



Child Care on Top of the World

Amy Laura Dombro with Pernille Weis-Fogh

Kullungen barnehage (Coal Kids' kindergarten) serves 47 children, ages one through six, and their families in Longyearbyen, a settlement of 1,500 people 600 miles south of the North Pole. To locate Longyearbyen on a map, first find Norway, then the North Pole. Longyearbyen is the largest settlement on Svalbard, the set of islands halfway between. These islands—home to the midnight sun, polar night, northern lights, and ice bear—are under Norway's sovereignty, regulated by the Svalbard Treaty of 1920.

Amy Laura Dombro is the author of many articles and books in the early childhood field and is based in New York City. Recently she has been focusing on listening to and recording the stories of teachers and programs. She looks forward to returning to Kullungen and to experiencing Svalbard's polar night.

Pernille Weis-Fogh is executive director of the program in Kullungen barnehage, Svalbard Samfunnsdrift, Svalbard, Norway. She worked as a pedagogue with children in psychiatric institutions for five years and since with preschool children in different programs in Denmark and, for the last 15 years, in Norway.

Photos courtesy of Amy Laura Dombro.

The program's name calls forth the town's mining roots. The settlement was named after American John Monroe Longyear, who established the first mine there in 1906. Coal from the dark-peaked mountains on the edges of town heats and lights homes and businesses as it has been doing for close to 100 years. Kullungen is administered by Svalbard Samfunnsdrift (SSD), a concern which oversees Longyearbyen services, including its heat and light, water, cultural experiences, and kindergartens.

At Kullungen children are divided into three age groups, called *gruver* (mines). In Gruve 1 there are 11 children ages one and two; Gruve 2 has 15 children ages two-and-a-half through four; and Gruve 3 serves 21 children ages four to six. Each gruve is guided by one head teacher (or *pedagogue*) and two assistants.

As you will see, much of the children's play and work at Kullungen reflects the climate, wildlife, and way of being here on top of the world. Like quality programs everywhere, Kullungen is grounded in children's everyday routines and experiences (Dombro, Colker, & Dodge 1999; Espinosa 2002). "We live in a beautiful and a harsh place," says Pernille Weis-Fogh, originally from Denmark and director of the program. "We want the children to be happy for the nature that surrounds them."

When I was in Longyearbyen two summers ago to join a nature cruise, I was attracted to Kullungen's windows,

where children's artwork is always displayed. The uniqueness of each piece led me to talk with Pernille. I was thinking that perhaps a small town in Scandinavia might reveal the answers to some enduring questions: How do we create quality learning experiences for children? How do we build responsive relationships between teachers, children, and families? Of course, what I discovered, when Pernille stopped laughing, is that she too is still trying to find answers.

The conversation we began that summer's day continued via e-mail. When Pernille invited me to come and stay with her and spend some time at Kullungen, I couldn't refuse. And so I packed up and headed North in March 2003. In the windows, yellow construction paper suns shone in celebration of Solfest, the return of the sun after four months of the polar night. It had been back only for four days when I arrived.

I share this story of my visit to Kullungen and some samples of children's work, because sometimes it is easier to see our everyday lives by looking at what is the same and different far away.

Respect for the individual child— Building a community of kindness

Like all high-quality early childhood programs, Kullungen strives to honor the individual as a part of the larger learning community (Katz 1985). The children's painted suns, each one different yet together brightening the windows, reflect the attention and respect the adults pay to each of the children as they learn to be members of a community in which people communicate, cooperate, and are kind to one another. "Here in our house, we try to help children believe in themselves, their future, and in other people," says Pernille. "We guide children as necessary so they have positive attitudes toward themselves and others."

That atmosphere quickly became apparent to me. When the teachers in Gruves 2 and 3 explained that I spoke English but was just learning Norwegian, the children listened carefully, then looked at me and smiled. The next day a three-year-old gestured for me to sit next to

her: "*Komme her Amy,*" she said. She looked me in the eye, held up her fingers one by one, and slowly started counting, "*En, to, tre,*" mirroring the care, attention, and pleasure in learning that I saw adults sharing with children during my stay.

