center workshops



and seminars as well. We try to create a comfortable and caring atmosphere of hospitality where women can feel at home and relaxed.

When the seminar group can deal flexibly and calmly with kids sometimes having to be integrated into the adults' happenings and when mothers who came with their kids don't begrudge other mothers their temporary freedom, if they came without their kids, then much is won for a basic atmosphere in which learning is possible.



To have gone through such a positive experience together provides energy and strength and a feeling of connection that is projected into the daily life of the mother center even after the seminar. To feel taken seriously and to feel cared for adds a lot to the women's personal self esteem:

"That I got funded to go on this seminar, including food, and travel, and everything, that's so great. I feel really taken seriously, because someone has shown interest in me as a mother. You know, men get that all the time, business trips and business dinners and such, but that we women get to do something like that, it gives us a whole new boost of energy."

Conflict and dealing with conflict are time and again topics of our seminars. We work with the courage and the confidence to endure disagreements and to get through conflicts together.

There are quite a few techniques to deal with conflict and several solutions for conflict situations that can be practiced in workshops. There is asking for clarification instead of withdrawing in critical judgment, there's staying with one's own feelings instead of formulating accusations, there's active listening to the other person and trying to understand what she is saying, watching for signs of underlying feelings, watching the signs the body gives, etc. Dealing with existing conflicts in the presence of a mediating neutral party can also be very supportive. Time is a very important factor in all of this. It's vital that seminars and workshops offer generous amounts of time, in which to have quiet periods, or individual conversations, or just the opportunity to approach others.

In the seminars we experience each other in different circumstances, away from the daily grind, something that contributes to a melting down of barriers and communication blockages and adds to a better mutual understanding.

Our seminars help to translate the most important aspects of the mother center concept into daily practice. Active women are supported in their ongoing responsibilities and in conflict situations, and especially in the very complex detachment process, in which they have to learn to let go and to allow other mothers to become active in the center.

Exchange visits and internships among mother centers are a very important part of our peer learning program. These meetings offer advice, tips, and ideas for daily life in the centers. They offer as well the immensely comforting and validating experience that all mother centers go through similar types of conflicts and that it's all normal. And they show us again and again that we are not alone in our center, that there are many others out there with similar interests and issues.

Trainings on fundraising and public relations also play a key role. How do we hold a press conference? How do we publish and market a newsletter? How do we write funding and sponsoring applications and where do we send them? How do we represent the center and the mother center concept in public?

Minimum requirements of our trainings are:

- ❖ a family-friendly conference site in comfortable and relaxing surroundings
- ❖ enough highly motivated and well paid child-care personnel
- ❖ trainers who believe in the competencies of mothers and who are able to give them confidence in and awareness of their own abilities
- ❖ a financial budget that is large enough to allow for the subsidized participation of women who cannot afford to pay for the seminar themselves



IX From Idea to Project–How to Start a Mother Center



An Understanding Ear is Hard to Find

For three years we moved through the world of bureaucrats and funders to find a sponsor for our model "mother center". The process was as exciting as a mystery novel with its constantly new and challenging developments. Grassroots women on the one side and almost always exclusively male boards of directors on the other. There were understanding and sympathetic men at times, but those usually weren't the ones who made the financial decisions. It took a long and hard process of persuasion before we got to where our concept was finally recognized as worthy of funds and we were able to start the first three mother centers. And this although we had constantly been told how very important our idea was for mothers, what a sensible concept we had and how wonderfully moderate (or did they mean cheap?) the budget for our model was.



But in spite of all these verbal commendations we still ran up against a hard factual wall of distrust and skepticism. Money for mothers, to be paid directly into the mothers' hands, didn't that violate a deep societal taboo? What mothers do is supposed to be free, a work of pure love. What unforeseen and potentially disastrous thing is set in motion if mothers are given money and are allowed to autonomously decide how to use it?

Vast amounts of money are spent in professional social work despite the so-called crisis of the social welfare state. Many mothers manage every day to live competently and carefully with a very tight budget. The suspicion directed at the rather modest sums a mother center requires and at what mothers may do with this money, is totally out of sync with reality. But suspicion runs deep that mothers will misuse public funds, that they and their projects don't warrant public funds, that they aren't able to manage public funds wisely. One does not need any special insight, only a superficial knowledge of institutional functioning, a cursory look at the depiction of big organizations, to see that millions and billions of dollars in public funds under male management are flowing into obscure projects and channels and are lost. Construction scandals, corruption scandals, reports about unprofitable subsidies are in the newspapers every day.

But still we constantly came up against this deep suspicion about our idea of putting money in the able hands of mothers. There was the instance where a group of mother center women went shopping for furniture with the customer store card a public institution had given them to use. The cashier automatically assumed that they were using this card illegally and caused them a lot of embarrassment. People don't think that mothers are able to manage the funds of a mother center without professional supervision. Or they think that it isn't a good idea to let many women have the keys to a center. After all there needs to be a manager who has all the keys and who keeps a close eye on them and the women. There needs to be a professional to manage, direct, and control what mothers are doing in the mother center!

This call for a professional expert is in direct opposition to the fact that professional social work has been shown to be beset by a lot of problems of its own. It also doesn't impress anyone as being

successful in reaching or working closely with clients. Often the professional experts sent to work in new projects are novices in their profession. They have just finished college, they tend to be very inexperienced and sometimes even terrified and anything but calm and friendly when it comes to communicating with real people. But still they are accorded trust and respect merely because they have a diploma and a degree. We, who have gained expertise in practical daily life, really don't have a lot of reason to trust in professionals. But the myth of the all-knowing professional expert just won't go away.

One example to illustrate the contradiction between this myth and reality. A large welfare organisation took on the project of initiating a mother center in classic professional institutional manner: First two young and child-less professional novices, a psychologist and a social worker, were hired. One was made manager of the project. Then mothers were hired as "helpers", with their pay and responsibilities being on a much lower level than those of the professionals. For one whole year the entire work done consisted of creating the ideal "team". During this time the establishment could only be entered through the back door and no one in the neighborhood was alerted or invited and no one came by anyway.

The team was busy furnishing its office and one of its first actions was to install a sound-proof door to shield the office against any noise from the children's area. Then rules were set up: Children could only be brought along on certain days and the helpers could only work those times when their children were not present in the center. The establishment was only to open during certain hours. People who arrived before that time had to wait in front of locked doors. It is easy to imagine how different the atmosphere of such a project is from the atmosphere of a project managed by the mothers themselves. In self initiated mother centers the women have hardly opened the doors to start renovating and furnishing the rooms when an endless stream of mothers and children starts pouring in and empty strollers are covering the road in front of the building.

We finally got lucky at the end of this long battle with traditional associations and professional organizations. We found supporting institutions who believed in the expertise of grassroots because they had already made their own positive experiences with them,

so they were ready to trust in our concept. Unfortunately such institutions are still the exception and not the rule. The needs of women with children, who cannot commit to rigid schedules and structures because of their daily dealings with sick children, school problems, housing difficulties, or financial dilemmas seldom find a place within the formal structures of big associations and institutions, even those of established women's organizations.



Looking for Funding and a Roof Over Our Heads

To say it right up front: it will take you at least a year, often even two. And every mother brave enough to actually try and start a mother center will feel like the main character in an adventure movie.

It takes a lot of strength and energy to create and launch a mother center. It's best if it's done by a small group of women who already know each other, who know a little about each others talents, strengths and weaknesses, and who know what they're about to do together. This way they can support each other through the tough spots and give each other strength and courage.

Mother center founders have to be courageous, because, despite the group, there will be times when they will have to manage the project's development all by themselves for some reason or other. If you have experience working with groups you will know that the group is often an incredible source of power and help for each of its members. And yet, in other situations the group may become so noncommittal and vague that you will feel left all alone with the decisions and with what needs to be done. If you have the courage to take on the responsibility by yourself for the short period of time it usually takes, you'll find out that the group will come together again and be strong and that everyone will have fun again. It's most important that you trust in your own personal strength and power. As a mother you don't need experts to make a mother center. Don't let anyone tell you different! But you will need partners and allies, because it cannot be done alone.

Here are some fundamental laws for the creation and launching of mother centers:

I. Law: Thou wilt need to form a group of organizers

Your most important allies will of course be other enthusiastic, energetic, and irrepressible mothers. How to find them? Talk to friends, neighbors, the grocer. Put ads and articles in local newspapers. Put out notices at the pediatrician's office, the day care center, the library, the supermarket.

