



* *

PLAY & ENCOUNTER

ef
evens foundation

* *

*'We are not ceasing to play because we are
growing older, but we are growing older because
we cease to play.'*

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

THE SERIOUS BENEFITS OF PLAY & EN- COUNTER

TWO PARADIGMS
OF PRACTICE

ef evens foundation

* *

PLAY & ENCOUNTER

1. **A TALE OF GAMES AND ENCOUNTERS** - THE EVENS FOUNDATION 10
2. **TWO PARADIGMS OF PRACTICE:**
 - 2.1 **WALALA** – GUDRUN ISERENTANT 18
 - 2.2 **DE SPEELVIJVER** –
HILDE TREKKER 36
3. **ENCOUNTERS WITHOUT PRESSURE**
– PROF. DR. MICHEL VANDENBROECK,
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL AGOGICS,
UNIVERSITY OF GHENT (BELGIUM) 49
4. **WHY CHOOSE PLAY?** – PROF. DR. PETER
ADRIAENSSENS, SENIOR LECTURER IN CHILD
AND YOUTH PSYCHIATRY AT KU (KATHOLIEKE
UNIVERSITEIT) LEUVEN (BELGIUM), HEAD
AND DIRECTOR OF THE CLINICAL CHILD
PSYCHIATRY DEPARTMENT AND OF THE TRUST
CENTER FOR CHILD ABUSE AT THE UNIVERSITY
HOSPITAL LEUVEN (BELGIUM) 54
5. **TOY LIBRARIES IN EUROPE** 62
6. **CONTACT DETAILS – COLOPHON** 64

THE EVENS FOUNDATION



The Evens Foundation initiates, develops and supports projects that encourage citizens and states to live together harmoniously in a peaceful Europe. It promotes respect for diversity, both individual and collective, and seeks to uphold physical, psychological and ethical integrity.

THE FOUNDATION ACTS IN THREE PRINCIPAL WAYS:

- * **It sets up its own sustainable projects**
- * **It awards biannual prizes**
- * **It takes partnership in projects and initiatives of general interest that correspond to the philosophy of the Foundation**

PROGRAMS:

- * **Sustainable peacebuilding in Europe**
- * **Peace education**
- * **Media education**



“Living together harmoniously” does not only mean living in peace with one another. Peace and democracy are never definitively acquired. Just like living together, they are constructed each day through dialogue, exchange, common reflection; they need to be “nourished on a daily basis”. In this regard, the role of the family, of social networks, and, to a broader extent, of civil society and education is crucial. Active citizenship is thus a dynamic concept whereby citizens and politicians alike take responsibility and engage in initiatives that benefit society.

The sense of individual and collective responsibility, courage, shrewdness, and hope are our ‘driving forces’, our ‘lungs’, and the air that we breathe in order to make progress in terms of conflict prevention and in achieving a harmonious Europe with a promising future.

This creation of citizenship awareness is at the heart of the activities of the Evens Foundation. Through all the projects that we support or develop, we try to contribute to the creation of a European society where citizens can live together in peace and with respect for the individuality of each person. It is a ceaseless task that has no end and requires relentless involvement and attention.

CORINNE EVENS
HONORARY PRESIDENT
EVENS FOUNDATION



CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

**ADOPTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE
UNITED NATIONS ON 20 NOVEMBER 1989**

FROM THE PREAMBLE

Recalling that, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations has proclaimed that childhood is entitled to special care and assistance,

Convinced that the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community,

Recognizing that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding...

ARTICLE 18

Parents have the primary responsibility for the upbringing of their children. States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities.

ARTICLE 31

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.



A TALE OF GAMES AND ENCOUNTERS

For more than a decade, the Evens Foundation has been actively involved in the area of learning in diversity and intercultural learning, in a broad sense. It supports initiatives and awards prizes in this field of education. By engaging in this work and by also taking initiatives in the area of social development, the Foundation has sought, over the years, to fulfil its mission of “promoting a harmonious society”.

In 2002, we selected a project proposal in Cureghem that, in our judgment, both effectively incorporated this intercultural-learning process and promoted harmonious co-existence (social development). We thus became the co-initiators and supporters of the Toy Library Walala – named after the Nordic mythological abode of gods and angels, Valhalla. The project, located on Otletstraat in the center of Cureghem, Anderlecht, eventually became bilingual; at the suggestion of a younger brother of one of our coordinators, we added the name ‘Walalou’. Hence the dual name: *Walala-Walalou* for the Toy Library.

Gradually, we became ever more convinced of the effectiveness of this initiative that unified *learning* and *getting together* in simple but powerful ways. We never ceased to be amazed by the responses that were stimulated by interactive play and games among parents and children; how parents established even closer bonds with their children; how children, with their enthusiasm for games and play, literally dragged their parents into participating; how parents gradually came to discover the joys of sharing in games and play with their children while being able to offer learning support at the same time (even if they could not readily understand the language their children were being taught at school). We noted how Walala/Walalou had within a very brief period turned into a meeting place for young parents from the neighborhood – how, in the course of playing games, they exchanged views about raising children, about the choices of schools, about their uncertainties, and so on.

Because of the success of the project, the Evens Foundation soon decided to seek to replicate in another city the wonderful experiences that this play-and-encounter venue gave rise to. In Antwerp North, we made contact with Samik, a social assistance and consulting team with rich experience in the field of educational assistance. Samik was planning to expand the scope of and support for its hospitality function. They accepted the Evens Foundation proposal to establish a Toy Library as a place of encounter, a meeting center. The result is that, since January 2007, De Speelvijver (The Playing Pond) has witnessed a lot of splashing activity.

The 20th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child seems to us an ideal moment to put the spotlight on these two examples of how games and play encounters, involving both young children and their parents, work in practice.





Every child is entitled to have his or her development guaranteed in every conceivable way. It is, therefore, a universal concern that all children and their families be offered the care and assistance that is essential for them.

Young parents are continually on the look-out for ways to support their children during their childhood and school years. They have many questions, are often unsure of themselves, and regularly have to deal with stress. Furthermore, many young families live in conditions of social isolation, particularly in urban areas.

In our two play paradigms, the key concepts and values are: informal encounters, socialization, experimenting, raising children, integration, and inclusion. Young families can take the opportunity to exchange knowledge and experiences about how to raise children. The encounters between parents allow them to discover that they are not on their own and that education is a common and shared concern that transcends cultural differences.

In both of our paradigms, the play aspect is central. Play is a very accessible way to reach both parents and children. While Walala established a Toy Library that grew into a popular meeting place, De Speelvijver (The Playing Pond) was conceived of as a meeting center, with the Toy Library as an adjunct.

That families are able to borrow carefully selected educational toys is a benefit that can hardly be over-stated. Socio-economically underprivileged families have access to appropriate toys, while middle-class families can borrow more expensive items for use at home. An added value is the resulting social mix.

The road we have traveled has not always been a smooth one, and recognition of the value of the work came slowly. But, in the years since the projects began, they have given rise to many beautiful stories of encounters. And, to our great joy, in 2008 Walala was awarded the Princess Mathilde Prize for its project 'Mijn mama is een speelvogel' (My mama loves to play). Parents and children were received at the Royal Palace and Her Highness the Princess came on a visit, to take part in an hour of playtime with the 'regulars' of Otletstraat. This was a most welcome gesture of support. In its turn, De Speelvijver (The Playing Pond) was selected as an experimental project for Human Services in the Social Economy. This was a happy occasion that offered the 'fishes' in the project a lot more fresh 'breathing space'.

We do not intend, with this brief publication and exposition, to detract in any way from the merits of other meeting centers for young families or to question their methods. Our aim is, rather, to demonstrate the unique aspects of a meeting center with a Toy Library as an adjunct, and of a Toy Library with an adjoining meeting center.

Both of these paradigms arose from a unique angle of approach and, in daily practice, became imbued with their own individual character. The manner in which the practice evolves depends greatly on the needs of the participating public. However, everything turns on play and encounters, and encounters and play. Joint play within the 'edenic' Walala and De Speelvijver (The Playing Pond) modulates into encounters; encounters lead to the playing of games ... and more games, followed by even more games.



