The 'Free from Bullying' Project

The first report from the follow-up research project about the Save the Children Denmark 'Free from Bullying' project

Rikke Kamstrup Knudsen, Jan Kampmann and Katrine Lehrmann
Centre for Childhood, Youth and Family Life Research (CeBUFF)
Roskilde University
June 2007

Free from Bullying - 1. report

This report presents a number of tentative results from the *Free from Bullying* research project. The report casts light on understandings and practices in relation to bullying observed in the beginning of the course of the project, as seen from the perspective of the personnel, parents and children involved.

The report contains a number of questions reflecting what we, the research group, have pondered over in our systematisation of the data material. The questions are conceived partly as a presentation for subsequent discussion with staff and parents when visiting the individual municipalities, as well as a presentation for subsequent discussions within the institutions themselves or on the municipal level concerning the continued work with the project.

The report is based on data from a questionnaire distributed to the parents and personnel in all of the participating institutions, as well as interviews with personnel, parents and children in three selected institutions, one from each of the participating municipalities: Aarhus, Kolding and Gentofte. The Data has been gathered in February, March and April 2007.

Enjoy.

Rikke Kamstrup Knudsen, Katrine Lehrmann and Jan Kampmann
Roskilde University

The status of the project

A generally positive reception
The *Free from Bullying* project started in earnest in February/March 2007, where the participating childcare institutions received a suitcase full of materials from Save the Children Denmark. A number of childcare professionals[1] from each institution attended a training course, and Dorthe Rasmussen from Save the Children Denmark visited the municipalities to make presentations about bullying for the personnel and parents as well as to distribute the "teddy bear buddies" to the children. Several of the institutions chose to wait before proceeding further with the aspects of the project pertaining to social education until all of the introductory arrangements had been completed.

The personnel groups in the pre-school institutions we visited have generally received the project well and see it as an opportunity to receive tools and input for carrying out preventive work with bullying; however, some were more reserved towards participating in the project, typically because they feel they lack the time and resources necessary for the work required.

The institution personnel generally perceive bullying as an important focus area and expect that the project will focus attention on the dynamics in the children group. Some of the childcare professionals emphasised the approach in the project to bullying as a group phenomenon involving spectators and supporters as being new for them. Several expressed satisfaction with the focus of the project on the sense of togetherness in the group of children and the importance of being a good friend:

---

[1] In Denmark, employees in pre-school childcare institutions are required to have a 3½-year degree in social education.

I was really satisfied to be able to re-use the idea of being a good friend. That made me really happy. It was as though there was a tool that popped up in my brain right away. The project has made me think about things that I think I had forgotten about in my social education work – because we have become so focused on the individual child, as opposed to the processes.

Without exception, the parents in the institutions have been very receptive to the project and expressed satisfaction with the focus on bullying in the pre-school institution.
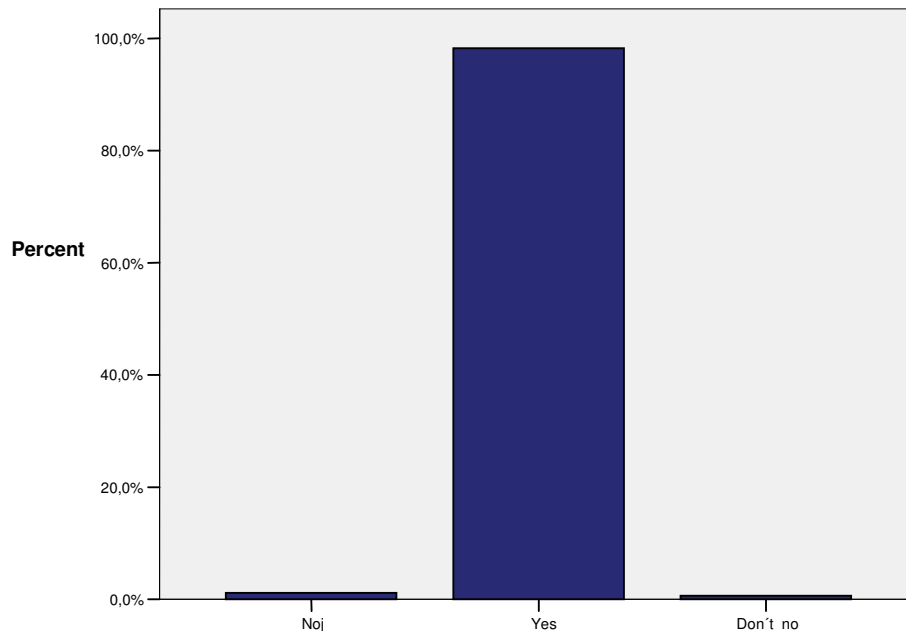
Do you think it is a good idea that your child's pre-school institution is participating in the Save the Children Denmark anti-bullying project?

As indicated in the graph above, 98% of the parents feel that it is a good thing that the pre-school institution is participating in *Free from Bullying*. The following is a brief sample of the answers provided by the parents:

- *It is an important issue and good for the children to learn about from an early age.*
- *Every single child that does not suffer from bullying represents a small victory.*
- *It is important that my children are in a pre-school institution with a stance on bullying.*
- *Bullying must be stopped before it starts.*
- *The childcare professionals really need to become aware of what is going on in the group of children in their own institution.*
- *Good project – it is good to give this kind of thing a try.*
- *I hope that we can all get some tools that we can use.*

Only two of the parents responded that it is not a good idea for the institution to participate in the project, as they believe the personnel lack the resources for the work required.