It's also important to be aware that those meetings that are at first so nice and warm and cozy will be over soon, because the first steps toward real action will be accompanied



by stress, which will be carried into the group and cause a lot of arguments, conflicts, and fights, as well as heartwarming reconciliations, of course. Mother center founders, welded in this kind of fire, will by now have gotten to really know each other; they will be aware of each others' strengths and weaknesses and should be able to put these different tales to use with real female intelligence. One mother has the talent to be a great mobilizer, while the other may be really good at organizing dates, appointments, reminders, papers and files. The third is great at wrapping important persons around her little finger, and the fourth has the gift to always be able to mediate among the others. The most important prerequisites for making your group of founders a powerful and convincing municipal mother center action group are now in place.

Proven Qualities

A mother center initiator needs social competencies, especially the ability to approach and communicate with people. She has to exude personal warmth while being able to endure criticism and nagging, because many important processes of group dynamics will revolve around her as a person. A mother center initiator has to show personal courage as well as the serenity and confidence that demonstrate that conflicts can be dealt with, even if things take a long time or may look hopeless at times. This is really intensive relationship work and it is done to help develop the social competencies of other mothers too.

As we have seen from our own experiences it takes two to three years until new mother center experts with these abilities grow out of the ranks. Important are exchanges and trainings, where they can swap experiences and where they can go to get new energy. Exchange visits between mother centers, where initiators can simply talk to people who've "been there" themselves, are highly important to the work in the center.

II. Law: Thou wilt need a place to meet in

Since most of us don't have living rooms set up for group gatherings with children, and because very few husbands are likely to enjoy hearing a bunch of women having nightly debates while they're trying to watch TV, the next step is to secure rooms for your group to meet in. You can try at the community center, at the adult evening school, or in the back room of the local pub, wherever your group can meet relatively undisturbed and without time limits. Presupposing that your husband or significant other is interested in the idea that you want to start a mother center in the area, you should also sit down with him and talk about who will watch the kids. It's practical if your kids are already a little older, but maybe you can negotiate that he can take care of his kids some evenings or Saturdays and maybe a babysitter could be hired at other times. Starting a mother center means a lot of hard work. It also brings new life into the family and changes the habitual view of mothers as self-chained to the kitchen stove, always ready, able and willing to take care of everybody else. This

may be a sensitive point and it is good to plan for this one early and carefully.

Speaking of the necessary meeting room gives us an important cue: mothers and housewives in our country have almost no public or communal social rooms of their own. Fortunately mother center action groups and grassroots groups are becoming more and more common, but they still have to use all their charm and cunning to finagle themselves into some room or other. These rooms belong to other established people or institutions with luck or the necessary connections and the mothers are more or less graciously "allowed" to use them.

Somehow these rooms always seem to belong to some gentlemen from the churches, from the big youth associations, from the sports clubs, from the big association XYZ. They may even have women working there, as social workers, as secretaries or such, who manage both the rooms and the activities taking place in the rooms.

Here, as a smart mother center founder, you need to pay attention. Among these women there are many single working parents, as well as older women whose kids are grown and who react to the concept of the mother center, by saying wistful things like, "Oh goodness, I wish we had had something like this when I was younger!" And sometimes there may even be young and childless female professionals with sensitivity towards their own mothers, who don't immediately try to patronize mothers and make them into their clients. Such professionals can be important and highly effective allies of a mother center action group because they know a bit more than we do about the territory of the big institutions.

III. Law: If Thou wantest rooms and money, Thou wilt have to gather information and make allies among city adminis- trators and municipal politicians

Those interim rooms in the church or youth center become too small almost immediately. The times that the room can be used are too short or too inconvenient, the space is not sufficient, and the constant need to clean up everything after each meeting is driving you nuts. You need your own rooms. But where to find them and how to pay for them?

Now the time has come to brave the administrative and political jungle. But how do you find the right way through it?

It is helpful to invite interested female professionals, for example equal opportunity commissioners, politicians, or social workers, along on the journey. These women tend to know a lot about the structures of the local administration in the community, the city, or the state. They know which departments would be in charge of mother centers, where there might be special programs with special funding pots left, and what's the current trend in social



and women's politics. These women often also know the right people in the offices, the ministries, those who would be responsible for your funding proposals.

It is also helpful and indeed essential to have a good look at municipal politics. Which parties are standing for what concepts? Who's responsible for what department and interests? Where might there be potential allies among the parties or factions?

One last vital point: See if any of your group already have some connections to some political or administrative people, who could be sounded out beforehand, and who might be willing and interested in helping, for example with writing the proposals.

IV. Law: Thou shalt have a legal governing body for your action group

There are plenty of books on the market dealing with how to form a private registered non-profit association. You can also turn to a lawyer or notary for advice. For this you should scout other associations and action groups for referrals to find lawyers that are willing to work for less if it's for a good cause as well as lawyers with experience in association law.

The Private Non-Profit Association

Advantages: Your group retains its independence and doesn't have to follow anyone else's rules.

Disadvantages: the law stipulates that a non-profit association needs an elected governing body, a board of directors. This could impose a hierarchical structure for your mother center that may not be wanted by you or make sense for what you want to do. Additionally association codes and laws can be rather heavy-handed and inflexible and may not work well with the flexible ways of working of most mother center groups.



Extra-Tip: You might want to create an association but choose to throw dice every year for whoever takes a turn at being on the board of directors instead of having formal elections. This complies to the requirements of association law yet also maintains the collective responsibility and team work that are such integral parts of the mother center concept.

Host Institutions

The alternative is to look for a supporting institution that is already a registered non-profit organization. The large welfare associations tend to manage an incredibly diverse spectrum of charitable social projects and sub-organizations. They tend to be part of the churches, unions, or other large and powerful interest groups.

What are the advantages of being part of a larger institution? To create and launch a mother center means taking care of quite a few legal tasks such as renting rooms, employing mothers in the center. It can be difficult for a single woman or even two or three to take on such responsibilities alone.

Governmental departments providing funding like to see the money go into familiar, legal, and transparent channels. City administrations also like to deal with experienced institutions with a proven track record, who know their way around the administrative world and who possess the necessary administrative staff to deal routinely with applications, grants, and financial statements. They like it because it makes life easier for them.

But in addition to all that the granting of public funds tends to be a very political issue. Grant proposals are debated in various bodies of municipal government before they even stand a chance of appearing on the agenda of the budget debates where decisions are made on what the city will spend money on this year and how much, which program or project will be subsidized and which will lose funding. In order to get in line for public funding you need a lobby that can get your application into those initial debates and can ensure that they will receive the necessary positive attention.

You need this kind of lobby also to deal with politicians and city offices as well as with the other big welfare organizations with their multitude of smaller sub-organizations.

It is really secondary whether your mother center group founds its own private association and approaches public sponsors directly, whether it seeks attachment to a host association, or whether it plans to become a project of one of the large welfare organizations. A thorough study of the local conditions and situation will always be necessary. It should always be your most important goal to remain as autonomous as possible. And with any plans of joining a larger organization, it should always be important to pay close attention and find out to what extent you will be able to realize the mother center idea in its true form under the wing of the particular organization.

Equally important is the financial aspect of your considerations. Usually welfare organizations demand member contributions. Before you pay a large contribution of several hundred dollars, you should take care to find out what you get for your money. Some organizations will pay for training seminars and that would be worth it. But it's still important to have a good look before committing yourselves.

Most mother centers today are private, registered, non-profit associations. A minority of centers, have additionally joined one of the large welfare organizations.

V. Law: Thou shalt have a good concept

For discussions and negotiations with administrators and politicians it's important to be able to illustrate and explain what a mother center is and why it's so important for this community, this city. However, we all know that not all mothers were born gifted speakers. That's why it's helpful and also fun to prepare for and practice these situations beforehand. And because pain shared is also pain divided it is recommended to portion the whole concept into several individual points to be presented by several different women. In addition you will need a written concept of your mother center idea that can be sent to the people in question beforehand or handed to them in conclusion of your meetings.

The title of such a concept should contain the word "Mother Center" and the subtitle should read something like this: "A Concept of How Mothers in the Community Can Help Each Other". Or "A Concept for Engendering Local Governance". These are just examples and not meant to stifle your own creativity. The main thing in the end is that you've managed to pack your most important message into the title and the first paragraph of your text.