This report seeks to explain what is happening in the actual practice:

- * **Michel Vandenbroeck of the Social Agogics Department at the University of Ghent offers an interpretation of the concept of ‘encounters’ and their significance in our contemporary context.**
- * **Peter Adriaenssens, senior lecturer of Child and Youth Psychiatry at the Katholieke Universiteit (KU) of Leuven and head and director of the Clinical Child Psychiatry Department and of the Trust Center for Child Abuse at the University Hospital Leuven, offers an explanation of why game-playing is so essential to children as they grow up, and discusses the development of the individual child, and how joint play teaches children to cope with their environments.**
- * **Finally, we end our exposition with some references to research and practical paradigms in other countries.**

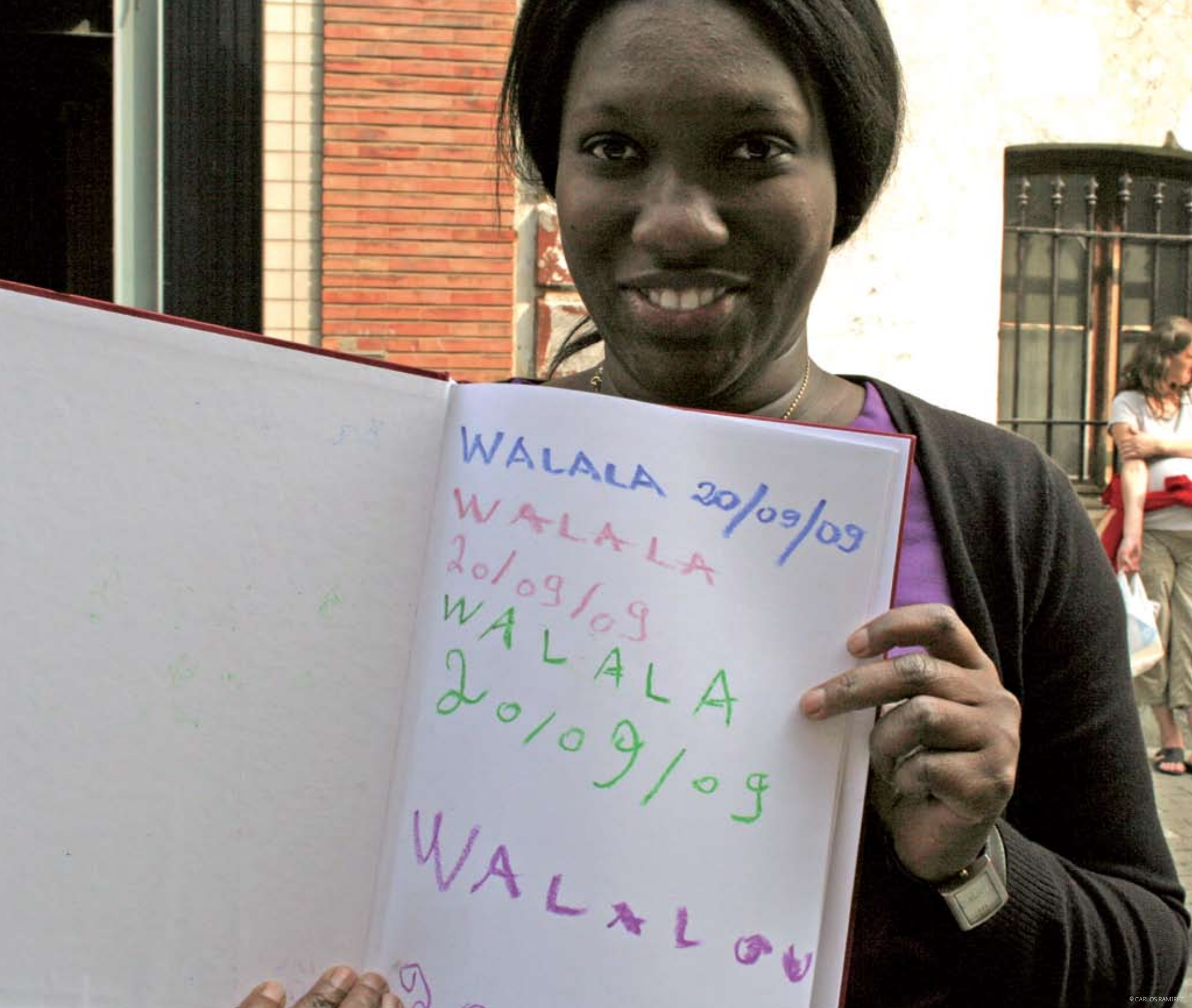
All the coordinators, collaborators, and volunteers in the project Walala/Walalou and De Speelvijver (The Playing Pond) are deserving of our admiration and appreciation. Their daily personal commitment and passion for young families is proving invaluable; they strengthen parents in their self-assurance as teachers; on a daily basis, they encourage parents and children to join in play; generate a great sense of enjoyment in game-playing; help parents and children to become aware of their talents, and lend an attentive ear (they do that a lot!). In brief, they are truly indispensable.

The Evens Foundation takes pride in its involvement in the birth of these two splendid initiatives. We hope that this little paper will persuade many of its readers to participate more often in the fun of play encounters.

MAUD AGUIRRE

EVENS FOUNDATION
ANTWERP, NOVEMBER 2009





WALALA 20/09/09

WALALA
20/09/09

WALALA
20/09/09

WALALA
20/09/09



TWO PARADIGMS OF PRACTICE

1. VZW WALALA – THE STORY OF A VERY SPECIAL TOY LIBRARY

HOW IT ALL STARTED

Cureghem ... to many people, it's a neighborhood with a bad reputation, and is known far and wide beyond the Brussels area.

You'll find a small street in this neighborhood, Rue Otlet, and in the middle of it, a building of flats, with two vacant floors. Towards the end of the 1990s, a search began for projects to occupy the building – projects adhering to the philosophy promoted by the Evens Foundation, based on the key areas of education, encounters in diversity, and creativity, aimed at encouraging people to accept one another as they are and to show empathy for, and understanding of, each other's beliefs and individuality.

In the midst of the Cureghem melting-pot, this was no small assignment.

Someone at the Toy Library 't Nekkertje,¹ the pioneer of the Dutch-language toy libraries in the Brussels region, became aware of the Evens Foundation's search for projects. Since the 1990s, 't Nekkertje has been combining a toys and games lending service with developing educational activities whereby the three main educational settings – family, school and neighborhood – are brought into closer touch with each other. The aim is to enhance development opportunities for children from underprivileged families.

1. TOY LIBRARY 'T NEKKERTJE WAS ASSOCIATED WITH THE NEKKERSDAL COMMUNITY CENTER AND SUBSIDIZED BY THE VGC AS A SIF PROJECT (SOCIAL IMPULSE FUND). TODAY, THE TOY COLLECTION HAS BEEN TAKEN OVER BY THE MUNICIPAL LIBRARY. FOR MORE INFO, GO TO WWW.NEKKERSDAL.BE AND WWW.BRUSSEL-LAKEN.BIBLIOTHEEK.BE



Aside from lending specially selected toys and games, the library organizes afternoon games, parent information sessions in the school, group sessions for mothers, and linguistic activities such as a language play-week, learning how to express ideas and images, and so on. Meanwhile, consulting sessions are held regularly with neighborhood organizations. This combination of activities had also been successfully tested in some other urban centers, such as Ronse.

The experiences of 't Nekkertje taught us that a toy library, situated in a disadvantaged neighborhood, can fill a real need of resident families. And local schools welcome such a project: through the toy library, the school gets closer to home, and vice versa. With some adaptations, the 't Nekkertje model was submitted in the project proposal for the large building in little Otletstraat in Cureghem.

PRELIMINARY STUDY IN 2000-2001

In mid-2000, two projects were selected: the Studio Globo initiative Inleefatelier Wonen op het Dak² and the Toy Library Walala. The projects complement each other – both focus on diversity and mutual understanding, and involve local schools. However, Toy Library Walala wanted to work predominantly with families, while Studio Globo focused exclusively on the classroom. As well, Walala is primarily a local neighborhood project.

To assess the need for and potential of the new initiative in the neighborhood, a Needs Study and an Environmental Analysis were carried out.³ A number of neighborhood walks and street interviews were carried out, photos were collected, local organizations were asked for their opinions, and teachers and students gave their views about the district and neighborhood, and the importance of play at home and at school.

These studies revealed a lot. Some of the conclusions were deemed important enough to serve as guidelines in the development of the entire project. They confirmed the extent to which Cureghem is characterized by a host of disadvantages: poor housing (primarily rental properties), a very young popu-

2. AN INITIATIVE OF VZW STUDIO GLOBO. FOR MORE INFO: WWW.STUDIOGLOBO.BE

3. CONDUCTED IN JANUARY 2001 BY SIX STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF GHENT'S ANTHROPOLOGY DEPARTMENT, COMPARATIVE CULTURAL SCIENCES, UNDER THE DIRECTION OF PROFESSOR PINXTEN.

lation and large families, a high unemployment rate and low incomes, a high percentage of residents with little education, a rapid turnover of residents and high migration, a high population density, a high foreign-language-speaking population, a number of suspect businesses, and minor delinquency and crimes among the young ...

All this – despite the fact that Cureghem is alive with initiatives. Are too many organizations present in the district? Not according to our survey. Parents, schools and local organizations all requested assistance with matters of child rearing and (extra) activities for children – especially for the very young, for whom there appeared to be a great lack of services.

