

# Raising Happy Children

**Sara Méndez** explains how she discovered the Danish way of parenting and educating children



**W**hen I became a mother I started questioning the way I was raised, and I soon realised

I wanted to bring up my child differently. I aspired to parent my daughter with respect, empathy and honesty while validating her emotions and personality, but as I began to look for a school in the English education system I felt discouraged by the amount of testing and stress children were put through

from the early years. I wanted a different approach to teaching, where learning was a joyful journey. And then by chance I came across *The Danish Way of Parenting*, co-written by Jessica Joelle Alexander and Iben Dissing Sandahl.

Alexander and Sandahl's book made me realise how much self-awareness is needed to be a good parent. I came to understand how powerful supporting language can be and how important it is to separate the behaviour from the child's identity. I learned

how reframing can help children shift the focus from a negative outcome to a more constructive one and how play teaches children self-worth. In their book I found what I was looking for: a kind approach to parenting where children are taught empathy, resilience and honesty from a very young age. Excited about what I had read, I searched for a Scandinavian school in my area, and to my surprise found Dania School, a small Danish school in the heart of London.

Even though neither my partner nor I are

Danish, we decided to visit the school. Anne Herman, the office manager and after-school club organiser, who is originally from Denmark, was enthusiastic about the school's philosophy, which is based on values of respect, tolerance and equality. As soon as I walked into the classrooms I felt the warmth of the teachers, the confidence of the children and the excitement around learning. There were boxes of Lego in every classroom, and round tables where children of different ages could interact with each other as they did their work. Despite having no exams, students excelled. Spending time in the playground was considered as important as being inside the classroom. In preschool, children played and participated in different activities throughout the day such as singing, reading and painting, and at recess they joined the older children to go to an adventure playground. There was a feeling of togetherness that made me feel welcome, and I immediately knew this was the school I wanted my daughter to attend.

## another key ingredient in Scandinavian education is play

For years Danes have been rated the happiest people on Earth, and according to Meik Wiking, author of *The Little Book of Hygge: The Danish Way to Live Well* and researcher at The Happiness Research Institute in Copenhagen, "social relations are essential for people's happiness." Danes believe that when children are socially happy they are motivated to learn, so it came as no surprise to discover that the main focus in preschool was to get children to be independent and to develop socially. In *The Danish Way of Parenting*, Alexander and Sandahl insist that "fostering empathy in children early on helps them create better, more caring relationships in the future. And we know it's these caring relationships that are the foundation for true happiness and well-being."

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Just a few weeks after the school year began, I noticed that my daughter would often speak about her emotions and those of others. Her teachers told me they were teaching the children how to find solutions to conflicts and to understand other people's emotions, through storytelling, by mirroring faces expressing different feelings and by encouraging children to draw their own emotions. Learning about empathy started reflecting on my daughter's behaviour. She became more vocal and confident during struggles with other children, but also more respectful and caring. I was pleased to see that the purpose of education was to give my child social skills while fostering moral values and independence.

In Denmark the focus is not on external measures of progress (hence no exams), but rather on the development of the whole child. Teachers evaluate each child's progress throughout the year, while encouraging children to find internal motivations and initiative and to develop an inner compass to guide them through life. Their aim is to cultivate the child's spirituality, respect for the natural environment and sense of social justice to bring up able, resilient and happy children.

Another key ingredient in Scandinavian education is play. Danes give a lot of importance to free, unstructured play, so after the success of *The Danish Way of Parenting*, Sandahl decided to write *Play the Danish Way*, focusing on the importance of play and how it affects a child's development. As a mother, teacher and psychotherapist, Sandahl believes that in play, "children are free to explore their full potential and develop their individual talents without the constraints of adulthood." Through play,

children are also learning social skills: how to regulate their emotions, cope with stress and negotiate difficult situations. For Sandahl, play is "the first step towards establishing personal milestones that will serve as points of navigation later on in life".

During our first school visit Anne stressed the importance of learning through play and spending time outdoors. Being in contact with nature and allowing children to disconnect is crucial for them to be able to absorb what they learn in the classroom. When I asked Sandahl how schools in Denmark incorporate play into their education system, she told me, "Much of Denmark's learning culture is based on a concept called proximal development. This means that a child needs the right amount of space to learn and grow in the zone that is right for them with the right amount of help. So if we push children or pull too much in a certain direction, they risk losing the joy of learning and becoming anxious. Therefore, in the younger classes you will see that the alphabet is sung, calculations are resolved by jumping in the school yard, and storytelling is dramatised." Respecting the individual child is highly valued in Scandinavian education. That's why in Denmark teachers are trained to follow a guiding principle called 'differentiate', which basically means that teachers learn to see each student as an individual, each with different needs. Danish parents also treat children as individuals who have their own opinions and allow them to express themselves, giving children space to find their own voices and individuality.

I want my child to grow in an environment of tolerance, respect, trust and love. I'm grateful to have found an alternative school that focuses on the development of the whole child, where children are listened to and are inspired to be responsible individuals by helping each other and through encouraging collaboration. We need more schools where there is a focus on outdoor play, teamwork and active learning. Maybe by adopting some of the Danish ways of parenting and education we too will raise happier children. ●

Sara Méndez lives in London with her partner and daughter. She is a certified yoga teacher with a holistic approach to pregnancy and mum and baby yoga. She is also honoured to be a new doula, offering her services as a birth and postnatal doula. [www.roofflowandrestore.com](http://www.roofflowandrestore.com)