In the following paragraphs you can sketch out the problems of mothers in more detail; those problems that led you to become involved and do something and that led you to become convinced of the idea of the mother center. Feel free to add comments about how the mother center idea has already been realized in several other cities. This may help to implant a little kernel of faith in your idea in the minds of the administrators reading your concept. Because usually the idea of something brand new and untried evokes only a picture of more work on their desks.

Do not mention any money amounts in your concept, only those general items that are inextricably linked to the idea of a mother center, a center by and for mothers. This includes fees that you want to pay your active mothers. You will have to be able to explain why you don't want a totally unpaid-volunteer structure and why you don't want professional women as employees of the mother center either.

Keep your concept brief and neat, don't forget to include your address and telephone number! Writing this concept has the beneficial side effect that you get to clear up all the questions in your own mind and that you can work out some formulations to be used later in meetings and discussions.

After all this you're maybe starting to realize why it takes such a long time for a mother center to really get going. It doesn't really matter how you do it. If you found your own association, if you're negotiating with a supporting organization, or if you're already at the stage of negotiating about funding from the city or the state. Each of the inevitable talks and meetings and appointments will be followed by weeks and sometimes even months when nothing happens. And if you get caught in summer vacation time, all proceedings will completely stall anyway, and time will seem to stand still while you're chewing your fingernails in frustration. It is best to get your proposals in place within the first three months of the year and maybe even be able to start negotiations. This way you stand a chance that your project will be taken under serious

consideration in the political debates of late summer and fall and – if everything goes as planned – be ushered into the crucial budget debates in late fall or early winter. If everything then continues to go well you may receive a positive decision about your mother center in time for Christmas. We wish you good luck, lots of enthusiasm, and loads of patience!

Last but not Least

Law: Thou shalt continue to build partnerships

When everything has gone well, remember to go and thank your allies and partners! They will remember this when your next proposal lands on their table and they will hopefully remember that your kind of project is not only a lot of extra work but also a lot of fun.



Fundraising

Unfortunately there is neither a patent recipe for getting funds nor an exact roadmap to follow through the fundraising and sponsoring jungle. Practices, procedures, and policies in the individual states, cities, and communities are simply too diverse for one source to be able to give out generally valid and accurate information. Generally it can be said that getting money depends on a good nose for opportunities, lots of creativity, imagination, and flexibility, a smidgen of megalomania, a dash of impudence and heaps of luck. Most importantly you should free yourself of any hindering modesty. The constant question among women, “Do we really deserve this?”, is a bad starting point for any fundraising effort. You need to get it straight in your own minds how women already do so many things for free, out of love for humanity apparently. Organizations comparable to a mother center, like professional institutional parent counseling offices, demand so much more money than you ever dreamed of asking for. They demand this as a matter of course - and they get it. So we have every right to demand our share. We are not only allowed to but we are obliged to ask for a fair return for our work in the mother center.



Tips and Tricks

in Dealing with Sponsors and People with Money

Highest Rule: You must be convinced that your demand is justified and you must know exactly what you want!

Plus:

1. Know what's going on in local politics, read your local newspapers front to back and talk to people in the community to find out what they're thinking.
2. Follow "big politics" at least to a point where you know the major national trends and how they could work for you.
3. Get familiar with the hierarchies in your administrations and government offices, but don't let yourself be impressed or intimidated by them. If possible, don't start negotiating at the bottom. Those who sit a little higher are also the ones who make the decisions.
4. Watch the manners of the people you are dealing with and translate their language, culture and behavior.
5. Feel or at least appear totally confident. Avoid uncertainties unless they're part of your tactics. Slight eccentricity or a dash of arrogance can be tactical but their success depends on a deft hand.
6. Personal connections are good.
7. A slight stubborn streak and the courage to be a little annoying can be very helpful.
8. Use team work; divide the tasks according to ability and interests. There are always those able and willing to take care of the details and those who can see and work with the big picture. Both are equally important.
9. Extra-Tip:
I always picture intimidating men in long underpants.

It has to be said

We're always sitting between the chairs – who is there for us mothers?

Mothers in our country have no real lobby, we are homeless, politically speaking. Some politicians like to appear supportive of mothers and families but when it comes to concrete sums of money for mothers' projects, all they want to talk about is unpaid volunteerism. Others are only interested in professional education of women. Still others see only the needs and interests of working mothers and a household is somehow not a workplace to them. And then there are those who are interested in women's needs and rights but not in those of mothers. Those who are on our side are usually not the ones who have any money to give. Who are we supposed to turn to? We'd like to see some hands here!

X. Where Do Mother Centers Stand Today?



If you wish to build a ship,
Then don't call together the people,
To gather the wood, to dole out the tasks,
And to divide the work at hand,
but teach the people the longing
For the wide, endless ocean.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Mother centers today are home to a wide diversity of families – from single parents to step-families to extended families – as well as to all the different stages of the family life span – from mothers with newborns, toddlers, or school kids, to those with teenagers still at home or whose kids are already grown and gone, and of course, grandmothers. They all feel at home in the animated atmosphere of the mother center, where they take advantage of a wide range of programs or use the drop in café. Because they feel so at home in the center many women also find it easier to dare to have another child.

From the coffee table to community services

Participating in the mother center usually results in diverse personal and social contacts, as well as an increase in general information. Even an occasional visitor in the center will come across all kinds of important information for families, like local doctors and clinics, kindergartens and schools, women's activities, educational or cultural programs, literature, and the local political situation. In addition, there is a wide range of programs and services in the mother centers, mirroring the range of abilities and interests of the women there. The daily community lunch table has become more and more popular over time. Center mothers shop and cook economical and wholesome lunches for families, women, and children. In some centers it's a form of welcome for new active mothers, they get free lunch for a whole week. The changing needs as children grow older make for an ever increasing demand for quality child care.



Through the initiative of mothers a whole spectrum of child care programs has been developed. There is the simple drop-in-type care during opening times, meetings, and courses. There are also mini- clubs for babies and toddlers, pre-school groups, and even full-time or part-time day care. These are some of the regular child care programs offered by mother centers and used not only by center mothers, but also by parents from the neighborhood. In addition there are many other forms of child care such as play groups with or without parents, baby groups, hourly child care when parents need to run errands or go to the doctor, there are emergency child-care, and of course the breastfeeding groups. When I talked with mother center women at the National congress they also mentioned a diverse program of special activities like vacation programs for kids of all ages, arts & crafts programs, child gymnastics, and child care during special events held by other organizations. While the kids of the first and second generation mother center women came of age, the demands for child care programs grew towards after-school care, school kids' clubs, or leisure activities for older kids and teenagers. These activities are meant to address both the needs of the children and the desire to improve the living-together of the generations. Other services were developed mainly to make life easier for mothers: driving kids from and to school and to after-school activities, shopping services, hair dressing with child care, sewing, ironing, and mending services, or bicycle repair. R&R for moms is offered also in the form of health and wellness activities such as massages or cosmetic treatments, meditation, aerobic courses, belly dance, yoga etc.

Many mother center women are interested in groups about women's issues or politics, as well as in opportunities for continuing education. Mothers with babies and toddlers tend to simply seek respite and support, especially since many of them have given up their jobs to be at home with their family. In this situation they look for the possibility for exchange with other mothers, which leads to more personal contacts and friendships, as well as common activities, outside of the center. Through communication with other mothers they see that most of their experiences and problems with their kids or their relationships are not in the least unusual and they find support in this simple sharing of experiences. Women with older kids tend to look more for opportunities to get additional education or professional qualification, or to re-connect with the professional world. Trainings such as language or computer courses, as well as competencies learned by working in the mother center, such as office organization, or the organization and management of events and activities, give many mothers a professional leg for their reentry into the workplace. Some also become small business entrepreneurs with their own ideas, sometimes with and sometimes without the help of the center. The mother centers offer diverse possibilities to build a professional existence based on family and community work experience and to create for themselves the life they want now and for the future.