The studies also highlighted the perceived division of Cureghem into four zones – two ‘better’ zones and two ‘worse’ ones. The result of this is that residents barely ever venture beyond their familiar surroundings to participate in other activities nearby, especially in the ‘bad’ sector – and yes, that includes Otletstraat.

In addition, local organizations engaged in relatively limited cooperation (and in some cases were in competition); and local residents had limited awareness of the organizations available. Another factor that needed to be taken into account was the francophone character of Cureghem North (our side).

It was also clear that, to ensure the success of the project, two issues were enormously important: the participation and input of local residents, and respect for, and recognition of, the numerous cultural community groups in the district.

MAKING CHOICES

Finding a fund or agency that, together with the Evens Foundation, would lend its support to the project was not easy. The vzw/asbl Walhalla⁴ was formed on 22nd April 2002, but the opening of the Toy Library did not happen until 21st September 2003. Two authorities ultimately displayed interest: the department of Samenlevingsinitiatieven (Social Cooperative Initiatives)

4. ENTERPRISE NUMBER VZW WALHALLA ASBL: 477.852.286 IDENTIFICATION NUMBER OF FORMATION 12953/2002, WITH AMENDMENT OF THE NAME TO 'WALALA' AND ARTICLE 3 'OBJECTS' ON 6 AUGUST 2004 UNDER PUBLICATION NUMBER 0117577.



(VGC⁵), and the municipality of Anderlecht, which recognized Walhalla as a *Projet d'Insertion et de Cohabitation*⁶, a project dealing with social inclusion and co-existence. In addition, notable financial assistance was provided by the Impulsfonds voor migranten (Impulse Fund for Immigrants).

With the conclusions of the Needs Study and administrative directives in the back of our minds, choices had to be made ...

People can see immediately that Walhalla is meant to represent the idea of Paradise – it has a colorful, happy appearance, far removed from the dullness and blandness of daily life. However, our four statutory objectives were concrete and detailed:

5. FLEMISH COMMUNITY COMMISSION, DEPARTMENT OF WELFARE.

6. A SUBSIDY SCHEME WITH SAMENLEVINGSINITIATIEVEN (SOCIAL COOPERATIVE INITIATIVES), BUT ORIGINATING WITHIN THE FRANCOPHONE COMMUNITY (COCOF). WALHALLA STARTED AS A BILINGUAL NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION BUT WAS SPLIT IN 2005 INTO A DUTCH-SPEAKING AND A FRANCOPHONE ENTITY (ASBL WALALOU).

1. THE OPERATION OF A TOY LIBRARY TO SERVE FAMILIES, SCHOOLS, AND LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS

Playing games is the starting point of all other activities. The Toy Library lends out carefully selected toys and games, but also provides a cozy play and encounter area, set aside in the library. We considered the lending of items to be a foregone conclusion, even in a so-called 'risk neighborhood' like Cureghem, since it would help to enrich the home environment. In addition, we would in this way reach individuals with responsibilities in raising children who generally are more difficult to reach, for example fathers. Through sharing pleasant moments, the quality of interaction and involvement between parents and children is enhanced.

The toys and games are available to anybody to test out on site. Meanwhile, the collaborators or volunteers in attendance can offer advice or explanations about a game, or can join in the fun ...

The play material is separated into categories that are easily understood and recognized. People can register for a low fee and,



© WALALA

as members, borrow the items for free. People who are not registered are equally welcome, and can participate in a chat or share some playing time. People can also register for free by volunteering their help for one hour or so in the Toy Library. All can come at any time during opening hours and remain for as long as they want.

For the really young children, a separate corner has been set aside and there is a space in which to park strollers.

Teachers and organizations are welcome to visit after hours.

The toys and games items are purchased with great care. We specialize in toys and games with a linguistic slant, toys for children aged two to eight, games from various cultures, games materials that are also used in schools, and cooperative games. We devote a lot of attention to diversity, design, the types of materials used in the manufacture of the games, their ease of use (not too many small pieces), and, of course, to ensuring that they are the kind of games that will be greatly enjoyed.

In order to keep the shared games as accessible as possible, we choose for this category especially brief, dynamic games that are easy to play at home or at school, and are simple enough to be easily explained.

2. THE ORGANIZATION OF LANGUAGE AND DEVELOPMENT-STIMULATING ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN

Schools can visit with their classes for an animated game session. This is enjoyed by both teachers and pupils. The Toy Library comes as a surprise that often advances learning in a new and different way. The pupils' parents, too, can join the animated session. This generally leads to fascinating conversations and encounters between teachers and parents. To explain the impact of games on the development of the child, we have recourse to the development disk.⁷

Individual teachers are also welcome – for instance, to inform themselves about language games, or to borrow a set of games that fits the grades they are teaching, or a set of traditional games gathered from around the world.

⁷. DEVELOPED BY THE PROVINCIAL EDUCATION CENTER OF LIMBURG.



Specifically for children, we organize language activities during the holidays: a language event session for children making the transition to the first school year, and *play-afternoons for IBOs* (Initiatives for Before and After-School Child Care) during which we complement the games activities with language-based events (such as puppet theater, kamishubai, songs and poems). In developing some holiday activities, we collaborate with organizations focused on organizing after-school activities.

During the everyday lending periods, of course, we also pay attention to language; for instance, children are addressed only in the language they use regularly at school (which, in Brussels, is not self-evident). We also pay extra attention to children from families that have newly arrived in the country.

Finally, we do not neglect the adults: many parents are enrolled in Dutch-language courses – and they, too, are always eager to test their newly acquired knowledge during a game.

3. THE ORGANIZATION OF EDUCATION SUPPORT ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS⁸

During the Toy Library opening hours, *encounters* tend to play just as important a role as *playing* or *lending*. The Toy Library has, as one of its aims, the bringing together of indigenous and immigrant parents; ‘being a parent’, ‘education’ and ‘raising children’ are all common contact points among all members, irrespective of origin, educational background, or social status. For this reason, we request that a child always be accompanied by a parent (or some other adult responsible for looking after the child).

Parents or guardians all have the opportunity to meet other parents, get settled in, and ask other parents or Toy Library collaborators for advice about child-raising or education. They can sit down comfortably for a chat with other parents, or just take a look around without engaging in conversation. In the play encounter area, they can relax, learn to discover their child in a

8. KIND EN GEZIN (K&G – CHILD AND FAMILY) IS AN ORGANIZATION THAT (ALONG WITH THE OFFICE DE LA NAISSANCE ET DE L'ENFANCE, OR ONE) SUPERVISES AND SETS NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR CHILD-CARE FACILITIES IN BELGIUM. ACCORDING TO K&G'S REFERENCE FRAME ON EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT, WE FULLFIL, IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE, THE FOLLOWING FUNCTIONS: 1. INSTRUMENTAL ASSISTANCE (VIA LENDING), 2. DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL CONTACTS AND STIMULATING SELF-HELP (VIA PLAY AND ENCOUNTER AREAS), 3. THE PROFFERING OF ADVICE, 4. EMOTIONAL SUPPORT, 5. GIVING EXPLANATIONS OR PROVIDING INFORMATION, 6. TRAINING IN SKILLS, 7. EARLY DETECTION OF MORE SERIOUS EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT PROBLEMS, AND MAKING APPROPRIATE REFERRALS.



new way, make time for the child, and experience richly rewarding and intimate moments together.

They can find, in a display case, information about educational and welfare organizations, school-support organizations, course programs, school addresses, IBOs or child day-care centers, holiday activities for children, etc. They can also get such information from our collaborators who, if necessary, will refer them to the next address where they will be assisted further.

In a separate nook – a small, cozy, soft-carpeted area – they will find a reading corner with many magazines and books about child-raising and education, as well as reading materials for the children themselves (scheduled for 2010).

Outside our opening hours, however, we are still on-the-go: We organize training sessions for parents and teachers on the themes:

- * **Importance of Play in the Child's Development**
- * **World Games**
- * **Language Play at Home**
- * **First Experience of Kindergarten**
- * **The Transition to the First School Year**

We have our own personal perspectives and our own methodology. To complement these, we regularly collaborate in the above training with other organizations that look at these themes from a different point of view. These organizations include a child day-care center; Steunpunt Schoolvragen (the Support Center for Questions about Schools); the Onderwijscentrum (the Education Center); the Leermiddelencentrum (the Learning Resources Center); the youth library; a consultation and social-assistance team; KWB (Christian Workers Association), and many others.

