

CITIES FOR CHILDREN

WORKING GROUP 3 ON “HEALTH”

ATHENS MEETING

Wednesday, 24 September 2008

Mrs. Irimi (Hera) Valsamaki-Ralli, Deputy Mayor of Athens and President of the Athens Municipal Nursery Administration Board, extended her greetings to the participants and conveyed the greetings of Mr. Nikitas Kaklamanis, Mayor of Athens. She, moreover, stressed the significance of holding this two-day workshop and pointed out the importance of the initiative taken by the Mayor of Stuttgart to conceive and implement the European Network Cities for Children.

Then, Mrs. Anastasia Gkika, representative of the Ministry of National Education, in her greeting conveyed the Minister’s greetings as well.

The last to extend his greetings was Mr. Theodoros Behrakis, Chairman of the Athens City Council.

Part 1

Speaker: G. Tsiftis, Pediatrician, Athens Municipal Nursery.

Subject: “The importance of health prevention and promotion during the pre-school age”.

In his speech, Mr. Tsiftis referred to prevention, which is the quintessence of Medicine and one of the main responsibilities of a pediatrician.

Prevention must begin during the pre-birth period as it contributes to maintaining and improving health. This is achieved by preventing diseases, constantly monitoring children’s growth and development, and by helping children develop and adopt behaviors favoring health protection.

In other words, prevention is an important tool, a way to help children develop healthy habits.

The Athens Municipal Nursery schools have implemented preventive medicine projects with a view to detect and identify problems at an early stage, and deal with disorders linked to these problems.

Cooperation between the Athens Municipal Nursery and pediatric clinics of national hospitals and the University of Athens regarding nursery school children has contributed to the following:

- Establishing a daily diet which was first introduced in 1988 (standard diet based on Mediterranean diet and Greek traditional cuisine)
- Reporting skin infections
- Detecting iron deficiency

- Identifying vitamin D levels
 - Reporting dental problems
 - Performing visual acuity tests
 - Reporting children's somatometric characteristics (excess weight or short height)
 - Identifying learning disabilities
 - Preventing accidents - poisoning
 - Organizing teachers' training courses
 - Introducing a voluntary blood donation day
 - Reporting vaccination status
- etc.

All of the abovementioned have contributed to preventing, i.e. detecting and tackling specific problems in a specific place.

What is most important though is to develop behaviors leading to health protection.

It is necessary to teach how to protect and promote health to guarantee an active lifestyle.

Being aware of and conscientiously adopting healthy behaviors constitutes a pre-condition for promoting health.

Prevention has undoubtedly a lot to offer. Knowledge is a valuable tool. However, health promotion is more important because it is no longer an individual matter, but it has acquired social dimensions.

Children must first learn to develop healthy habits and then, once they have been aware of them, put them into practice. This will only be achieved by providing information and setting a good example. In this respect education professionals and parents play a major role.

Implementing educational programs (such as theater games, fairy-tale narratives etc.) with a view to help children understand the meaning of healthy habits greatly contributes to achieving the goal of health promotion.

Concluding, Mr. Tsiftis highlighted the importance of the role parents, pediatricians and education professionals play, regardless of the progress Medicine has made.

Short break.

Part 2

Panel discussion:

1st speaker: Dr. Alexandra Nikolaou-Papanayiotou, Pediatrician, Director of Department of Social Medicine and Childhood Development, “Pendeli” Children Hospital of Athens
Subject: “Screen and prevention of development disorders in pre-school age”

In her speech on the screening of learning disabilities, Mrs. Papanayiotou referred to the screening performed to evaluate school readiness by using tests to find out whether children can attend primary school.

In our country, age is the criterion defining whether a child can attend the 1st grade. There are of course children with different degree of development in various fields.

Our aim is to prevent learning disorders which constitute the n^o 1 problem.

The child’s cognitive and perceptive abilities are evaluated on the basis of questionnaires.

In a study carried out on 1,195 nursery school children of the Athens Municipal Nursery such tests were performed.

There are special tests performed to evaluate visual discrimination, speech articulation (speech articulation disorders or disabilities), pre-mathematical concepts, and the rate of pre-writing abilities-skills.

Tests of orthographic-motor integration, for example, aim to evaluate concentration, attention, perception and problem solving abilities.

