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Marte Meo: A Method Of Developmental Supportive Communication

Reading The Developmental Message Behind The Behaviour



1. Case Study

Marte Meo as a video-based method of observation and analysis is becoming more and more popular. It is also suitable for situations of conflict:

► *It is a totally normal day at the day-care centre. A mutter of voices in the building block corner, a crowd in the doll corner and giggling in the group room. One kindergarten teacher is busy with the breakfast dishes and a colleague of hers is tending two children in the bathroom. Suddenly, two boys get into a fight, having played peacefully before. The kindergarten teacher runs to them, because Max is crying and Jan is standing in front of him with clenched fists. Earlier, the two boys played – each on their own – with building blocks and toy cars. When both of them wanted to have the wooden bridge a fight broke out. ◀*

1. 2. What Happened?

Scenario 1:

Max forcefully takes the wooden bridge out of Jan's hand, Jan goes to get it back, clenches his fists and Max starts to cry.

Scenario 2:

Jan takes the wooden bridge forcefully from Max's hand, Jan defends the wooden bridge physically and Max starts to cry.

Scenario 3:

Jan fights for his wooden bridge, after having told Max very clearly that he does not want Max to destroy his building block construction, and stresses these words with a physical threat. Max starts to cry.

This short moment thus can have happened in many different versions. The individual perception of the conflict on the part of the kindergarten teachers, but also on part of the children, is influenced by the pre-

vious events, experiences, the atmosphere and the children's particular personalities.

3. Understanding Conflicts Better: Observing Small Aspects

Conflicts always consist of various aspects that are connected with one another. In order to understand conflicts better one has to observe the small aspects. Only set in context, it becomes clear what has happened and why a child shows that exact behaviour.

If the origin of the conflict could not be determined, in the best case both children provide information about the course of events and solve their conflicts

Marte Meo: A Developmental Supportive Approach

The Marte Meo method was developed by the Dutch woman *Maria Aarts* in the 80s and has in the meantime been established in almost 40 countries. The name *Marte Meo* comes from Greek mythology, and translates approximately »to achieve something on one's own strength« and hence describes the resources orientated approach of the method.

»To achieve something on one's own strength« is the basic concept of the video-based counselling services for developmental support in daily life. *Maria Aarts* determined the stages of development and developmental needs of children by means of video recordings. She combined her observations with parental behaviour patterns that are important for a beneficial development of their children. From this, the Marte Meo method was created, consisting of elements of basic communication for good developmental processes, video sequences, and check lists that are used as helpful tools for the interaction analysis and for the purpose of making a development diagnosis.

The aim of the method is to recognise blocked development processes, to activate them and to be able to give parents, or professionals respectively, concrete, detailed and simply phrased information on how to act and help. The practicability in daily life without additional working material is crucial thereby. On the face of it, the Marte Meo method is simple, easily

comprehensible and contains a lot of practical information about stages of development, communication elements and supportive behaviour.

At a closer look, however, one becomes aware of the profundity and versatility of the method, which is why the method appeals to a great number of occupational groups.

Marte Meo Training Opportunities:

There are different stages of training:

- Training to become a *Marte Meo Practitioner* consists of the use of Marte Meo elements when dealing with children.
- The training towards becoming a *Marte Meo Therapist* puts the emphasis on creating the development diagnosis and offering advice by means of film sequences, aimed both at parents as well as colleagues.
- *Marte Meo Colleague Trainer*.
- *Marte Meo Therapist/Colleague Trainer*.
- *Marte Meo Supervisor*.
- *Marte Meo Licensed Supervisor*.⁽¹⁾

Further information:

see website »Marte Meo International«:
www.martemeeo.com

without any help. They are already able to formulate own needs and emotions, to regulate themselves, if anger or disappointment come up, to bear the feeling of any kind of frustration and to deal with the »opponent«, to find solutions or to give in. They are socially able, emphatic and self-confident.

But what can one do when children are not able to name their own needs, to notice and to accept their own boundaries and the boundaries of others? *Maria Aarts*, the founder of the Marte Meo method, has a simple answer to this question: »One has to practice everything one is not able to do yet.«

4. There Is A Developmental Message Behind The Behaviour⁽²⁾

The point in the work with Marte Meo is to read the developmental message behind the behaviour, that is to say not to merely analyse the behaviour, but to understand the message regarding what developmental need hides behind it. One aims at recognising developmental blockades but above all to notice the existing abilities and skills of the child and to work with these resources. In order to activate the natural development process of the child, it is necessary to recognise the child's positive development initiatives. The objective is to tie in with the existing resources and thus to enable the child to develop own strategies of solution, to not despair in the face of problems, but to grow with them. In this way, children can grow up to become strong personalities.

5. A Theoretical Model Of The Marte Meo Method

In the context of a scientific project at the Albert-Ludwig University of Freiburg, Dr. *Armin Castello* and graduate psychologist *Marlene Grotz* developed a theoretical model of the Marte Meo method. They evaluated film sequences according to five Marte Meo basic elements for developmental supportive communication. *Armin Castello* and *Marlene Grotz* describe the basic elements as being part of a closed circuit: »These elements are interdependent, that is they are in close interplay and come to generate a closed circuit. This circuit is not an inflexible one, but is subjected to continuous further development. Because of this inherent dynamic, the circuit could be described in a three-dimensional way as a spiral. (...) Its elements are:

- development of initiatives;
- noticing/following;
- naming;
- positive guidance/supervision/support;
- affirming.«⁽³⁾

These elements of basic communication serve as a foundation for the Marte Meo method on three different levels:

- on the parent-child-level (or professionals-carer-ward-level respectively);
- on the counsellor-parents-level, and
- on the supervision-training-level.