4. THE PROMOTION OF NEIGHBORHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND COLLABORATION AMONG LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS AND PRIMARY SCHOOLS

At least twice a year we organize a street event. This gives us new insights into the world around us. For instance, we learn about newly arrived residents or find out how non-member families and children can benefit from our presence. Some of our mem-



EARLY EVOLUTION: FROM SOCIAL COOPERATIVE INITIATIVE (2003-2005) TO EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT (2006-2007)

It did not take long for the non-profit organization (npo) – which had been renamed to include both a Dutch (vzw Walala) and a francophone (asbl Walalou) version – to become embedded in the neighborhood. From the outset, we chose to carefully establish parameters: both quantitatively (facts and figures) and qualitatively (noting down conversations, observations, advice offered, remarks and comments from members or visitors, etc).

This work pinpointed issues such as:

- * **How many mothers, fathers or other assisting adults were present?**
- * **The children's ages**
- * **How long do people remain in the toy library, on average?**
- * **The cultural background and language of the family**
- * **Do they come to borrow materials or to play?**
- * **What are the membership numbers and turnover?**
- * **What types of games are most, or least, in demand?**
- * **What kind of discussions do members engage in?**
- * **What kind of questions require professional advice?**
- * **How do teachers assess their class visits?**
- * **How many group visits have taken place and where did the groups come from?**
- * **Where is collaboration with schools and organizations needed?**

After a couple of years, we noticed certain early trends. Concerning requests for collaboration, two streams were evident:

1. The Youth/Education sector – after-school child-care/IBOs, child day-care centers, qualitative afternoon day-care in the school, a broad platform of school activities, language-support events or language training programs during holidays, reading sessions, etc.
2. The Welfare sector, with organizations centered on family support leading the way – Kind en Gezin among others, consultation agencies and training teams, guidance and social-assistance teams, health centers, but also child day-care centers with parental assistance, etc.

bers actively participate in these street events: they collaborate with us in performances, do make-up for kids, look after drinks and snacks, or arrange receptions for new families in the street. Every school year we devote much time to finding local volunteers to help us, not only with the street event but also in the Toy Library itself or in organizing holiday activities. They provide a 'special face' to our work and make everything more accessible for local residents. Some of our permanent collaborators are, indeed, residents in the neighborhood. If we lined up all our collaborators and volunteers in one row, we'd go a long way!

Aside from our 'own' party, we also participate in other local festivities organized by the many Cureghem organizations.

However, 'working' the neighborhood is not just about throwing, or participating in, parties. To develop a neighborhood or community, it is essential that local organizations consult with each other and collaborate regularly. For that reason, we chose in the first place to provide services and to proceed according to requests: schools and organizations can subscribe to our standard services but they are also welcome to pass on specific requests to us. To reinforce such efforts to be responsive to the needs of the residents, the Board of Trustees and the General Meeting include member families and representatives of the socio-cultural field.

Among the target public we were able to reach, we observed a strong trend: families were coming to us with ever-younger kids – with the result that toddlers now occupy an important place in the Toy Library. The number of families visiting not to borrow materials but just to spend a pleasant and meaningful afternoon rose by more than 30 per cent on Wednesdays (when Belgian schools have a half-day). It has become less difficult to explain to parents that we are not a child day-care center but rather a family-oriented organization. The lounge corner has gained tremendously in importance; mothers love it as gives them the opportunity to meet other mothers and to take a breather.

More and more often, we are visited by isolated parents – both single mothers and fathers, who are responsible for raising their children on their own because of divorce or separation, but often also because of the spouse's employment abroad, or because the father performs shift work, thus being seldom at home. There are also families that have all their relatives living abroad, people who have recently arrived in our neighborhood or in Belgium and hence lack any social network, and mothers at home with their babies or small children day after day. Many of these children have little contact with their peers; their existence is as isolated as that of their parents.

For such reasons, the step towards school raises, for many parents, almost insurmountable obstacles on which they look with trepidation and with many questions. They come to us to get their children accustomed to the presence of other children or to the regular absence of a mother.

Children sometimes come to us with a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or grown-up sister. (The factor of young children being cared for by an older sister is worthy of much more attention within the non-profit sector.)

Cultural differences are noticeable and not easy to bridge, even in the Toy Library. But as families meet more and more frequently and get used to one another, such barriers disappear, to be replaced by open, communicative relationships.

Concerning our lending practices, the question of how parents can support their children at school and in learning the Dutch language remains of particular importance. To provide

assistance with Dutch, we tend to refer parents to after-school programs and activities, and to the regular libraries, where they can also take out films and CD-ROMS. In addition, we encourage parents and children to talk to each other in their native tongue. Similarly, many of the games that we selected for use in the 'school corner' cannot be played without plenty of chatter – and that can be done both in the native tongue and in Dutch. In any case, the games materials from the school corner are much in demand for borrowing.

Some parents have difficulty in monitoring a child's learning progress, especially the less educated parents, or those who have not been to school in Belgium. We try to answer any questions that they have.

Group games are borrowed much less than one might expect – their rules or their small components prove too much of an obstacle. Some years ago, therefore, we shifted towards short, dynamic games and to traditional games from both our own and foreign cultures (for instance, Checkers {Draughts}, Awale, etc). The toys for small children are very popular. Since they



are expensive to buy and a child rapidly outgrows them, they are ideal items to borrow from the Toy Library. Symbolic and activity games are also much borrowed: doll's corner, dress-up clothes, doctor's medical bag, castle with knights, dinosaurs, plus toy bicycles and scooters. More surprisingly, some families ask to borrow pencils or paper. This confirms our belief that there is a great need for a lending service in a neighborhood such as ours.

SECOND EVOLUTION: WALALA AS A SCHOOL-SUPPORT INITIATIVE (2009 ...)⁹

Aside from families, we also have schools, organizations and students coming and registering with us. The number of visits and registrations of these groups has grown considerably over the past three years. The students are primarily enrolled in child-care or speech-therapy programs, or in teacher-training courses. We welcome the interest shown by, among other bodies, the Centrum voor Volwassenenonderwijs Brussel (the Center of Adult Education in Brussels), Tweede Kans Onderwijs (Second-Chance Education), in having their students in polyvalent care programs become acquainted with the role of toy libraries.

Organizations approach us for inspiration, to work around a specific theme, or to bring some variations to their own play-corner concepts. Schools, especially, are interested in toy libraries; appropriate toys and games are expensive and often the school's budget is small. And a toy library, even more than a school, is familiar with the range of toys and games available. But there are many other reasons why teachers borrow materials. The Dutch Toy Libraries Association polled users of toy libraries to find out what motivated people to register as members with these centers. Excluding budgetary considerations, teachers highlighted the following benefits:

- * **Games and playing games provide different insights into the child and the class as a whole than do teaching situations – you get to know and see the child in a new light**
- * **The child also gets to know the teacher in a fresh way**
- * **Toy libraries offer an opportunity to test out new games and see how they might work in the classroom**
- * **They help the teacher to make an educated choice from**

9. FLEMISH COMMUNITY COMMITTEE, CABINET OF EDUCATION.



© CARLOS RAMIREZ

among the commercial offerings

- * **The broad range of games offers opportunities for experimenting, for using variants, getting inspired, and establishing one's own priorities**
- * **The toy libraries help to remove the boundaries between child and adult and between 'inferior' and 'superior'**
- * **You can take your class out of its school context, without losing the teacher's guidance role**
- * **Toy libraries are a neutral space**
- * **You can initiate interesting projects in collaboration with toy libraries**

In the Brussels context, there is the further benefit that a toy library can make a valuable contribution to a child's ability to acquire language proficiency, both because it makes games available and offers animated game participation to schoolchildren. Every self-respecting toy library in Brussels will develop expertise around 'language' games materials – that is to say, materials that, in the process of the game, will stimulate communication, interaction, expression, and the varied use of words. Indeed, vzw Walala has from the outset – in its statutes, standing rules, daily activities and choice of programs, etc – considered language a priority.

Teacher members, however, often face practical obstacles: who at the school will collect and return the materials; who will pay



for the borrowing; preparation is required before games can be used in the classroom; you need to go and get the games after school time, and so forth. For such reasons, we are visited frequently by the most dedicated teachers who live not too far away from our library. We also find that, after school group visits, it is such dedicated teachers and parents that stick around, having been inspired to make a success of playing in the classroom or at home. Some schools have decided to set up their own small toy library on their premises, in addition to the normal school library, or to modify their playground to accommodate the concept.