From community service to involvement in municipal politics

Women who stay actively involved in the mother center for a period of time tend to start to extend their interests to improving the life and environment of families in general, by getting involved in local, environmental and municipal politics. They start out organizing activities, representing mother center interests towards local administrative and political officials, they advertise and do public relations work for the mother center, they work with the media, they learn to speak publicly. All this increases their self confidence and their desire to be a part of bringing about societal change. The topics may include traffic safety of children, the status of public playgrounds, the lack of diaper changing or breastfeeding rooms in public places and stores, the opening of school yards after hours for the neighborhood or the general lack of adequate public child care in the community. All these and more are areas where mother center women feel a personal interest and where they go into public and attempt to influence municipal politics. Their interest in social change also expresses themselves in work towards more tolerance and integration of groups like immigrants, new arrivals in the neighborhood, or people and kids with special needs. Mother centers, through the broad spectrum of their programs and their diverse activities, are becoming more and more a center of political interest for mothers, women, families, and, increasingly, senior citizens. As such, they are beginning to be reckoned with as a political factor by politicians and administrators. Within the past 20 years mother centers have developed from the comparatively simple concept of a place of communication for mothers and children to an innovative and forceful political player, while still offering a spectrum of programs and activities as diverse as their membership, along with communication, personal support, and the opportunity to rediscover oneself personally and professionally. And all with the constant assurance that kids are always welcome.

Many of the first mother centers have grown into several story buildings.. What was once a small seedling has become a wonderful plant, flowering in constantly new blossoms.

In some centers some thousand young and old people are cared for, with up to 80 employees and a million-dollar budget that is juggled under the management of grassroots women with a democratic style of leadership. The centers, despite enormous expansion in some cases, remain faithful to the mother center concept of selfhelp and grassroots leadership.

The activities of these centers can include full- or part-time care for children from one to twelve, whose flexible hours are based on the actual needs of the parents, an after school club, programs for the professional re-orientation and re-integration of women who want to return to the work force, as well as neighborhood services that include lunch in-house or "on wheels", mending services, a janitor service, outpatient or in-house nursing care for seniors, and counseling services. Some of the space can be devoted to trainings and seminars, complete with guest accommodations, that are also used for vacation programs for mothers with children. The mother centers are also home to several



independent small businesses like a cosmetic studio or a computer graphics office.

A plant will grow and flourish if it is rooted securely and it has access to a nurturing source of energy. The mother center concept is the most important root. People in the mother center learn everyday anew that a functioning community of people depends on mutual give and take, on honest dealing with conflicts, and on everyone's willingness to change and grow personally. Constant reflection on interactions and continuing education are also a source of energy and continual renewal.

From taking responsibility for the daily life in the mother centers to claiming a say in the community on issues regarding families, women, children, and senior citizens is only a small step. In this way the mother centers are not only social service organizations, educational institutions and intergenerational meeting places, but also manufacturers of involvement in local governance.



From mother child groups to childcare for all situations

Children of all ages are part of mother centers. There are babies, toddlers, school kids, and budding teenagers. In the center the children meet other children of all ages, they meet other moms, child-care staff, the senior citizens. They can play, read, eat, relax, meet their friends, or do homework. Different than in most traditional child care institutions there is no obligation for the kids to be there, there are no age-homogenous groups and activities and no pre-set play times. The

children can leave when they don't feel like joining in the play and look for another activity they might want to join somewhere else in the center, or join their favorite grandmother. The children, even the real small ones, roam easily throughout the whole center. Everybody in the center watches out and feels responsible for them, they are welcome and cared for everywhere. Their mothers can do something for themselves without constantly having their little ones hang on their laps.

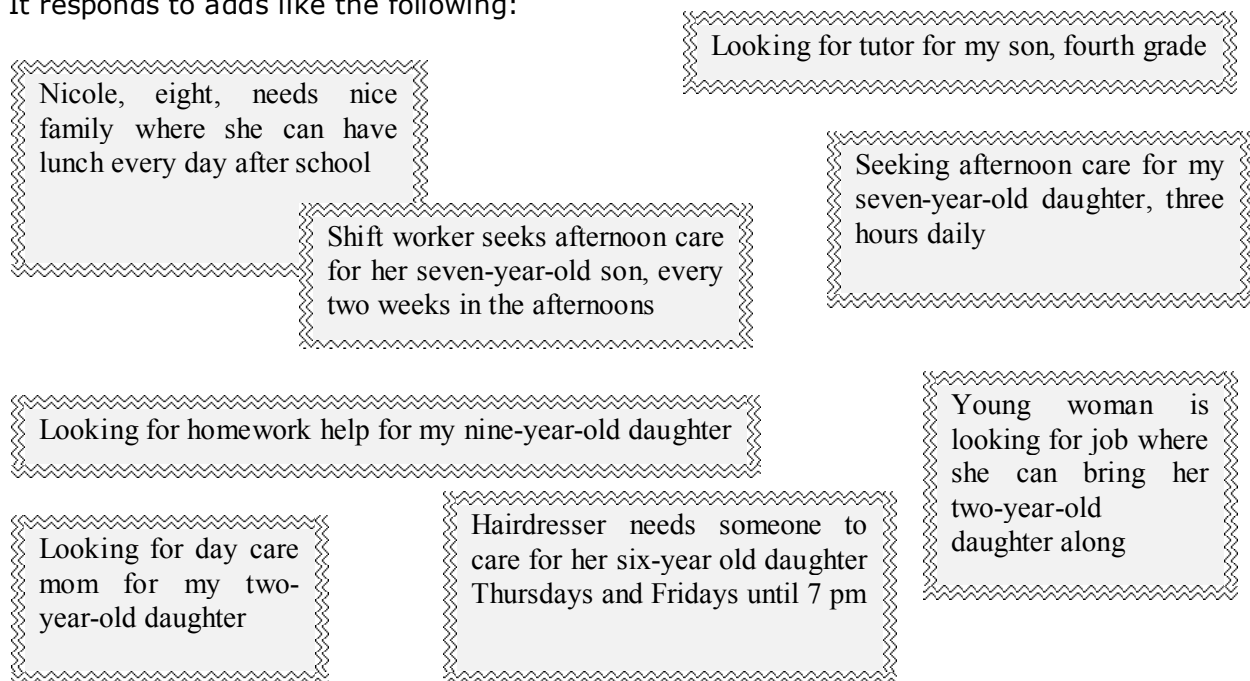


Mother center childcare is very different in its transparency and its openness, its high degree of flexibility, its groups spanning several age levels, additional services offered such as pick up services for children (from and to school or to after-school events) or household services for mothers. Also there is an emphasis on equal partnerships between professional staff and mothers, and close contact is held with the community.

The whole child-care program is open to adults. Parents and mothers are seen as partners who are always welcome to become involved, not only at specially set-up opportunities like parent's night. They are welcome to participate in the children's lunches and in all the other activities with the children just as all other people from the community are welcome to participate and get involved.

Childcare in the Mothers Centers address diverse needs.

It responds to adds like the following:



Child care in the afternoons, evenings, at irregular times, homework support, lunch for school children, jobs where there is room for children, all this is hard to find for women, especially if they don't have the necessary financial means to pay someone privately for it.

Fathers who feel responsible for their share of child-care are still in the minority. Of the parents who take paid child-care leave, 99% are mothers. Most families do not possess a grandma who is able or willing to take care of her grandchildren around the clock.

Governmental, church, and private child-care institutions have as yet shown little consideration for the variety of living and working models of mothers. Traditional kindergartens are open for two to three hours in the mornings or afternoons and close at noon and quality day care places are needed everywhere. Employers' day-care programs with flexible hours are very rare.

Where does this leave us mothers? With latchkey kids who are home alone (or God knows where) in the afternoons. With more guilt for working mothers. With stress in the evenings for both children and mothers, when everything has to be done at once: homework, housework, dinner, and maybe some quality time with children and/or partner.

The mother center child-care programs offer alternatives: Child-care before school, after school, all day long, lunch tables for school kids, help with homework, games and activities in the afternoons, and pick up services for after-school activities.

The mother center concept of child-care has begun to influence and change the way traditional institutions run their programs. They have started to open themselves to the community, to the involvement of parents as equal partners in child-care, and they are establishing contact with mothers' groups.

From self help to partnering with professionals

It looked like our childcare program would have to close because of lack of funds. But after long discussions and tough negotiations the city agreed to help fund it and we could keep it open. However, it was very difficult to keep our concept of everyday life experts vis a vis our new sponsors. In my new job contract there suddenly appeared the word "assistance in the care of school children". I felt intimidated by the newly hired professional teachers. How were things going to go on, with me, with the kids, with the program? The first months were marked by mutual suspicion and criticism. It was hard for me to accept the new, differently qualified women, and it was just as hard for them, the professionals, to learn to take me seriously, a woman without a traditional education, but who had practical experience and knowledge through my work in the mother center and the creation of the childcare program.