Tests of comprehension and expression of speech aim to evaluate the ability of comprehension and expression of speech.

In every test the children’s behavior was observed (hyperactive children, active children, command execution speed etc.).

2nd speaker: Mrs. Benetou, Lecturer, School of Medicine, University of Athens, representative of Dr. Antonia Trichopoulou, Professor
Subject: “The role of nutrition of infants and young children in the promotion of health”

In her speech, Mrs. Benetou referred to nutrition which plays an important role in maintaining and promoting health.

Good or poor nutrition habits can affect our health. Nutrition constitutes an environmental factor we can change.

Nutrition can help children achieve their full genetic potential.

As early as the age of two or three, the children’s body starts growing. During this vulnerable period a number of changes may appear on the children’s body.

A poor quality or quantity nutrition may have an effect on morbidity, mortality, growth retardation, disease occurrence, vitamin deficiency, arthritis etc. It may also have long-term effects, such as chronic disease occurrence, learning and behavioral disorders.

Good quality nutrition during infancy and childhood can help prevent diseases, such as obesity, diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular diseases, osteoporosis etc.

What is most important is to immediately protect children's health in order to make sure they will enjoy quality of life in adulthood. If children adopt healthy eating habits in childhood, they will maintain them as adults.

Nutrition must be a priority for public health workers.

A study carried out in 1984 demonstrated a higher intake of calories, carbohydrates, fat and total energy, as well as high levels of cholesterol.

The findings of another study carried out in 2003-2004 were found to be similar to the previous ones.

In 1988, the year when the City of Athens started cooperating with the Nutrition Center to set up a healthy nutrition program for pre-school children, a number of diet plans were introduced based on children's energy needs per age group. These diet plans had to contain every micro- and macronutrient, and the main focus of interest was a fiber-rich diet, the Mediterranean diet.

For this reason, an awareness raising campaign on nutrition was launched for teachers and education professionals.

There is also the National Food Policy Committee set up by the Ministry of Health at national level. Professor Antonia Trichopoulou has been placed at the head of this Committee.

Finally, the World Health Organization regularly issues important documents on children's nutrition.

3rd speaker: Dr. Ekaterini Dakou-Voutetaki, Professor, Director of the Department of Pediatric Endocrinology, School of Medicine, University of Athens.

Subject: "Can we prevent childhood obesity?"

In her speech analyzing the abovementioned subject, Professor Dakou-Voutetaki referred to obesity as a biological aberration attributed to the concurrent action of both genes and the environment.

In the years from 1976 to 1980 obesity became a pandemic disease.

By comparing data from studies carried out in 1978 and 2001, it seems that some weight changes have been observed, children are more obese now, while the frequency of children's weight varies.

Nature has not provided our body with obesity prevention means.

The etiological factors involved in obesity occurrence are a) genes, b) environmental intervention.

As for the gene factor, many genes seem to be responsible for energy metabolism. Some people, for example, do not have much leptin, while others suffer from hypothyroidism etc. Excessive cortisol secretion may also be responsible for obesity.

As regards the environmental intervention factor, energy and fat intake have remained the same, but the number of obese persons has risen. What has changed is not energy intake, but our habits, e.g. the hours we spend watching television.

Obesity complications may include fatty liver, motor impairments, and psychological problems, such as depression.

Established obesity cannot be cured.

For this reason, education professionals must act to prevent obesity because as early as the age of two, children, if left unattended, may become obese.

The teaching staff must keep an eye on children since they spend many hours together. As soon as an aberration is detected by the education professionals, parents must be alerted.

However, parents need training too. They, for example, have to learn not to criticize their children or make negative comments which may hurt them. The parents or persons taking care of the children must not make them believe they are different from other children. Tackling obesity involves constant training for parents, grandparents or persons having custody of the child.

Our aim should be to help children maintain their normal weight, and in case of a weight increase, to keep this at a minimum level.

Physical exercise plays a very important role as it helps increase endorphins, as well as feelings of well being. We need to tell children that physical exercise is a pleasant activity and not that they must exercise in order to lose weight.

We need to focus on healthy food and physical exercise.

A project has been launched, in cooperation with the City of Athens, to explain what obesity is at the age of two. We hope to identify in this way the factors responsible for this aberration and to give instructions on how to prevent obesity. We hope that next year we shall have results.