We have been asked by the public authorities to place greater emphasis on the further development of the educational aspect of the library, and to expand our neighborhood activities. Since we ourselves are convinced of the many possibilities and the pressing needs in these two areas, vzw Walala is, as of the current school year 2009-2010, profiling itself as a service provider for the educational sector, within the perimeter of west-southwest Brussels. The action points in our second statutory objective (see above) will thus be greatly expanded in the coming years. Our activities will remain primarily family-oriented, of course, but in future our work will be conducted within the contextual goal of the 'learning child'. Specific cooperative partnerships around the topic of providing educational support will now mainly be developed by our francophone counterpart, asbl Walalou (which remains recognized as a Co-hésion sociale {Social Cohesion} project). At the same time, the educational packages for parents (see our third objective) and our offerings for schools will continue to engage our full attention. Meanwhile, we consider parental support at home "the most significant form of parental involvement in the learning performance of their children".¹⁰

GUDRUN ISERENTANT

VZW WALALA

OCTOBER 2009



VLAAMSE
GEMEENS
CHAPSCO
MMISSIE

WALALA MET DE STEUN VAN DE VLAAMSE GEMEENSCHAPSCOMMISSIE
WALALOU MET DE STEUN VAN DE FRANSE GEMEENSCHAPSCOMMISSIE



¹⁰. K. BROEKHOF, DIDAKTIEF, MARCH 2007, P. 24.







2. DE SPEELVIJVER – HOW THE PLAYING POND CREATED A SPLASH

THE RECEPTION AND ENCOUNTER CENTER OF
THE SOCIAL ASSISTANCE AND CONSULTING
TEAM SAMIK

1. SOCIAL ASSISTANCE AND CONSULTING TEAM SAMIK

Since 1987, Team Samik has been actively providing support with the upbringing of children. At first, this was done through individual projects and action research; later on, through the recognition of Kind & Gezin (Child and Family), with financial support from OCMW Antwerp. (We are also co-coordinator of the project Kansen voor Kinderen {Opportunities for Children}.)

In the community center Centrum De Wijk in Antwerp-North, our premises are in an old district school building in the Seefhoek/Stuivenberg area. There, we work daily with collaborators and teams active in social cooperative development.

Together with many other colleagues and programs of CAW Metropool (the center for social well-being), we help to provide expert assistance and services to those people that are in greatest need of help.

OUR KIND & GEZIN (CHILD AND FAMILY) MISSION

“Social assistance and consulting teams pursue integral and readily accessible preventative support programs in the areas of education for underprivileged families with young children. Reception and group-oriented education-support activities (activities in group context) represent the core activities of the support function.”

We engage in regular consultation with our colleagues in the



Social Assistance and Consulting Teams in Antwerp. All of these are now also operating their own reception and hospitality centers (with harmonization, collaboration, and joint engagement at the municipal level). There is a shared website and the teams take part under a single name in the municipal advisory council and the network of Integral Youth Assistance.

2. SAMIK AND ITS PLAYING POND

Some years ago, Samik tried to find a way to expand its reception facilities. Until then, we had been running a readily accessible reception in Centrum De Wijk, where Samik has its premises, and in the waiting-room of the consultation agency of Kind & Gezin (Child and Family). However, we wanted to focus more specifically on children and their education.

In seeking to improve the reception facilities, we became acquainted with many people and initiatives. These provided us with inspiration and proffered many suggestions. One of these organizations was the Evens Foundation. A few years earlier, it had established the Toy Library Walala in the Brussels neighborhood of Cureghem. This was a splendid initiative that we wished to duplicate in Antwerp. In the end, the Evens Foundation turned from supporter to co-initiator, partner, and sponsor of our project. It contributed the initial buckets of water to our idea for the Playing Pond.¹¹ And we integrated their experiences and knowledge into our new initiative.

We turned the first sods to dig the Playing Pond and build our play and encounter center.

We took advantage of the team’s accumulated know-how and its long years of experience in group activities as we built and fitted out the Play Encounter Center. Similarly, in the TeamPlay Group, which has been active on a weekly basis for many years, we work with mothers and their toddlers.

Parents, mostly Samik clients, became involved from the very outset. They helped in the preparations, the making of choices, the drafting of the standing rules, and the organization of the festivities for the Grand Opening.

11. THE PREPARATORY WORK STARTED IN JANUARY 2006, AND THE ALTERATIONS IN SEPTEMBER 2006. THEN THE FISHES WERE INTRODUCED ... AND PARENTS AND CHILDREN COULD START VISITING THE PLAYING POND AS OF JANUARY 2007.



The Playing Pond was an instant success story. Because it is open and easily accessible, has an attractive and welcoming ambiance, and offers a wide variety of activities, without any compulsion, it attracts families from the neighborhood like a magnet.

Sometimes, mostly on Wednesdays (school half-day), the Playing Pond proves too small – and the host of little fishes in the water have hardly enough oxygen to breathe. For that reason, we are constantly on the look-out for alternatives: more room, another area, a better spread of opening times.

3. THE PLAYING POND – PRACTICAL ISSUES

The Playing Pond is open on Wednesday and Friday afternoons and on Saturday mornings.

On average, at any one time, it is visited by some eight parents (generally mothers), together with 11 children. The busiest time is on Wednesday afternoons, when we record around 17 parents and up to 30 children. Fridays prove less hectic, while the number of visitors on Saturdays is still growing.

Parents and children are welcomed by two or three collaborators, assisted by volunteers. The Playing Pond then becomes the scene of games, chatting, laughter, whining, hollering, stamping, jumping, shouting, dancing, and all sorts of merriment and hilarity.

The visitors are generally parents with children under six, but the toys provided are suitable for use by children up to eight, so older brothers and sisters can come and play along.

Aside from the opening times reserved for parents and children, the Playing Pond is periodically open to groups such as schools and local organizations. But we also get out and about at regular intervals; during the summer, we move to squares and the neighboring park, take part in theater projects, organize group visits to the city library – and then end our summer ‘walkabout’ in Antwerp’s new Spoor Noord Park.

4. THE PLAYING POND – ENCOUNTERS, GAMES AND NETWORKING

The Playing Pond is an ideal spot for parents or grandparents to engage in play with their young children or grandchildren. It is a peaceful and pleasant place to get some breathing space and spend time with the kids. Visitors will always find an attentive ear, and can count on support from other parents or counselors. As and when required, concrete issues are dealt with.

It is a place where parents can exchange experiences, ask questions, and share and offer advice and answers. It provides a great opportunity to engage in dialogue about the upbringing of children.

It is also a place to get in touch with other cultures and their educational methods, styles and values. Together, parents start exploring what is happening around the world.

Most of the parents and children live in the neighborhood. They are a mixture of Flemish, Romanian, Polish, Senegalese, Pakistani, Indian, Moroccan, Rwandan, and Turkish. They include two-income families who come to the Playing Pond to borrow pedagogically proven toys. They, too, find it fascinating to exchange ideas and information about parenting and enjoy joining the kids in their play. This social mix is an important objective for us and must be advocated and safeguarded in the future.

In short, the Playing Pond is as diversified and distinctive in its parts as the district where it is located. And it gives rise to informal and intercultural networks that form an excellent basis for more social interaction.

For the children, the Playing Pond represents a safe place where they can take their first tentative steps into the world at large and, together with their parents, discover and learn. They meet other children and adults and thus expand their horizon. They become acquainted with new toys that they may take home. This helps to prepare them for the transition to child day-care or Kindergarten.

Playing and language experiences are stimulated in an enjoyable way. Thus, for numerous children, the Playing Pond introduces

them to the Dutch language through story-telling, discussing pictures, and listening to stories.

5. THE PLAYING POND AND THE LINK WITH SAMIK

When, three years ago, Samik started this initiative, we had no idea that it would take off the way it did. The importance and the impact of the Playing Pond within the activities of our team, the number of visitors, and the input of and collaboration with similar initiatives are all on the rise. The Playing Pond is almost an autonomous operation.

Initially, the aim of the Playing Pond was to expand the team's reception and hospitality function. But it didn't take us long to discover the new possibilities that the meeting place offered, such as engaging in group activities.

Parents, if they wish, can participate in group sessions. Certain questions or signals may lead to proposals to work at home with the Play as an Aid module during home visits. Or one may work towards care harmonization. Or a group participant can visit the Playing Pond with her children. In such ways, the Playing Pond plays an important role in our Social Assistance and Consulting Team. Its operation fits into the whole picture of a broad-based, differentiated, and highly accessible educational program.

The interaction between the various activities is important and enriching, but should not be seen as an absolute. Every activity has its own special individuality. The Playing Pond activities must not be constrained within a straightjacket but retain their *free and open* character. It is essential to allow for the individuality of parents and children, and enable people to make their own choices.

6. THE PLAYING POND AND THE LINK WITH THE CONSULTING AGENCY

Samik also operates a consulting bureau for the Kind & Gezin (Child and Family) agency. Here also, there is an important link with the Playing Pond; indeed, the waiting-room of the consulting office and the Playing Pond adjoin each other. Hospitality workers are already active in the waiting-room but we aim to maximize the benefits of this proximity by installing glass



doors, adjusting the opening times, making better use of the reading corner, improving the toys and the toy corner, and offering informational materials about nursery schools.