If one considers the parents-child-level, the circuit presents itself as follows: the child shows initiatives or develops them respectively, and demonstrates this by way through sounds, language or actions. The parents notice these signals if they pay attention to their child's initiatives. In doing so, the parents name the child's spontaneous initiatives and feelings, if the child does not do this on its own. They talk about their own initiatives and feelings, call the child's attention to the feelings of others and affirm the child in its actions. This kind of support helps the child to develop self-perception, new initiatives, ideas and responsibility. Thus, self-confidence when dealing with one's own feelings as well as social skills develop.

Every single element of the circuit is important for the development process and has different effects. However, the individual elements cannot be considered in isolation, but complement each other or are strongly linked to each other.

6. Supporting Social Skills⁽⁴⁾

6.1. Back To The Starting Point (Case Study):

► Jan and Max are fighting. Jan clenches his fists and Max cries. Neither of the children can explain what happened. The kindergarten teacher settles the dispute and finds a compromise. The playtime continues but judging from the previous events it is clear that it will not take long until the next fight breaks out. The kindergarten teachers wish for Jan to be able to notice other children's actions better and that he learns to understand non-verbal signs in order to develop

empathy and to be able to react to other children's feelings. For Max, they want him to develop more self-confidence and a better ability to tolerate frustration in order to be able to deal better with any kinds of disappointment. ◀

6.2. Developing Empathy By Means Of Naming

Using the Marte Meo elements, the kindergarten teacher supports Jan's cognitive ability in daily life by making him aware to the actions and feelings of other children by means of naming.

For example:

»Look Jan, Max is going to get a toy car. Can you see that? He's driving through the tunnel«, or:

»Look Jan, Lisa has taken the big spoon. She is filling pasta onto her plate.«

By naming of other children's feelings, Jan develops empathy and is able to understand non-verbal signals and to »read« the facial expressions better.

Example:

»Look here Jan, Max is angry, because the building brick keeps falling down«, or:

»Do you see, Lena is really enjoying her food today.«

In this way, Jan receives a lot of social information that enables him to get to know the feelings of other children and to understand them. Thus, he is encouraged to become aware of his surroundings, to observe other children out of his own interest and hence gradually learns to get an overview of situations and to evaluate them.

6.3. Support In Order To Build Confidence In One's Own Abilities

Max requires support in order to build up confidence in his own abilities and to be able to solve conflicts on his own. He would do well to develop more pleasure in playing together with other children, so that the natural balance between joy and frustration can be established. Furthermore, he ought to develop a better self-perception and a positive self-image. Through the naming of Max's initiatives, the kindergarten teacher can encourage his sense of self and help him to achieve a better self-perception.

For example:

»Ah, you are taking the red building brick for the bridge«, or:

»You like the blue car, don't you?«, or:

»Yes, there is one line, and another long line, you have drawn a lot lines now.«

Simultaneously with and as a result of this, Max learns that he is noticed and that people like his company. Moreover, he is supported in his ability to concentrate; thus, he is able keep himself busy with something for a longer period of time.

7. Cooperation And Change Of Perspective

With the Marte Meo method, one does not work on the two stopping to fight but focuses on how they learn to cooperate, to discuss, and to empathise with others. The evaluation of both Jan's and Max's ability to play is made by means of different film sequences. Afterwards, several working points, particular to every child, to practice are decided upon following the Marte Meo development diagnosis. These moments of practice take place in daily life, during dinner, in the bathroom, during creative tasks, in the building brick corner, in the sandbox or when brushing the teeth and are different for both children.

Marte Meo adapts itself to the respective work area, is individually applicable and irrespective of the children's ages. Thus, the method finds its way into more and more day-care centres and family centres that work in the area of support, is used in cooperation with the parents, but also as a quality assurance.

Annotations:

⁽¹⁾ See: AARTS, MARIA (2011). *Marte Meo – Basic Manual*, 3rd edition. Chapt. 6: *Marte Meo-Kurse & Ausbildungs-Curriculum* (Marte Meo courses & training-curriculum), pp. 177-203. ISBN 978-90-75455-26-7. Eindhoven: Aarts Productions.

[In English: AARTS, MARIA (2008). *Marte Meo – Basic Manual*, 2nd ed. Chapt. 4: *Marte Meo Courses & Training Curriculum*, pp. 171-192. ISBN 978-90-75455-16-8. Eindhoven: Aarts Productions.]

Also see the website of »Marte Meo International«: www.martemeeo.com, page »Training/further education«: <http://www.martemeeo.info/fortbildung-gen.html> (Access July, 2014).

⁽²⁾ AARTS, MARIA (2011). Id. Chapt. 3.1: *Die Entwicklungsbotschaft hinter den Problemen lesen; »Schwierigkeiten« in »Möglichkeiten« umwandeln: Ein Prozess wie die Photosynthese«* (Reading the

developmental message behind the problems; transforming »difficulties« into »opportunities«: A process like the photosynthesis), pp. 93-96.

- ⁽³⁾ CASTELLO, ARMIN & GROTZ, MARLENE (2007): *A theoretical model of the Marte Meo method*. In: Marte Meo Magazine, issue 2007/1, pp. 1-9.
- ⁽⁴⁾ AARTS, MARIA (2011): Id. Ch. 5.3.3: *Marte Meo-Spielfähigkeiten- und isolierte Kinder-Checkliste*. (Marte Meo-play ability- and isolated children-check list), p. 154 ff. [In *Marte Meo – Basic manual*, 2nd edition: Chapt. 6.3, p. 234ff.]

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- Negotiate, Learning to -
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