The cooperation between professional specialists and everyday life experts has been going on in the mother centers for many years and in many different areas. This cooperation is not always easy, both sides have to learn a lot. These rules have proved helpful for us: we give each everyday life expert three years' learning time until she is able to function professionally in her area. We give professionals the same amount of learning time to really understand and realize the mother center concept as a basis for their work in the center.

That we insist on this sometimes difficult learning process is an expression of mother center culture. We bring together our different competencies to create a new type of institutional care for children. We join the practical knowledge of mothers gained from actual living with children with the theoretical knowledge of professionals, gained from psychological and social science and research.

An example:

It is part of the daily life of a childcare institution that new children are integrated into the group. Their mothers can feel apprehensive about this in the beginning, so can the children. Both are sad, both are anxious. The children express their pain and apprehension noisily, their mothers in a more restrained fashion, if at all. What reaction does this situation

elicit from our professionals and everyday life experts? The everyday life expert, a mother herself, approaches the mother as another mother, she can talk from her own experience, she has been through the same situation, she can share how she felt, when she was told by the teacher to just relax and leave, that her child would be just fine shortly. The everyday life expert is often closer to the real problem. She can take the other woman's sadness and apprehension seriously, she can encourage her to acknowledge these feelings and allow them room, to talk



about them. The professional teacher, even if she has kids of her own and has gone through similar situations, tends to use other resources and strategies, the theoretical pedagogical concepts she has been taught. For her the picture of the clinging mother who just can't let go can dominate and she will think about how to solve that problem. She is often farther away from the emotional issue at hand.

These different approaches aren't based only on the different resources of professional and everyday life experts. They are an expression of a different picture of parents and of parenting in the minds of the everyday life expert, the mother center woman, and the professional. A picture not only focused on the children, but including also the needs of the mothers, the parents. Giving mothers in the center the opportunity to speak about their emotions and ambiguities and helping them to accept pain as a valuable part of their lives, is also good for the children because it enables the mothers to let go more easily and not to cling in unacknowledged sorrow.

"Last week, I had to take care of a group of six kids between one and ten. At first I was scared, but then I thought that mothers with six kids are in that same situation every single day. This motivated me and so we ended up baking cookies and playing together very peacefully. It was a wonderful afternoon, for me and for the kids."

The experienced mothers in our mixed teams demonstrate the extended-family concept in our child-care program. They guarantee that the daily life of families is made part of the pedagogical concept.

"Washing, ironing, shopping, cooking together are fundamental parts of our work with the children. If we had to drop something from our program we'd rather drop those pedagogically crafted chickens around Easter time."

When no one has done the dishes there are no more clean dishes and people can't eat lunch. We try to relate to the kids the particulars of daily life for them to learn to understand such logical chains of cause and effect and to learn to become responsible. We aim to deliberately incorporate situations of daily life into our childcare program. Children learn from real life, from modeling, copying, and participating. We think it's just as important that a child learns to wash a plate at the right time as it is important for the child to learn reading and writing at the right time. We don't want to teach the kids to adopt certain behaviors in preparation for school, like sitting still or being able to read and write a few words already. We all love to bake. Not only because we all, kids and adults, like to eat cake and cookies, but also because working with the hands, the kneading and spreading and shaping are important for the development of the children.. What we want is to give them tools to deal with the stages of their life and development in which they are at the moment. Then they have a basis from which they can go on to the next stage and on to the whole world.

Daily life in the kids' house is shaped in the way it would be shaped by families, by mothers with children. Of course, we have the advantage that we don't have all the other tasks and duties of

mothers. We have more time and peace and can give the kids all our time and attention.

With our "mixed teams" we have developed our work with parents, from the inside out. Our experiences in self help have taught us that some things cannot be organized from the outside. For instance, you can not train or "force" traditional child-care institutions to adopt a different image of parents. That can only come from inside, from their own needs, from self-experience and self-awareness and from interactions with the parents.

Parents as Partners

To say it right up front: the motto "parents as partners" doesn't mean to use them as cheap labor to be brought in for things we can't or don't want to do ourselves. It doesn't mean inviting them for a pottery session or for an arts and crafts evening or for a lecture on raising kids. It doesn't mean giving them a room or a corner where they can hang out and talk and it also doesn't mean talking down to them with the more or less avowed agenda of helping them clean up some of their deficits as parents. What it does mean is that we want to develop an equal relationship with the parents – which isn't always easy or even successful.

How can an equal relationship between child-care staff and parents develop? One important precondition is that the childcare workers in our mixed teams take themselves seriously, that they don't leave their own feelings out of their work. They don't have to pretend to feel great every single day, they don't have to smile or be fit or pleasant all the time. Possibilities for partnership develop where people experience their true mutual strengths and weaknesses. Conversations against this background have a whole different quality.

"When the mother came to pick up her child I could tell that there was something on her mind. But I was under such pressure myself that day, that I wasn't able to approach her. The next morning when I talked to her about it, I told her about my situation and we then had a good conversation about her problems. "

An equal relationship between parents and workers is possible in our case also because everyone can pick who they want or like to talk to and a personal relationship can freely develop – in both directions.

In our childcare center we don't have a boss or a manager. We chose this way of doing things because we wanted to get away from the traditional way of doing business in which the manager is the only person with real contacts with the parents. In the center all of our workers are competent and responsible and open to be approached by parents.

An equal relationship is also the result of the involvement of the parents in the daily life of their children. Parents are always welcome to come in announced or unannounced while we still retain the right to close a group for a certain period of time from outside contact.



This kind of relationship doesn't fit the experience of most parents for whom it is new and strange that they are suddenly seen as equals in the professional care and education of their children. Parents need time to get used to this concept before they are able to bring in their competencies and their authority. The workers in turn have to learn to accept the opinions of the parents.

" A mother came with her eighteen month old to look at our institution before deciding on a day care spot for her daughter. She came at 10 am when it's busiest here. She found a spot in the common room and watched her child and what was going on around her. One worker was in the kitchen with two kids and the rest of the kids were playing happily. One of our little ones had to be changed so I took him to the bathroom and left this mother in charge for the moment. One of the children was thirsty and served himself some water which resulted in a spilled puddle of water on the table. Other kids came and poured more water on the table and splashed it around with their hands. The water ended up on the floor and that mother just sat there the whole time watching without doing anything. When I came back I was shocked that she had simply watched the whole thing. I got the kids to clean up the mess before they went back to playing. The mother then stated that since kids were left without any supervision here, this might not be a good place for her daughter after all. And she left without giving anyone the chance to talk to her."

How the regular and spontaneous participation of parents builds good relationships in the child-care is evident from the furnishing. Platforms, tables, and pergolas have been built by workers, children, parents and teachers together and by students of a neighboring school. During the renovations, the house remained open and mothers took care of the kids, cooked or helped build furniture. What we gain from this common action in identification of everyone involved is immeasurable.

Childcare by Everyday Life Experts

What's my topic again? I stare at the paper and while the lines blur before my eyes, a little girl appears on the paper. Myself, three or four years old, in a plaid dress with a starched pinafore, hair in a tidy ponytail, my lunch bag hanging snappily from one shoulder. But what is that? My hand is imprisoned in that of an old nun who will take me across the busy street. A reproving look from her and for some reason my cute little lunch bag has to go back to where it belongs according to some mysterious rule: around my neck and in front of my round little tummy. I think it's totally uncool and I hate to have to walk home like this but I don't dare to defy the teacher.

Did I enjoy the rest of my first or second year in kindergarten? The doors and the gate to the street were always locked, which gave me a constant yearning and desire to run away. The walk to the bathroom was a scheduled group event and woe to the child who didn't want to participate in the circle activities or singing.



My poor mother was very embarrassed and although she had never heard of things like personal identity development she did mumble something about not breaking children's backbones and she was thus way ahead of her time. Unfortunately the aunties, Gertrude and Hilda and whatever their names were, believed that kids with unbroken spirits were nothing but trouble. I'm not angry at them for it, because in those days the raising and teaching of children was simply accepted to be a matter of intimidation and blind obedience.