7. THE PLAYING POND – SAMIK: POINTS OF DEPARTURE AND VISION

It is part of Samik’s approach and vision to respect the choices and the individuality of the parents with whom, and on behalf of whom, we are working. This is often easier said than done.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CHILDREN RESTS WITH THE PARENTS

Through dialogue and with regard for flexibility, we make our knowledge and skills available to help achieve the well-being of young families forced to cope in socially difficult circumstances and faced with the problem of social exclusion. That is our mission under the aegis of Kind & Gezin (Child and Family).

Every collaborator of the Samik team, during their association with families, and from the perspective of their assignment and role, validates how much the parent means to the child, drawing the parent’s attention to his or her competencies, influence, and strengths. All this requires involvement, the showing of respect, appreciation, and understanding. It forces one to associate with the views of the parents involved. Collaborators also need to deal with difficult situations, and difficult questions. This in turn demands that they be very attentive and join in the search for meaning and clarity. In the Playing Pond, too, the collaborators are putting this vision into actual practice.

A GRASP OF, AND ATTENTION TO, THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

Education and development extend beyond the parent-child context. For that reason, the Samik team pays special attention to social assistance and social networking, and to influencing environmental factors. In our dialogue with families, we cover all these issues, paying attention to the various aspects of an individual’s life situation (housing, education, leisure time, relational components, etc). Hence Samik’s preference for a multi-disciplinary team.

The Playing Pond – a place where much can happen but where little is of a compulsory character – is a ‘social sphere’ with shared responsibilities for education, a lot of interaction, and



mutual support. It is important to empower both parents and informal networks. For instance, we are following up on a research report¹² demonstrating that one of the most significant forms of educational support is providing social and emotional support – so that people are able to get some breathing space, find that their concerns are understood, meet someone who makes time for them, and so on.

BEING ALERT TO STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION

All too frequently, educational support is a preserve of the middle-classes, while those living at the periphery often have to cope during their childhood years with foster-care placements and social exclusion. They, more than anyone else, are entitled to be supported in their education so that they might be in a position to create maximum opportunities for their children. While seeking to ensure a healthy social mix, we pay particular attention to families living in deprived circumstances.

The Playing Pond is an area where families living in poverty can find a space for calm and reflection, can take their bearings, can get things off their chest. Vulnerable groups often lack access to a supportive network, or must make do with a less effective one. We seek to give them social support: to introduce them to new forms of education, to enable them to exchange ideas with other parents and children, to receive support from the hospitality collaborators. In this way, the Playing Pond may function as a step towards a new or different social network.

Even though intercultural work is not always a simple matter, the encounters between various cultures tend to give rise to fascinating incidents each day at the Playing Pond. Raising children in socially difficult conditions is a communal experience; it affects parents from differing cultures. And, in the absence of opportunities for children, socio-economic issues are more important than cultural differences.

We do not, however, take a narrow or purist approach. The families who move into the neighborhood often include two-income families who face fewer problems. But having them take part in

12. VANDENBROECK, M., BOONAERT, T., VAN DER MESPEL, S. & DE BRABANDERE, K. (2007). ‘OPVOEDEN IN BRUSSEL’: GHENT-BRUSSELS: UGENT – VGC, AND BUYSE A. (2007). ‘OPVOEDEN IS TWEERICHTINGS-VERKEER EN COMPLEXER DAN DE IMPACT VAN OUDERS OP KINDEREN’.





the Playing Pond is an asset for us and other members. The wider the range of encounters, exchanges, open and free interaction, and bonding, the more we can contribute to social cohesion.

PARTICIPATION

The result of all of this is a pronounced preference for *member participation*. Members are involved in every new initiative. They are active as volunteers, and have a role to play in the evaluation and steering of individual assistance. Although active participation may vary from project to project, we seek always to take into account the personal views and rhythms of the families to whom we devote our efforts.

8. SAMIK – THE PLAYING POND: SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

The services provided by Samik are being constantly developed by collaborators, the team, and partners. Actions and new initiatives develop organically, mostly as a response to some shortcoming or to our efforts to provide personalized care. We provide the form, but not without being inspired by others and by successful examples from the actual practice.

Our sources of inspiration include:

First and foremost, **the children and the parents** we are collaborating with. Their contributions and input, their questions, stories, and views both challenge and inspire us.

The vision of **empowerment** and individualized care – we are grateful followers of the principles of personalized care of Tine Van Regenmortel and **Bindkracht** (Binding Power). These force lines offer us a framework to act in concert, to start dialogues with families living in poverty. It is a force field that emerges from our unshakable belief that, at certain times, we will make the difference and provide crucial support for people living at the periphery, in crisis, or torn loose from their social environment.

The importance of and methodology for prioritizing **member participation** in our dealings with families was impressed upon us by **South Research**.¹³ This is a process that we started more than fifteen years ago with colleagues of the education center in Genk. With both, the exchange of ideas, novel initiatives, and visions was a fascinating and inspiring experience.

Our **views on children, education, and education support** were also colored by collaborators from the Faculty of Pedagogical Sciences at the University of Ghent, the VCOK (the Training Center for Education and Child Day-Care, Ghent) and the VBJK (Specialist Center for Education and Child Day-Care, Ghent). Their analyses and views on clients, their views on prevention, shared education and responsibility, and the socio-pedagogical perspective, were important sources of inspiration – reinforced

¹³. SOUTH RESEARCH IS A BELGIAN CONSULTANCY FIRM THAT SUPPORTS ORGANIZATIONS WORKING FOR FAIRER SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS.



by a joint visit to the day-care centers in Lyon, a meeting with Tullia Mussati (with a testimonial about the splendid practical paradigms from Italy), and a visit to the encounter center Baboes in Brussels.

9. PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

At this moment, we are at a crossroads. The team is being expanded and we have started an experimental program in social economy (Bridge to Kindergarten and the Workplace).

In July 2009, we reinforced the team of the Playing Pond with three new hospitality collaborators of varied background: a young father, a quiet older Congolese lady, and a flamboyant Algerian mother (the latter having been a visitor to the Playing Pond from the time of its inception; it was her dream to work at the Pond). These additions were enabled by the project Proeftuin Lokale Diensteneconomie: Bruggen naar onderwijs en werk (Experimental Local Service Economy: Bridges to education and the workplace), an initiative of the Flemish Community.

This expansion of the team has opened up new possibilities and challenges for the Playing Pond: more flexible opening hours, greater diversity, and new target groups. Now is the ideal moment to fine-tune both the method of work and operating methodology of the Playing Pond and then to further develop it. This will include strengthening the link with the consulting agency, integrating the focus on toddler participation into the method of work, attracting more fathers, enhancing the harmonization of the various operational methods used by the social-assistance and consulting team in the meeting place, improving further the Toy Library asset for the meeting place, and so forth. The Training Center for Education and Child Day-Care (VCOK) will be assisting Samik in this process.

HILDE TREKKER

DE SPEELVIJVER - SAMIK

NOVEMBER 2009



ENCOUNTERS WITHOUT PRESSURE

MICHEL VANDENBROECK
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL AGOGICS, UNIVERSITY OF GHENT (BELGIUM)

Nearly 40 per cent of children under three lack brothers or sisters.¹⁴ In major cities like Brussels, one-quarter of all mothers with young children spend more than seven hours a day with them, entirely on their own.¹⁵ These are just a couple of factors that indicate the context in which children are being reared and that raise questions about the *socialization* of both children and their parents.

At the same time, researchers are increasingly reaching similar conclusions about the needs and requirements of parents with young children. All parents want the best for their offspring. Most parents regularly have questions about how to raise and educate their kids (something that is completely understandable and part of the 'normal' process of raising children). Some parents look for answers in books, others ask for advice from specialists, and others browse the Internet, and so on. What one parent may find supportive and useful, another may experience as stressful (and vice versa). There is thus no universal education support in the sense of one specific 'method' that will serve everybody equally well. Nonetheless, there is something quite close to it: *informal social assistance*.¹⁶ All parents find that being able to discuss child education among themselves is especially supportive.

Family policy is, for these reasons, mostly a balancing act – for instance, between, on the one hand, structural facilities that assist parents to assume their parental duties (since the educational responsibilities are being shared, as in, for example, child day-care) and, on the other, facilities that provide support to

¹⁴ KIND EN GEZIN (2009). HET KIND IN VLAANDEREN 2008. BRUSSELS: KIND EN GEZIN.

¹⁵ VANDENBROECK, M., BOONAERT, T., VAN DER MESPEL, S. & DE BRABANDERE, K. (2007). OPVOEDEN IN BRUSSEL. GHENT-BRUSSELS: UGENT – VGC.