4th speaker: Dr. Evangelia Papayiannouli, Professor, Director of the Department of Pediatric Dentistry, University of Athens.

Subject: “Oral healthcare during the pre-school years”

In her speech, Professor Papayiannouli referred to pediatric dentistry which must be both analytical and specialized.

Oral healthcare for school and pre-school children has been neglected at international level. Early dental caries detected in pre-school children develops very fast.

Dental caries is a hard dental tissue disease. Bacteria triggering dental caries have been there ever since our first tooth appeared. These bacteria feed on carbohydrates and produce acids affecting tooth enamel. These acids speed up enamel decay. Our eating habits affect our teeth. Even the effect of saliva on our teeth depends on our eating habits.

Parents’ training and social status is very important when it comes to dental caries. This is to say, the lower the family social status, the more dental caries detected on children’s teeth since parents do not know how to educate their children.

Epidemiological studies have demonstrated that in Greece we are still lagging behind regarding the target set by the World Health Organization to increase to 90% the rate of caries-free individuals worldwide by 2010.

A 1999 study has shown that children suffering from severe dental caries in their early age are underweight because they cannot chew their food.

Dental caries development is reversible, if detected early and has not infected too many teeth. Parents, however, must spend a lot of money for visits to the dentist’s office.

It is necessary to prevent dental caries. The ways of prevention include showing children how to brush their teeth correctly, use dental floss, avoid eating sweets and unsafe foods etc.

Fluoride toothpastes have changed the course of dental caries worldwide. 30% of dental caries is caused by lack of fluoride.

We had the chance to launch a two-part project in cooperation with the City of Athens. In the first part our goal was to screen the disease. The second part was about prevention.

The results showed an increase in the number of caries in early childhood. Children's poor nutrition, as well as mothers' training played a major part in this respect.

So the starting point had to be the nursery school. Toothpastes and toothbrushes were distributed, and through theater games and a dentist's participation everybody was trained in following this process. At the end, information brochures were given to parents.

Then a number of interventions followed, as well as questions and answers regarding obesity and oral healthcare.

Later the dinner reception took place in a restaurant in Plaka district, Athens oldest neighborhood, beneath the Acropolis.

Thursday, 25 September 2008

The moderator, Mr. Miltiadis Kalafatis, extended his greetings to the participants and the speakers, and then the interventions of participants from other countries followed.

1st speaker, Mrs. Iwona Iwanicka, Lodz, Poland.

In her speech Mrs. Iwanicka, referred, among other things, to the following:

“...The City of Lodz is responsible for launching prevention projects relating to citizens’ health.

Cooperation has been established with the World Health Organization, and there is an intense activity in the prevention area in general.

The persons responsible deal with financial issues, social care, education etc.

There are many health-related activities, such as a program concerning cardiovascular disease prevention, prevention of addictions, stress prevention, combating oral and dental diseases, such as dental caries.

Schools are provided with training material regarding the prevention and fight against caries, as well as vaccines.

Medicine students have been asked to participate in disease prevention projects implemented in Lodz nursery schools.

The public sector works independently, and all the activities are funded by the municipal authorities...”

2nd speech by Mr. Slawomir Pietrzak & Mr. Dominik Golema, Wroclaw, Poland.

In their speech, Mr. Pietrzak and Mr. Golema referred, among other things, to the following:

“...Wroclaw is a Polish city which does not follow stereotypic patterns. This means that not only women, but also men take initiatives when it comes to children’s upbringing.

In Poland there are not many children because our society grows older, and there is no increase in the birth rate.

In Wroclaw a health promotion network has been established for schools and nursery schools. Schools and nursery schools progressively become part of this network.

Our aim is to promote training programs, as well as healthy habits, such as choosing healthier school cafeteria food.

These programs are funded by the City of Wroclaw. There are hygiene programs, anti-smoking programs etc.

In our city we are trying to establish a “breakwater” mainly consisting of children. That is, we teach them how to say no to risky behaviors. We have also launched social campaigns on a number of issues, in cooperation with families and other bodies ...”

3rd speaker, Mrs. Ankica Perhat, Rijeka, Croatia.

In her speech, Mrs. Perhat, Deputy Mayor of Rijeka, referred, among other things, to the following:

“Children are top priority for local governments. Most of the things I would like to mention in my speech, mainly regarding nutrition, are in line with the views expressed earlier by the Greek fellow speakers.