Looking back again, I see myself as a young mother whose child also refused to participate in those same old stupid games. But sweetie, please only turn your arm one time and act like a little flag, otherwise you won't be allowed to stay here and then you'll have to stay at home with mommie all day and all the other kids will get to go to this wonderful kindergarten. And here you'll be learning something for school, and for life, and you want to become a famous physicist later on, don't you, pumpkin? Oh how well I had forgotten, how my youngest child, that child, simply refused to make Easter bunnies in class. I was asked to come to speak with the kindergarten director. Maybe tomorrow or the day after, but today the child just didn't want to do arts and crafts. And this child also never finished her plate at lunch in the kindergarten. On a ship that would be called mutiny. To the great chagrin of her older sister, who would have been happy to finish the younger's portions, both kids were excluded from lunch. They were called maladjusted and such children were simply not welcome.

Rarely did we manage to get to kindergarten before 9 am (I know everybody out there is already picturing my easy life as a housewife again, while I remember six people in one bathroom and breakfast still to be cooked). Still today my heart remembers the shock of standing in front of locked doors, the kids and I, and of having to ring the bell and wait humbly for it to be opened for us and of feeling angry inside about the need for offering an excuse and the patronizing way with which I and my kids were treated. How are they supposed to learn to get to school in time later on when I'm not able to teach them how to get to kindergarten on time, I was asked.

And yet, in those days, the times of the antiauthoritarian movement of 1968 were already behind us. A movement regarded with deep disapproval and suspicion by the older teachers who only felt their misgivings justified when looking at me, I guess.

Oh and then mother's day and my kids refusing to learn the standard poem for me, their dear mother, who was worrying about new ways of raising kids and who would have done better to clean her windows, in the minds of neighbors and teachers. But we just refused to adjust ourselves, we simply founded our own kindergarten where we work according to our own pedagogical concept. Mothers for children and not against children. Women for women and not against women. Children for children, parents for parents, parents for teachers, parents for mothers...

In our kindergarten we have our kids participate in the daily life of adults by not excluding them but by naturally integrating them and by taking them seriously. Shopping, cooking, washing, we

offer help and suggestions judiciously, while keeping them safe when and where necessary. We let them do their thing. We have learned to live with some dirt and disorder ourselves. They thank us later, not only by not being afraid to handle kitchen knives, scissors, pots, and pans, but my also having learned to deal responsibly and respectfully with their environment, to be curious and ask questions, and to actually like the idea of change and improvement.

Our kids experience reality first hand. Do you know how many kids suffer from delayed motor development or disturbances because of apartments that are too small, the lack of safe spaces to play in gardens, yards, play grounds, or streets. Our kids are different, they are very active, they love to run and jump and play, or to practice their sense of balance. They do balancing acts on top of their little wooden cabin in the garden, scaring people on the street to death, and helping each other not to fall. Because they spend a lot of time outside, they are also very resistant to the usual little infections and because of that we too are hardly every sick. Just like them we are also learning to deal with each other lovingly and warmly and we support each other, although we're not so good at climbing on the roofs and we have a little trouble learning how to spit fire.

I fulfilled my own personal dream together with a few other women, by starting this child care center where we can realize our ideas about raising kids: to help kids in their development by inventing, challenging, wishing, giving... We want to stimulate and support, encourage and console, as well as teach them. We don't want to schedule them, plan for them, overprotect or manipulate them. Only when a child feels a need for help or feels left alone do we intervene and offer support and help.

We have founded a small business, created jobs for child care teachers, for a cook, an accountant, and a cleaning woman. All of us can always bring our own kids along and we have created a home away from home for other kids too. We are truly experts. And all that without a formal education.



New Definition of Professionals

In our centers professionals find a different set of job conditions. Here are some points that are often mentioned:

- ❖ equal treatment of professionals and grassroots experts
- ❖ unusual flexibility, of content as well as of organization
- ❖ age- and generation-mixed programs
- ❖ multiple responsibilities, multiple use of rooms, open rooms for everybody
- ❖ lack of classical hierarchies
- ❖ visitors are not treated and don't see themselves as clients
- ❖ the impossibility to hide behind the role of professional expert, the necessity to bring oneself in as a whole person and to show personal reactions and emotions openly, to develop a sense of belonging
- ❖ the demand for personal responsibility for the whole center, no specialization or departmentalization allowed
- ❖ the expectation of volunteer work, for example of voluntary and unpaid participation in clean up actions

In the context of mother centers professionals meet the mothers on an equal level. Everybody works in the same house, everybody is a co-worker, although with different tasks and responsibilities. Mothers, children and staff meet and intermingle at all times, spontaneously and unplanned. This situation demands letting go of customary behavior. For many professionals this is at first confusing and causes them anxiety and insecurity. They usually encounter their „clients“ only during short periods of time, in limited and protected settings and with specific problem definitions. In the mother center there are no such safety zones. They have to learn to allow people to get close to them and without the customary hierarchy. They have to develop and bear with spontaneity and flexibility and accept as well as strengthen equal partnerships with grassroots. What's special about this is that these experiences and processes are made and reflected together. Professionals are not left alone with them, neither are the everyday life experts. We all look into each other's cards – whether we want to or not. The women experience each other as whole people with their different abilities and competencies. In the mother center it's very important that professionals as well as grassroots experts are supported by trainings, supervision, study tours and exchanges, and daily consultation.

What makes a good mother center worker is not simply a matter of professional or grassroots expertise. The true mother center must be learned in the daily life of the centers. A traditional education plus two or three years internship in a mother center or a practical education in the school of life plus one to three years internship in a mother center can both make a good mother center worker. In the end the quality of a mother center worker depends on her own social competence, her personal warmth and her willingness to grow and to develop as a person.

It would be wonderful and it would make good sense if all our staff could be chosen by these principles. But unfortunately in child-care or senior care there are all kinds of regulations and pay scales that don't care at all about personal competence but about traditional degrees and diplomas. This has negative practical effects on several levels. The people to be cared for suffer because they don't get the most capable caretakers but those with the right kind of diploma. Grassroots experts suffer because their real competencies cannot be turned into employment and they are forever stuck in the role of “assistant” or “aide”. The professionals suffer because the ever rising qualification expectations get them stuck into rigid hierarchies that, in the end, often turn out to be completely worthless, for them and for society, because no one will be able to afford the ever increasing cost of professional education and services anymore.

Only on a basis of equal worth and partnership can professionals and grassroots experts work together effectively. For professionals this means that they have to challenge the assumptions of their position, to not patronizingly delegate certain aspects of their work to the grassroots experts. The attitude that needs to change is not only one of professionals but also an attitude all of society holds toward so-called volunteer work and thus it has to be addressed and changed on the level of society as a whole.

Business Incubators

One of the ideas that bloomed very quickly was to use the mother center for the development of small independent female enterprises like the second hand store, the carpenter's shop, the laundry salon, or the cosmetic salon. Support and know-how of the mother center help to give these entrepreneurs their start and enable them to eventually detach themselves from the center and be successful on their own. In the mother center unemployed women are encouraged to develop their interests in areas in which they are competent and where they have ideas and motivation. This leads them to step out into economic and financial independence, which is a totally different situation altogether from the dependency of an employed work relationship. The mother center offers diverse kinds of support in this endeavor: rooms, help with planning and financing, general mother center infrastructure (child care, lunch, laundry service, pick up service, janitor service, etc) and, very importantly, help in dealing with the inevitable frustrations. What's important about this approach is that the women stay connected to our network and part of the community. It is not an up and out approach.

An example: A woman may start her own business in the mother center, something like a little gift store. The deal she makes with the mother center may look like this: the mother center provides start-out assistance in the form of publicity, machines, telephone, free of charge until the business starts to show a profit . The businesswoman in turn brings customers and visitors into the mother center, she helps to break down accessibility barriers, and she participates in mother center activities such as clean up projects, parties, press interviews etc. From the moment when her business can be considered to be profitable she starts to pay a certain amount for rent and utilities. This amount is contractually agreed upon and can be very different. The simplest form is to pay 20% of total intake or to pay a fixed rental sum based on the space used. The businesswoman may also pay by teaching interns or taking care of the computer work.

Mother centers think in two types of currencies. The one is monetary, the other social, consisting of attention, an open ear, and practical and emotional support. This way give and take becomes a fairly shared process and those services not paid with money become visible and a real value, usable for barter.