It all begins with the adults

Pernille's number one goal as director is to create an environment that leads to learning and social competence. Key to this, she believes, is the staff. To be a good teacher, each person with his and her own personality, strengths, and weaknesses must respect themselves and their colleagues and work and learn as a team (Rinaldi 1994). "If we want adults to educate and care for young children in responsive ways," Pernille says, "we need to pay attention to the environment we create for the adults. I want staff to feel Kullungen is their second home and to be proud to be part of what we do here together."

Pernille creates regular opportunities for staff to meet together, learn together, and play together. She openly shares her own questions and admits when she makes a mistake. At the same time she sets clear expectations and holds staff to them. Over time the teachers have come to appreciate

what they—and colleagues—know and can do. This gives them confidence to try out new ideas, ask for help when necessary, learn from mistakes, and celebrate successes. Conversations with several teachers confirmed this: "You don't have to know everything to work in Kullungen, but you do have to be willing to learn." "Kullungen is a work in progress. It is not perfect. When problems arise, they are addressed openly and directly."

Because they are learners too, Kullungen's teachers—and director—have precious insight into the children as well as great respect and clear expectations for them. They know the



excitement, fear, awkwardness, and joy that come with trying something new. Drawing on their early childhood training and personal experience, they give children the space and time and the guidance and support they need to learn.

Three differences I could see and feel

I had five days at Kullungen. As the days went by, I noticed three things that looked and felt different from some early childhood programs in the United States.

First, the staff and families are more homogeneous than those found in a typically diverse U.S. program. At first I thought this would make things much easier. But homogeneity also can be a challenge unless staff make it a priority to talk with and learn from the families, as opposed to making assumptions about how and why families believe and do what they do (Gonzalez-Mena 2001).

Second, at Kullungen the adults are not the center of what goes on in the classroom. Of course, they present and oversee activities, such as making a group mural, singing and telling a flannel board story, building an ice house, painting, or taking the Ice Bear Club for a trip.

The Ice Bear Club is a good example. These five-year-olds from Gruve 3 who will begin school the following year meet every Tuesday. With their teachers, they move out into the world. Over the course of the year, teachers make a book for each child in the club. On the cover are self-portraits; inside are children's stories, quotes, drawings, photographs, and relevant articles that children and families will take home at the end of the year.



Children's paintings of arctic foxes reflect the animal's winter coat in the polar night. When local painter Olaf Storo came to paint with the children, he brought blue and white, the colors of the spring sky and snow.



"We have goals in mind for our trips," explains Hilde, a teacher. "But what we see and do on the way is most important. A trip to Isbreen, a glacier, to look for fossils was so successful that the backup fossils that Hilde brought, just in case, stayed in her pocket.

Here is what the members of the Ice Bear Club had to say about their adventure:

- We drive a car.
- I told my daddy we are looking for an ice bear.
- We eat inside the old dog kennel [abandoned for a long time and cleaned].
- We pretend to be a dog.

"On this trip," Hilde notes, "the kennels were a big hit."

After Christmas the Ice Bear Club spent two months visiting the school the children will attend. In spring the focus was on skiing. "We want children to enjoy skiing," says Hilde, "so we spend lots of time talking about how the right clothes keep you warm and make a point of stopping to enjoy hot chocolate and biscuits along the way."



Outdoors there are some sliding toys, riding toys, and shovels available. The rest is up to children's imagination. Teachers watch as children play, offering an occasional helping hand or bit of guidance, but for the most part, children are on their own, and their imaginations soar. In a large hill of snow, they excavate a mine. After some heavy digging, the miners take a well-deserved break.

Kullungen teachers are *guides* (New 1990). They are aware of what children are doing and step in only when needed, which is not often. There were moments I had to sit on my hands—and I am a firm believer in giving children the chance to work things out. I saw children help each other find a book, snap together wooden tracks for a train, free a riding toy that got stuck in the snow, and cover a doll with a blanket. Over five days, I saw only three occasions when an adult helped negotiate sharing; the rest of the time children figured things out on their own.