In our city, nursery schools belong to the Municipality, their organization and funding is a municipality task.

Both institutions and families are responsible for children’s health.

Since 1986 a nutrition program has been established for nursery school children, launched in cooperation with local and international bodies, such as Unicef.

In the city of Rijeka a study carried out on children’s habits demonstrated that children do not exercise and spend many hours watching television or on the computer etc.

So we have been trying for a long time to promote educational and sport programs, and as a result things have changed now regarding children’s health.”

Following Mrs. Perhat’s speech, Mr. G. Tsiftis, Pediatrician, Athens Municipal Nursery, intervened and referred to the shared view that it is very important to train education professionals and parents on nutrition issues.

4th speaker, Mrs. Monika Baars, Cologne, Germany.

In her speech, Mrs. Baars, coordinator for the health promotion project in the city of Cologne, mentioned the following:

“...In Cologne we have many health promotion projects in place.

There are about four hundred nursery schools and kindergartens in a total population of 1 million inhabitants, 25% of whom are children and young people aged 2 to 25.

55 thousand of them are children up to 5 years of age. Since 2006, it has been noted that many children are overweight or consume beer, cannabis and other addictive substances, and ever since there has been a constant monitoring.

This prevention model will be implemented until 2010.

Implementation of these projects by nursery schools is not compulsory but optional.

In the framework of prevention implementation, nursery schools are provided with specialized knowledge and receive certification. Physical activity and sports are the key elements included in the preventive measures which have been proposed. Advice is given through education on how to prevent drug addiction. Medical care is also provided to children.

These activities are government-funded”.

End of the first round of speeches.

Break.
Second round of speeches

5th speaker, Mr. Ibrahim Evrim, Gaziantep, Turkey.

Mr. Evrim thanked the City of Stuttgart for this project promoting the exchange of knowledge and ideas.

The city of Gaziantep has 1.5 million inhabitants and is located near the border with Syria, in southwestern Turkey.

The city makes every effort to establish a child-friendly urban environment. Every institution has been certified as infant and child-friendly.

The World Health Organization (WHO) is one of the main bodies with which they cooperate.

Many battles have been fought to protect children living in the streets and drug-addicted children, and promote their social reintegration. Projects have been set up to provide psychosocial support and help drug-addicted children reintegrate. To this end, one rehabilitation center has been founded.

Schools have adopted nutrition programs. There is also a program encouraging breast feeding.

Health programs have been launched for schools.

However, nutrition programs in Turkey are lagging behind compared to other countries. Mr. Evrim stated that as soon as he returns to his country he will explore the possibility of cooperation and exchange of views on issues regarding children's nutrition.

Training children on nutrition, personal hygiene and oral healthcare is crucial.

Finally, in this city claiming to be child-friendly a 300-bed hospital has been built to treat only children.

Next, the moderator, Mrs. Irimi (Hera) Valsamaki-Ralli, Deputy Mayor of Athens and President of the Athens Municipal Nursery Administration Board, took the floor and stressed that pre-school age is the most important period of a person's life as it is then when the person's character and intellect are being shaped. She, moreover, mentioned that the Municipal Office is trying to implement educational programs in accordance with the principles of modern psychology and the children's needs.

Then, a number of projects implemented in the city of Athens were briefly presented, especially in the Athens Municipal Nursery schools. These presentations were made by education professionals working in these nursery schools, under the supervision of Mrs. Evangelia Kalaitzi, Director of Educational Programs.

The **first presentation** was about an oral healthcare and nutrition project for children implemented in one of the schools of the Municipal Nursery. The presentation was made by Mrs. Olga Skoufi and Mrs. Evangelia Theohari, education professionals working at the kindergartens of the Municipal Nursery. During the project presentation, they referred in detail to the ways they used to introduce concepts and healthy behaviors to children. Through theater games, painting, tales,

experimentation with objects, such as toothbrushes, and other activities in which the children took part all the time, they tried to convey the message that the children must take care of their teeth and brush them. The children managed to understand the morphology of the mouth, to make a distinction between healthy and non-healthy foods, to learn the course of food through the digestive system, and how to brush their teeth.