Intergenerational Living and Working



Our achievement oriented society divides people into those capable of work performance and those who are not and also segregates the generations pretty much from each other. Private and public life have become two separate worlds that are barely connected anymore. There are hardly any natural areas of life left, in which values like community involvement or the ability to develop and nurture relationships can be learned. The different groups that make up our population live mostly in segregated, monocultural, and artificially individuated environments like kindergartens, senior homes or in the isolation of private households.

The conditions in a mother center are more like those of a public living room than those of an institution. That's why senior care in mother centers looks so different from senior care in traditional professional care institutions. In the mother center the seniors meet other people of all ages. Kids are running around with their trikes and dolls and toys, yelling, screaming, laughing, crying, and singing. Mothers from the center and from the neighborhood come together over a cup of coffee or a little chat. There are courses, there are people with questions, there are the families of the senior citizens who want to get information or get a consultation. All this happens spontaneously because it has become commonly known that in the mother center people can find contact and exchange as well as professional counseling and advice if and when they need it, in an environment that feels comfortable and unthreatening. They don't have to put their names on waiting lists, they can come whenever they feel the need to ask a question or get some information. Or they can simply stay for a while in the open rooms of the mother center to have a chat and then go back home. They can bring their children along, who will be cared for in the children's room if they want to.

In a mother center kitchen some 100 meals can be prepared daily, but it still looks more like a family kitchen than an institutional kitchen. The kitchen is open to the café and lunch room and offers much room for working and living together.

In the senior day care elders spend their day in the mother center. They are brought in the morning and picked up again in the evening to go back to their private apartments. An outpatient service is available as well, both to old people as well as to others who need help. This service provides the little services of daily life as well as psychosocial care.

Seniors often enjoy being around younger people and children. We should not expect however that old people will always like to take care of little kids or that children and young people will inevitably be happy to sit and learn from their elders. Mutual prejudices and fears have to be dealt with gently. Mutual understanding and treating each other with consideration often have to be learned. This happens in the mother center in many little steps and through the active integration of old people into the normal daily life. They can help fix lunch, they can decorate rooms, they can tend the garden, tell stories and they can participate in parties and celebrations. We had great success with projects such as a theater piece for the Christmas party, in which children, staff, and seniors played together.

An important step is to get to know the life story of an older person, to be able to understand them. Just like older people need to get to know the life story of a younger person to be able to share their life, to be able to be happy with them in happy moments and console them in sad situations.

"She is balm for my soul. Through her I have learned to laugh again", this was said by an older lady about a young care taker. At first she had been very critical of the young woman and wondered publicly how such a young person was supposed to be able to help her.

When accompanying seniors to the doctor or to administrative offices, or to go shopping, it is important to rebuild their personal abilities as much as possible. The earlier these kinds of assistances occur, the more we can prevent future isolation with all its successive consequences of confusion and depression as well as physical frailty.

In the mother center kids are free to run throughout the house. In the mother center mothers can find some peace and quiet without their kids. In the mother center old people meet to eat, read, or talk. Is all that at once possible? Indeed it is! In conclusion here the comment of a senior mother center visitor:

"Sometimes it's really noisy, but at least there's something going on here. The little ones come to visit me, and I can be like their grandma. Of course in our generation kids used to be a lot more well mannered. More quiet. But after all, when it really gets to be too much for me, I can always go home to my own apartment. There I have my peace and quiet – often more than I want!"

Community Services

The range of services offered by mother centers is very diverse. It includes childcare and eldercare as well as commercial services like the pick up service, the cafeteria including meals on wheels, household services such as washing, ironing, sewing, and mending, mobile janitor services, catering service, hairdresser and cosmetic salon, massages, the shopping mall with several small shops, and a computer based writing and layout service. These activities are partly under the direction of the mother center and partly independently operated small businesses. The clientele is made up from inside the center, from visitors and employees, as well as from the entire community outside. With these services we were able to create mother- and family-friendly jobs.

Mother center businesses obey the same economic laws as any other enterprise. We have to try to work cost efficiently and because of that we are subject to the conditions of the market as well as the usual laws and regulations. But still it is our goal not to be just another commercial service but to apply the important results of our experiences in self-help to this part of our work too. The success we have experienced so far proves us right and encourages us to stand up for our ideas, even though on occasion we may seem to be dancing to a drummer only we seem able to hear.



All jobs should be like this!

In the mother center we often wondered what a job would look and feel like that could be considered "mother-friendly". When we created jobs for ourselves with our projects we found out.

I work in the elder care service of our mother center and I have full access to all services of the mother center. What I especially like is the possibility to eat lunch with my daughter. Sometimes I have the pick-up service bring her to me and we eat together at the mother center. She likes that because she gets to see where mommy works. Sometimes I go over to the children's center and eat with the kids and the staff there. That way I often have really good conversations with the teachers, I can find out how my daughter is doing, I can get advice, I can clear up a misunderstanding right there on the spot, and I can get to know my daughter's playmates and friends.

Sometimes when I have the early shift and I'm done by lunchtime, I get the lunch ladies to pack my lunch to go and we eat at home, just the two of us. Marie enjoys those days when she has mommy all to herself and we really celebrate those occasions. Sometimes of course I'm also under a lot of stress and then we don't meet at lunchtime at all and she eats with the kids in the kindergarten.

The flexibility this gives me has made my life as a single mother and working parent a lot easier but I also find it wonderful for my relationship with my daughter. We are so at home in this community of people we know and where she as well as I can always find a friend to talk to.

Mother Centers International



In 1995 a delegation of 20 women from several German mother centers participated in the World Conference on Women in Beijing. We had prepared ourselves for this event for two years. We had organized flea markets to make money, socked away our own money, prepared texts about the mother centers in English and even Chinese, studied sketches and skits, painted bed sheets, had balloons printed, and produced a wonderful quilt as a greeting from German mother centers to the women of the world. Many women, who weren't able to go to Beijing themselves, participated in making this quilt. We were well prepared to take an active part in this world meeting of women's groups. The echo we got was encouraging and it gave us our wings. The mother center concept was received with great interest by women's groups from all corners of the world and we got many requests for cooperation with groups in other countries, for example from Hong Kong, India, Papua-New Guinea, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Cameroon, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Ghana, Australia, England and from the United States.

This gave us a lot of motivation to continue developing the international aspects of our work and the next year we participated in the United Nations World Congress Habitat II in

Istanbul, where questions of housing, city development and planning, and social ecology were on the agenda. In Istanbul, under strange and adventurous conditions, together with The Foundation for the Support of Women's Work, a Turkish women's group, we organized, child-care for the duration of the congress. It was the first time child-care had even been available at such a high-level meeting. Mother centers were seen as successful models of neighborhood and community development and again we made many contacts and received many offers for cooperation and exchange. We received recognition in the form of awards too. The mother center in Stuttgart received the Habitat Scroll of Honour in 1997 and we have been listed in the UNCHS Best Practices program as Best Practice since 1998.

We want to continue working with our international. We are a member in the international grassroots organization GROOTS (Grassroots Women Operating Together in Sisterhood) and as such we organize study tours and exchange programs.

Projects that came after Istanbul was our participation in the first national congress of mother centers in the Czech Republic, an exchange visit with the neighborhood women's group WAITS in Birmingham, England, an exchange with the group SPARC in Bombay, India, the setting up of mother centers in Bosnia and Bulgaria and our cooperation with the National Congress of Neighborhood Women, the Mother Center Development Project in the founding of mother centers in the United States and the Mother Centre Cooperatives in Canada among the First Nation population.

When one of our mother centers became a world wide project of the Expo 2000 we took the occasion to organise a Grassroots Women's International Academy (GWIA) and invited 42 grassroots groups from around the world to present and exchange their practices in a curriculum training format. GWIA has since become a trademark for grassroots exchanges and grassroots ownership of their knowledge and is developing into a permanent structure.

Meanwhile the mother centers have spread to 15 countries and in consequence the international network MINE (Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment) has been founded.