On afternoons when the wind chill is above -25°C (-13°F), the children in Gruves 2 and 3 play outdoors. The one- and two-year-olds in Gruve 1 go out in the morning, then nap in the afternoon in covered carriages on a semi-enclosed porch, a toddler's version of snuggling in a warm sleeping bag in a tent. In the winter, children wear three layers under their one-piece snow-scooter suits, as well as hats, gloves, scarves, and often face masks. Learning to dress appropriately starts early. "It's a big part of life here," explains Bibbi, a pedagogue. "We try to make it as easy as possible—for everyone."

There is a clear procedure in place and everyone knows the drill. Each child gets clothes from the hook labeled with his or her name, piles everything on a spot on the floor, sits down, and gets to it. To make things more manageable, children go out and come indoors in small groups of three or five. Of course, teachers encourage and help. But by this time of the year, many of the twos and young threes manage on their own, except for some adult tugging, straightening, and snapping. I saw just how well when I tried to help a child hang her coat up. "Nei," she said, shaking her head, as I started to drape her coat over her assigned hook. She took the coat, showed me the loop inside the collar, handed me the coat to hold, climbed up on a bench, and put the loop over the hook herself. I realized that only by using the loop could she get all her clothes to fit on the hook.

Finally, I noticed that teachers in Kullungen allow children much more space and physical freedom than children in the United States experience. For example, I watched a one-year-old climb up on a low bench to reach her family book. Children in Gruves 2 and 3 go

The children build an ice house, an arctic variation on water play. Malfrid, a teacher in Gruve 2, explains, "The process is the best part, more important than the house itself. We freeze blocks of water in milk cartons, then mix a huge pot of slush that holds the blocks together when it freezes. The children like to stir and slap on the slush with a wooden spoon." As they work on the house, Malfrid and the children talk about what colors to make the water, how long it takes the ice blocks to freeze (not very), how the water in the cartons expands as it freezes, and turn taking. "Now lots of children want to make houses at home," reports Malfrid. "Parents are asking me how to color the water [by adding bits of crepe paper], and ice houses are being built across the town."



into small rooms, where toys and housekeeping props are kept, and close the door while they play. Outside there were several moments when I started to move toward a climbing child who looked to be in a precarious spot, only to see him lower himself to the ground or reach the top of a snow mound. It was as if given the chance to be safe, the children learn to take it.

One teacher explains, "We give children the chance to explore. We watch and step in if they are in danger. At the same time, we take care not to get in their way if we don't have to. As we see it, a scraped knee is part of growing up and learning to handle bigger scrapes later in life." As Pernille pointed out one evening, "Here we fear the polar bears, not a lawsuit from the parents."

Conclusion

I went to the top of the world looking for answers. What I found there were colleagues who know about children, openly share questions, and work as a team day by day to find answers and make their quality program even better.

Pernille and I plan to keep in touch. There's so much to talk about and learn.

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What Is It Like to Live 600 Miles from the North Pole?

Here is what some of Longyearbyen's children have to say:

- Why do people live on Svalbard? I don't really know, but there aren't many living here. Anyway, there are more polar bears living here than people. I can tell you that.
- **WARNING FOR ALL TOURISTS:** There is nothing to do up here. There are no bowling halls or cool sports like baseball. Rumors spread fast. Tourists buy up the milk. It's not allowed to pick the flowers. It's cold. Don't come up here.
- I love the smell of Svalbard. It smells cold and clean and snow and stars. It is good to stand in the window and draw all this into your body.
- I like to live on Svalbard but it is too naked here. How about some trees and more animals?

Source: *Barn og unge på Svalbard: Overst på jordkloden* (Children and young people of Svalbard). 2000. Orkana forlag, Norway: Svalbard Samfunnsdrift.



Children from Gruve 1 are eager and proud to help unpack the weekly groceries. Side by side with an adult, who assumes the children can and will participate, the toddlers pull off the sticky packing tape and carry tubs of margarine and cartons of milk to the refrigerator. Later they have fun climbing in the empty boxes.

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Poster and tablet from Learning Zone Express

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Tablet of Handouts: This useful 8 1/2" x 11" version of the *How I Learn* poster is great for giving to parents and early childhood students. 50 sheets per tablet. **#416—\$10 / members \$10**