¹⁶ SEE FOR INSTANCE: BUYSSSE, A. (2008). OPVOEDINGSONDERSTEUNING. ONDERSTEUNING VAN GEZIN-NEN VANDAAG: EEN ONDERZOEK. GHENT: UGENT – GEZINSBOND.

parents who want to undertake part of their responsibilities on their own. It is in this latter category that one looks for a balance between services to assist parents through professional advice (individually or in a group) and services that enable parents to exchange informally their ideas and experiences.

Services of the latter kind appear to be spreading in some parts of the world. Meeting places where parents and their children can encounter one another in an informal setting have expanded substantially in the past few years in France (some one thousand of them are registered) and in Japan (over three thousand), while in Italy, the UK and Australia they are eliciting increased interest. Some of these meeting places have also been established in Flanders.

The first such meeting places were based on the psychoanalytic model of the French 'Maisons Vertes'.¹⁷ Recently, a number of new centers have adopted a more socio-pedagogical approach (see, for instance, www.opvoedeninbrussel.be).

It is typical of such *encounter places for children and parents* that parents come to them in the first place to give their children the opportunity to play with their peers, to discover what it means to play together, to learn the meaning of sharing, of being together, and other similar experiences. Sometimes, they are also interested in having their children gain experience in a Dutch-language environment, looking upon this as good preparation for Kindergarten. Briefly, parents want such initiatives to assist their kids in the context of *socialization*. At the same time, in these meeting places parents find out that they themselves can learn a lot. They see their children's behavior in circumstances entirely different from those customary at home, and this appears to broaden their understanding of the child. They are also able to experience how other parents deal with their children. This is what Tullia Mussati (an Italian researcher who has done a great deal of research in this area) has called 'free confrontation'. Parents witness situations where other parents are handling issues of child education in different ways. This is a useful experience as it makes it clear that there are varying approaches to 'good parenting', and it also makes parents reflect on what they themselves are doing. But, at the same time, the 'confrontation'

in such experiences is 'free', meaning that there is no specialist present to tell them how to do, or not to do, this or that, no-one who makes a 'judgment' for them. Each parent can thus feel at ease and decide independently how to react to these confrontations. And parents find support in talking to one another.

For these reasons, it is not only a matter of *socialization* for the children, but also for the parents. Hence, the individuals in charge of the reception of parents and children are first of all hosts and hostesses rather than 'education experts'. Their task is to ensure that all feel welcome, and that children as well as parents establish contact with one another.

These meeting places are, therefore, not to be seen as classrooms in the traditional sense. They offer no elements of prevention, no solutions to deal with specific problems, and, even less, initiatives for specific target groups. They are places of encounter, where people meet without constraints. For that reason, they can morph into places where parents will experience that informal social support that is today deemed so important by all researchers. It is a remarkable tension field: to the extent that they do not harbor too many ambitions in terms of being supportive, they can be places for true educational assistance. During the initial stages of a new Brussels encounter center, it became clear that it is quite possible to reach families of great diversity. In the first two months, the visitors included two-income families as well as single and unemployed mothers and fathers, and indigenous people as well as immigrants. So many different languages are now represented that it would be hard to keep count of them. Nonetheless, these parents manage to get together across all such boundaries. This is made possible by the one objective that occupies all of them equally: the concern for their children and the fact that everybody experiences doubts and has questions about the raising of children, and wants to get away from being cooped up inside the four walls of their living-room.

17: MEETING PLACES FOR CHILDREN AND PARENTS THAT, IN THE LATE 1960S, WERE INSPIRED BY, AND MODELLED AFTER, THE WORK OF THE FRENCH PSYCHOANALYST FRANÇOISE DOLTO.





WHY CHOOSE PLAY?

PETER ADRIAENSSENS

is senior lecturer in Child and Youth Psychiatry at the KU (Katholieke Universiteit) of Leuven (Belgium), and head and director of the Clinical Child Psychiatry Department and of the Trust Center for Child Abuse at the University Hospital Leuven (Belgium).

INTRODUCTION

All children play. But who offers facilities for play, offers a reference frame for stimulating kids, for helping and guiding them. While playing, the child learns to cope within a social context, to deal with his or her own emotions and with the feelings of others. The child learns to deal with conflicts and to think up new ways to handle problems. By playing, children are given the chance to amass experiences in establishing social contacts, to broaden these, and to practice them.

WHY PLAYING IS INDISPENSABLE

People are not born fully formed. While growing up, they gradually develop their various capabilities. They also learn from their daily experiences. This way, they gather, during their childhood years, critical mass from which, later in life, they will draw in order to tackle the situations that confront them. The normal play behavior of children fulfils an indispensable role in processing and learning to situate and assess daily life happenings. This growing-up and development process is not a smooth experience. Situations or relationships can cause grief and leave scars. Fortunately, this is not necessarily or inevitably irreversible. New situations and relationships may succeed the earlier ones and alleviate those that were painful or smooth out the bumps in the road.

PLAYING GAMES IS ESSENTIAL ...

1. While playing, the child creates his or her own, temporary, different, and safe world.
2. While playing, the child can express and cope with his or her feelings and emotions.
3. While playing, the child learns to deal with limitations, and shift and test out boundaries without incurring any risks.
4. Peers and the peer group form a different mirror, reflecting



figures to imitate other than the parents.

5. Through the game, the child comes in contact with his or her emotions and keeps a hold on them.
6. While playing a game, the child can look at a situation from different perspectives: there is not just one reality.
7. While playing, the child can experience this diversity and reflect on it, thus acquiring more insight into a situation.
8. The game offers the child an opportunity for change; it offers the chance for learning to be flexible.
9. Through the game, the child learns to discover himself or herself and establishes his or her individuality.
10. While playing, the child has a chance to blossom, to live his or her newfound talents.
11. While playing, the child can create new things.
12. While playing, the child discovers that nothing is immutable, that nothing is excluded, and that change is possible.

Playing games may be seen as a practice-ground for later life. This involves practice in thinking, imagining, pretending, planning, being amazed, having doubts, remembering, guessing, hoping, and experimenting. While playing, children learn to distinguish fantasy from reality and accumulate training in social skills and in fancying situations. All children will, at a certain moment in their development, act out in play what they are observing and experiencing in their environment. Thus they learn to cope with anxieties and conflicts. A visit to the dentist is repeated with the teddy bear as the patient, or dolls may be used to simulate a family quarrel. While playing, the child places the situation and the attendant anxieties and emotions outside of him or herself and, thus detached by distance, may feel less anxious and more secure in dealing with the situation. This symbolizing capacity is important later in life in order to be able, as adolescent or adult, to keep reflecting on and to maintain control over strong emotions during the many trials and tribulations that befall people in daily life.¹⁸

18. SEE ALSO: JEANNIN, N., ADRIAENSSENS, P. AND MERTENS, E. (2008). BETER OMGAAN MET DE EMOTIES VAN KLEUTERS' – MET DE METHODE VAN 'HET TOVERBOS' (HOW TO COPE WITH THE EMOTIONS OF TODDLERS – THE METHOD OF 'THE MAGIC FOREST'). UITGEVERIJ LANNOO.



PLAYING GAMES HELPS CHILDREN TO DISCOVER THEIR OWN STRENGTHS

Today, we no longer consider a child's strength as a personality trait (either you've got it or you don't) but as an adjunct to one's development. Children learn how to cope by interaction with their environment, in the first place with their parents, brothers, and sisters. Likewise, we no longer think of kids as 'being able to cope', as if this were a universal characteristic. There are no 'Teflon children' that, regardless of how you treat them, will always land squarely on their feet. Furthermore, there is the risk that, when we tell a child 'you are very strong', he or she will feel responsible when no longer able to cope with a situation, believing that s/he should have been 'strong enough' to do so. Many children are strong in one or more ways. For instance, they can be very capable of coping socially (making friends, sharing their feelings, knowing how to ask for support and to offer support) or they can cope in the cognitive sense (perform well at school in spite of a disastrous family situation). But this may well be coupled with areas of vulnerability (enjoying activities of a youth movement, joining their friends there, laughing and fooling around, and at the same time losing the motivation to learn, getting poor results, playing hooky). Research has also demonstrated that it can make a difference if you are not confronted with problems all at the same time. Children who are raised in an environment that offers them many opportunities (for instance, a good school, permission to visit and receive their friends, taking part in non-school activities, absence of poverty) are better inured to serious shocks such as the death of a parent, or a contested divorce. They may continue to exercise their skills outside of those situations, in other areas. But the same experience of, for instance, the contested divorce may affect the child's development much more deeply when coupled with social exclusion, the upheaval of moving, losing friends, changing schools, confrontation with violent situations, and poverty. The accumulation of risks in a number of areas in life substantially heightens the possibility that the child will lose his or her resilience and suffer, in some way, damage that may become evident sooner or later. For instance, one child may be able to cope with the problems for years and then suddenly suffer a breakdown during puberty, while others may not pay the price until some point in their adult lives, perhaps at the time when they themselves want to raise their own children.