What is it that makes German mother centers so interesting to women's groups from other countries? Here are some quotes:

"When there are child-care projects planned here, it's always about the kids only. With the mother center model it's possible to put the focus on mothers too. (Zimbabwe)

"Through the recent cutbacks in welfare for mothers many women in our neighborhood are experiencing severe financial difficulties and are in great need. It is very important that they don't remain isolated, that they have a place where they can go to. Mother centers are perfect for us to create an easily accessible point of contact where mothers on welfare can get together and figure out a new course for themselves. (Bronx, New York, USA)

"To repair all that the war has destroyed we need to start in the neighborhoods. This is how our neighborhood centers developed. It feels so good to know that there are women in other parts of

the world who are also working on the development of neighborhood relationships.” (Afghanistan)

“Mother centers are a place where we can learn democracy in our daily life” (Czech Republic)

“It is time again for the American women’s movement to talk about the interests of mothers and politics for and by mothers. Mother centers are simply great as places where the interests of women are given a voice.” (Little Rock, USA)

We are looking forward to the new experiences and impulses, the growth and the development and the fun, that our international cooperation will continue to give us in the years to come.



Meanwhile Mother Centers have spread to 15 Countries – Here are some snapshots:

Outside the Mother Center in Mathare, Nairobi (Kenia)



Childcare in the Mother Center Mathare, Nairobi (Kenia)



Exchange visit Mother Center Stuttgart Germany in St. Louis, USA



The children's room in the Mother Center Prague, Czech Republic



Exchange visit German Mother Centers with Mother Center Group Little Rock, USA



Mother Center Slovakia: The garden



Mother Center in Proprad, Slovakia



Mother Center Presentation at the UN World Conference on Women in Huairou, China 1995



Mother Centers International Network (**mine**) receives UN Dubai International Award for Best Practises to improve the Living Environment, 2002



The Mother Center Charkov in Ukraine



Outside the Mother Center in Zavidovici, Bosnia



The Mother Center Zavidovici in Bosnia



Renovating the Mother Center in St. Petersburg, Russia



Outside the Mother Center Triadiza in Sofia, Bulgaria

XI. Executive Summary



„ I would walk a mile for a mothercenter.“

1. Mother centers claim public space for women, organized on the principle of self-help

- ❖ They offer opportunities for contact, communication, counseling, and education for a group of people otherwise excluded from society: women with small children. They do not exclude anyone and offer their rooms and opportunities to women with older children, women without children, as well as fathers.
- ❖ In mother centers children do not have to be put away with a babysitter, out of sight and out of earshot. Children are cared for and are always welcome in the mother center.
- ❖ Opening times of the mother centers depend on the rhythm of daily life with children: they are open all the time and there is no need to sign up for regular activities
- ❖ Mother centers are shaped by their visitors and members, who organize program and special activities based on their own interests and abilities, and who discover and develop new abilities and strengths in these activities.

2. Mother centers are important neighborhood network centers for mutual assistance and social contact

- ❖ Mother centers offer services designed to assist women and families, such as breakfast and lunch tables, washing services, pick up services, child-care, thrift stores, etc.
- ❖ Mother centers offer unbureaucratic assistance in emergencies
- ❖ Mother centers offer support in the organization of daily life through services like babysitter and day care referral
- ❖ Mother centers help families manage tight budgets through mending and repair services, second hand stores or toy libraries.
- ❖ Mother centers are invaluable to help integrate newly arrived families and immigrants into the community.
- ❖ Through intergenerational activities mother centers re-integrate older people into the community and into a social network, with big benefits to the quality of life and health of senior citizens.
- ❖ Mother centers recreate community where it has been lost, including people from totally different social and ethnic backgrounds.

3. Mother centers develop and practice new and family-friendly forms of child care, such as:

- ❖ Flexible and open childcare in mixed age groups under the supervision of mothers during opening times of the center
- ❖ Babysitter referrals
- ❖ Breastfeeding and baby groups
- ❖ Mini-kindergartens: toddler care before kindergarten
- ❖ Childcare for kindergarden age children
- ❖ Lunch and after school care for school kids, homework clubs, and vacation programs

4. Mother centers offer continuing education and qualification, as well as assistance with reentry into the job market. Mother centers are a leading example in the creation of family-friendly jobs.

- ❖ Mother centers offer training and qualification activities by mothers for mothers, within a framework of support services such as child-care, household services, or word processing services.
- ❖ Mothers who actively participate in the mother center develop increased self-confidence, as well as social and professional competence, especially in areas such as fundraising, accounting, and leadership. This confidence and experience make reentry into the job market easier and encourage women to apply for better, more highly qualified jobs.
- ❖ Child care and other supportive services (such as lunch, washing services, pick up service) make it possible for working women to effectively combine work and family life.
- ❖ The services offered in the mother center, such as carpentry, hair salon, wash salon, thrift store, gift boutique, biological market encourage the development of small independent businesses.

5. Mother centers offer counseling and information referral

- ❖ Mothers are natural experts in many questions, such as raising children, dealing with relationships and family situations, breastfeeding and nutrition, household organization and budgeting, pregnancy, birth and post-partum consideration, city planning and youth welfare.
- ❖ Counseling in the mother center takes place in daily situations, from woman to woman without the usual access barriers found in traditional counseling settings with bureaucratic overhead, appointment scheduling, and long waiting lists.
- ❖ If considered necessary, mother center counselors make referrals to professional counseling services and establish first contact. The women seeking advice are encouraged and supported in getting answers for their questions at agencies such as family counseling offices, debtor's organizations, welfare offices or employment offices.

6. Mother centers represent the interests of families and make for a good social climate in the community.

- ❖ Exchanges at the coffee table or while working sharpens awareness for one's own problems, needs, and interests. Awareness of and sensitivity for the social environment and one's own role therein are matters of discussion in the mother centers and a stand is taken against unfair, inhumane or hostile conditions to the needs of families. These matters are taken into the public and their resolution is actively sought in various forms of political and social involvement.
- ❖ Through the coming together of all generations, races, religions, and social backgrounds, values like tolerance, solidarity and integration are developed – something very much needed in today's society.
- ❖ Mother centers in the community work against and prevent exclusion, isolation, and intolerance and are one of the most effective and cost-effective ways to prevent social decline and drop-out.



Dear Women!

In this book we have tried to give you an impression of what mother centers are. Each mother center is different and always something special. But those who have once caught this bug will never want to miss it again.

Life in the mother centers has changed us and our families. We have become more thoughtful and more open, we are more willing to encounter and deal with other people. Our thoughts, actions, and feelings have become more aware more political. It is a wonderful feeling to walk through town and to know: there is a house that belongs to us, to us mothers. We are here! Here we are! Only when you have a mother center you realize that it is exactly what you need. Before you only know that something is missing, without being able to say exactly what it is.

To get contact and friendship with other women is often hard. In the mother center it's easier. You have fun developing ideas and projects together with others. It doesn't have to be many, one or two with the same ideas are enough. There are no limits to what you can do.

We have described how we did it. But you don't have to do it the same way. You can find other ways. Your mother center can look totally different. We want to encourage you with our example to start realizing your ideas. And please don't think that we had it easier than you, or we have better conditions. It was not easy for us, but we had a handful of courageous and visionary women, that's why it worked out. This courage and this enjoyment of our success we want to relate to you with this book and we want to wish you all the luck.

And should the time not be ready for you to start a mother center, maybe at least you found this book fun and interesting to read and some of the feeling of the mother center movement came across: Women together are invincible!

Contact: the Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment mine e. V. info@mine.cc

Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment **mine** eV.

The Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment (**mine**) represents the international mother centers movement. Originating in Germany mother centers have spread over the past decade across the world and are found in The Netherlands, Austria, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, Italy, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Russia and Bosnia as well as in the USA, Canada, Kenya, Rwanda and the Philippines, currently representing a network of 750 centers world-wide.

mine conducts peer learning exchanges, Grassroots Women's International Academies GWIA, partner dialogues and networking and capacity building activities for mother center initiatives around the globe, focussing on three areas:

- ❖ Start up support for mother centers
- ❖ Trainings, peer exchanges, study tours and apprenticeships
- ❖ Grassroots advocacy on family and community issues

This involves step by step consultation , fostering a "buddy system" between mother centers in the region and between continents, fund-raising activities and the production of training materials. These include start up manuals on how to initiate mother centers as well manuals for local authorities and partners on how to support grassroots groups.

Mother centers seem to answer a historic need. They are spreading around the world like a "virus". They represent another kind of globalisation, a globalisation from the ground. This has produced a need for a global network that MINE has responded to.

We welcome participation and support from all corners of the earth.

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