The **second presentation**, made by education professionals Mrs. Vassiliki Assimakopoulou and Mrs. Stavroula Dimopoulou, was about the Olympic Games project. This project was implemented in 2007 on 21 children in total, aged between four and five, i.e. in pre-school age. Their aim was to help children understand the value of physical exercise in maintaining a good level of health, and that healthy children would become healthy adults. Some of the secondary objectives were to promote the correct posture, psychomotor development, bring children in contact with the spirit of Greek antiquity and Olympic sports, and explain the value of fair play. Audiovisual material was used; sport games took place, as well as a visit to a gym facility and a basketball court, and medals made of clay were fabricated, etc.

The **third presentation**, made by education professionals Mrs. Chrissoula Athanassiou and Mrs. Dimitra Argirokastritou, was about a healthy food and physical activity project. This project was implemented on 25 pre-school children, aged between four and five, in 2007. Through fairy tale narratives, participation and discussion with the children and the education professionals, they aimed at helping children understand the meaning of healthy habits, realize the importance of being in good physical condition, help them get to know their body and cooperate with each other. Furthermore, Mr. Athanassios Constantopoulos, physical education instructor, made a valuable contribution to this end.

END OF SPEECHES AND PRESENTATIONS

After the conclusion of interventions and presentations, Mrs. Irini (Hera) Valsamaki-Ralli, Deputy Mayor of Athens and President of the Athens Municipal Nursery Administration Board, pointed out that at the end of the day what mattered was to put theory into practice so that children can adopt good habits, learn to decide on their own and choose what is good for them. Once children are aware of this they will be able to make good choices, be responsible and protect themselves. The ultimate goal of education, as Mrs. Valsamaki-Ralli stated, is to turn children into responsible individuals able to make the right choice.

The Deputy Mayor of Athens gave the floor to Mrs. Katharina Freter from the city of Stuttgart, whom she praised as “the network’s heart and soul.”

Mrs. Freter thanked the City of Athens for cooperating in this project and for hosting the third working group meeting, and said that she was confident this network would be sustainable thanks to all of the participating Municipalities. It has been made clear, she mentioned, that we all have common problems to share and that we are all seeking the best solutions to these problems. She, furthermore, made particular reference to the European Commission proposal to provide free food (fruits and vegetable) to schools with students coming from families suffering severe financial

problems, and that to this end a Fund would be set up, as it has already been announced by the European Commission. Mrs. Freter said that the Athens meeting was very constructive, reminded that the next meeting is taking place in the city of Rijeka, Croatia, in March 2009, and made a number of recommendations on the stability of groups and cities regarding their participation in the Health program, as well as on a thorough presentation of the proposals and projects in every city.

Then, Mrs. Freter gave the floor to Mrs. Romana Jercovic from the city of Rijeka, in order to set the topic of the next meeting. The upcoming topic will be prevention strategies in the field of addiction.

Next, Mrs. Violeta Podolskaite from the city of Vilnius spoke about the need to discuss about nutrition (we eat well, but do we eat clean?), while Mrs. Laura Bulmanis from the city of Riga said that another major issue to be discussed was how to prevent addiction to computer and television. Mrs. Valsamaki-Ralli agreed that these are very important issues for young ages and that they should be discussed at an upcoming meeting.

The participants were unanimous in setting the topic for the next meeting which would be addiction, either to food, drugs or the mass media and computers.

The Deputy Mayor of Athens and panel moderator closed the meeting held on 24 and 25 September 2008 in Athens, and gave the floor to Mrs. Freter from the city of Stuttgart for the last time.

Mrs. Freter announced the newly established award competition for outstanding child-friendly projects implemented in countries applying to participate. The award will be awarded for the first time on 29 June 2009 on the occasion of the 3rd Cities for Children Annual Conference in Stuttgart. The project categories will be: a) design of open spaces and play areas for children and young people and b) mobility and traffic safety for children and young people. The projects, as Mrs. Freter pointed out, will have to be sustainable, innovative, cost-efficient, effective and transferable (i.e. realizable) to other cities. For more information visit the website www.citiesforchildren.eu.

Concluding, the moderator, Mrs. Valsamaki-Ralli, made a number of general remarks on the importance of holding this particular meeting and conveyed a message of gratitude on behalf of Mr. Nikitas Kaklamanis, Mayor of Athens.

A visit took place afterwards to n° 4D6 nursery school of the City of Athens.