FOR MOST CHILDREN, WE CAN DRAW UP A BALANCE SHEET OF STRENGTHS/WEAKNESSES

When we draw up the sum total of known risk factors, we come to understand how, in certain neighborhoods and districts, we find an abundance of so-called problem youngsters. We tend to find there a conglomeration of poverty, failed integration, exclusion, partner violence, race-induced violence, child abuse, poor housing conditions, failing educational policies, unemployment, etc. In these matters, research has become less optimistic than it was in the past in its hopes of isolating the protective factors that operate during the child's development. What is needed here is encouragement of the youngsters' skills in combination with a political policy that is decisive in its approach to structural aspects.



Is it necessary then to direct all our efforts towards certain target groups? The above information may perhaps lead to the impression that children from advantaged socio-economic groups, coming from families that have not experienced serious problems, acquire an intrinsic resilience and ability to cope. That is not the case. An individual can compare the risks in his or her life only with his or her own experiences. Some youngsters are reluctant to seek timely help since they feel ashamed that, in spite – or because – of the opportunities they are offered within their environment, they are so badly affected by the study pressures placed upon them by their parents, or by their mother’s chronic – albeit not dramatic – alcohol (ab)use. Today, many youngsters suffering from severe depression and fear of failure come from such family backgrounds. Many people cannot understand why, as ‘pampered’ youths, they should have all these problems. But what one experiences as ‘very stressful’ is relative. We need to remain receptive to the vulnerability of every individual, while always keeping in mind that resilience and the ability to cope is a trait or attribute that every person builds up while coping with his or her concrete environment. As such, this can be very divergent indeed.

WHAT MAKES PLAYING GAMES SO HELPFUL?

There are traits in children and parents that, it has sufficiently been demonstrated, form a protective shield in the development of children. This topic falls outside the purview of this paper. Let me just summarize them: intelligence, a calm temperament, good problem-solving skills, attention span, and concentration. And we find that two elements recur as reinforcing aspects in the development of children: parents with deep personal involvement in their children, and an education supported by clear understanding.

What children learn from parents and educators that play with them is how to cope with feelings. In group play, one has to assist others, learn to accept help oneself, propose one’s own ways of thinking, react to others, develop compromises, learn to cope with different types of temperaments, ask for advice, join together to reach a goal. You learn to tackle something that you may not find ‘feasible’ and then find solutions. You learn to be less scared of new challenges and to be less quickly turned off; you learn how you can help yourself by looking at things in a different way; how confessing to somebody that you are scared

by a situation or that you don’t believe you can do something will not alter the reality but make you feel less alone in trying to cope with it. All these skills are important when, later in life, you need to confront setbacks.

WHAT FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO A COMPETENT, SUCCESSFUL YOUNG PERSON?

Warm and structured parenting is important. But parents are not the only educational forces of influence. There is also contact with socially competent adults. These include teachers, youth trainers, local social workers, caregivers, the parents of friends. An underestimated protective factor is the fact that a child may have a talent that others recognize and appreciate. Some children have very obvious or quantifiable talents. They play the violin, are good students, participate in school drama, etc. But every neighborhood holds many children who are unaware of their own talents, and need to discover these. To this end, organized games can make all the difference. The games director can point out to the child his or her sense of humor, or ability to fantasize, or ability to sense that someone else needs encouragement or a sign of appreciation. Whatever the talent may be, every child can benefit from the company of someone else who points out his or her skills and talents. In that way, the child acquires self-knowledge, self-awareness, and self-worth. For our generally small families, participation in games constitutes a supplemental activity in broadening one’s life experiences.

CONCLUSION

Playing at light-hearted games – certainly for the fun of it, but not *only* for fun but with a purpose in mind – with parents and other adults who give directions and support, who are generous with their affections, who offer the comfort of structure, who challenge children to challenge themselves, who show appreciation for their individual competencies and talents, who encourage them to solve problems on their own to the best of their ability ... that is the way in which cooperative playing contributes to, and enhances, a child’s ability to learn to cope with life’s situations.





TOY LIBRARIES IN EUROPE

Europe may be a very diverse continent, but we are everywhere coming upon toy libraries under a variety of different names: Leisure Library, Toy Library, Legeteket, Ludothek, Spielothek, Játéktár Ludothèque, Jucarioteca, Ludoteca, etc.

On the international plane, we witnessed the formation in 1990 of *The International Toy Library Association (ITLA)*¹⁹ and, since 1996, there exists a European umbrella structure that maintains strong ties with ITLA, The European Toy Libraries, or ETL²⁰ for short. Today, twenty countries have joined the organization, representing more than 5,500 toy libraries. In Flanders, we have the VOS – Vlaams Overleg voor Spelotheken (Flemish Toy Libraries Consultancy)²¹ which, unfortunately, has not yet received accreditation.

EDUCATIONAL ROLE

Concerning the supportive role of toy libraries in the educational field, France in particular has assumed a leading role. The research conducted by sociologist Luce Dupraz²² for ALF²³ has demonstrated that, while the toy library is an informal structure where activities are organized around games, it offers room for the further development of spontaneous and informal relationships between visitors, between visitors and the library's collaborators or volunteers, and between parents and children. In this space, all sorts of special relationships are formed, and we frequently note the emergence of richly rewarding bonding moments among parents and children.

Dupraz concludes that, in the toy library, parents experience relief and support in their educational tasks. Educational support is neither sought nor imposed but emerges from the intrinsic

19. CONSTITUTED UNDER BELGIAN LAW. SEE WWW.ITLA-TOYLIBRARIES.ORG/

20. CONSTITUTED UNDER SWISS LAW.

21. VLAAMS OVERLEG VOOR SPELOTHEKEN C/O 'SPELOTHEEK' DE PIEPBAL – VERVERSDIJK 17 – 8000 BRUGGE, MRS. ELS HOSTE, SECRETARY, AND DE ZEVENSPRONG, LEVIETENSTRAAT 4, 9700 OUDENAARDE – MR. PHILIP VAN DEN BOSSCHE, CHAIRMAN.

22. DUPRAZ, L. (2005). 'LA PLACE DES LUDOTHÈQUES DANS LE SOUTIEN À LA FONCTION PARENTALE': RAPPORT D'ETUDE, 2002-2005, ALF.

23. ASSOCIATION DES LUDOTHÈQUES FRANÇAISES – WWW.ALF-LUDOTHÈQUES.ORG



goal of the toy library itself, which is to encourage play behavior. Dupraz considers toy libraries a favorable environment for parents, given that they are offered the chance to further develop their parenting skills in an implicit and random manner, in a setting where their individuality as persons, their socio-cultural diversity, and their very personal and unique expectations are respected.

BENEFITS FOR DISADVANTAGED FAMILIES

In 2007, the British *National Association of Toy and Leisure Libraries* published a report with findings and recommendations: '*Toy Libraries: their benefits for children, families and communities*'. Based on study and analysis, the report proposes five toy libraries as paradigms of correct initiatives in underprivileged areas. According to this study, a toy library can not only promote interaction between parents and their children, but also favorably influence the child's development of such skills as literacy and self-confidence. Parents understand better the importance of play in their children's development and come to realize how 'playing together' can bring enjoyment to both child and parent. Finally, there is the clear and positive impact of toy libraries in underprivileged areas. On the one hand, a toy library creates a communal bond and social cohesion; on the other, it is an important asset for socio-economically disadvantaged families, offering them the opportunity to borrow carefully selected, high-quality toys for their children.



CONTACT DETAILS

Evens Foundation
Stoopstraat 1
2000 Antwerpen, Belgium
+32 3 231 39 70
www.evensfoundation.be

Walala-ou
Rue Otletstraat 28
1070 Anderlecht, Belgium
+32 2 527 52 41

De Speelvijver
p.a. Inloopteam Samik
Wijkcentrum De Wijk
Willy Vandersteenplein 1
2060 Antwerpen, Belgium
+32 3 236 08 00

COLOPHON

PUBLISHED BY THE EVENS FOUNDATION
ENTERPRISE NUMBER 0445135671
STOOPSTRAAT 1
B-2000 ANTWERP

PROFESSOR PETER ADRIAENSSENS
PROFESSOR MICHEL VANDENBROECK
MRS. HILDE TREKKER, COORDINATOR OF THE SOCIAL ASSISTANCE AND CONSULTING TEAM SAMIK
MRS. GUDRUN ISERENTANT, COORDINATOR TOY LIBRARY WALALA
MRS. MAUD AGUIRRE, THE EVENS FOUNDATION
EDITORIAL: HILDE SMEESTERS & MAUD AGUIRRE



© EVENS STICHTING