The children have also displayed great interest in the project. Several parents told about how their children have talked about the project at home. One mother tells of her child's experiences with the project:

> *They say that you must not be a bully and that you can't make others sad. And if this still happens, then you must help the others, which you can do with the teddy bear. My eldest daughter has actually also tried to be a 'knight', I think she called it. Because another child became sad, so she ran in to get the teddy, which she thrust in the sad girl's face. And she really feels that it was a little cool. I really got the sense that she had a good feeling of somehow or another having helped a little to cheer up another child. So I really think that I have already heard a lot about the project. It sure is something they think about, at least.*

Implementation and ownership
The institutions have had very different approaches to the project. When we visited the institutions in March/April, most of the staff members had hardly thought about the implementation of the project in their institution; neither as regards how they would *organise* the implementation of the project nor the actual *content* of the work aimed at preventing bullying, e.g. which "social practices" they will choose in the institution. On a general level, however, several mentioned that they think it is important for the project to be part of the everyday routine in the institution.

In all three of the institutions we visited, the personnel had an understanding that the persons participating in the *Free from Bullying* instructor seminar were to serve as the instructor/key person/coordinator/driving force in the project work in their institution. There was a sense of agreement among the personnel that it made sense to have one or more coordinators responsible for the project; though there were few persons with a clear sense of what this role actually involves. At the same time, however, it was also felt to be important for the entire personnel group to participate in the project. The institutions had not gotten very far as regards the concrete application of how to ensure a widespread sense of ownership of the project; when we visited the institutions, it was clear that the persons most passionate about the project and with the greatest knowledge about it were those who had participated in the instructor seminar together with the institution leaders.

In one institution, they have started the project working together in the personnel group in order to define and specify their understanding of the four fundamental values of the *Free from Bullying* project: tolerance, respect, concern and courage. Moreover, they have agreed that everyone must read the instructor handbook, at which time they can discuss the content of the social education meetings. Several of the personnel indicated that they felt it would make sense to make the project a permanent point on the agenda for their personnel meetings.

There are two pre-school institutions in the municipality of Kolding, and the school chose to coordinate their efforts in a manner so as to ensure that certain elements would be repeated in the pre-school institutions and the school alike, thus becoming recognisable for the children upon making the transition to school. The plan is for a group consisting of the institution leadership as

well as instructors/key persons to meet at least twice annually. The school principal is to be the coordinator for this group.

In two of the institutions visited, the management had already taken the first steps to implement the project in the lesson plans.

A factor that would appear to play a great role in relation to the motivation amongst the personnel and their sense of ownership of the project has been the way the institution has become involved in the project. The personnel groups where the motivation is the greatest are in those instances where they have a sense that they had a say in the decision about whether the institution should participate in the project *or* they have a very motivated leader who has taken deliberate measures to support the decision. Conversely, the project has stirred up some resistance among the personnel that feel as though they have been forced to participate in something despite having the sense that their institution is lacking the resources and energy to get involved.

The steps taken by the pre-school institutions to inform and involve the parents vary greatly from institution to institution. Some institutions have hung up information or articles about the project; some have distributed written information; others yet have provided information about the project at a parents meeting. In most of the institutions, all of the parents have been informed about the project, whereas in one of the institutions, only the board of directors was told. The personnel we interviewed generally feel that parental support is important for the project. One of the childcare professionals explains:

> *The parents are just so important in this whole game – in how they can support it and how they can support their children in how they can be friends with everyone. This is just so important. And if the parents do not send this signal clearly to the children, then ... I mean, the children have role models – for most of them, this is their mom and dad. That's just the way it is.*

As the childcare professional quoted above sees things, the parents are the primary role models for their children. It is therefore important for the parents to support the project values and initiatives.

Nevertheless, 18% of the parents in the participating institutions feel they have not received any information about *Free from Bullying*. The percentage of the parents who do not feel as though they have received any information about the project varies greatly from institution to institution, but there are parents in all of the institutions who feel uninformed. The graph below illustrates the degree to which the parents in the individual institutions feel informed.
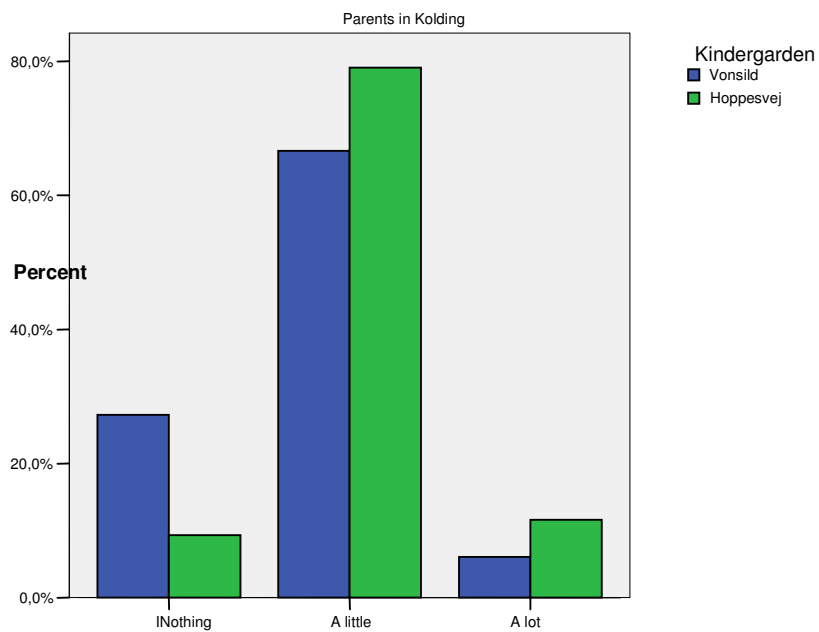
Parents in Kolding

How much have you heard about the Save the Children Denmark anti-bullying project from your child's pre-school institution?

Parents in Århus

How much have you heard about the Save the Children Denmark anti-bullying project from your child's pre-school institution?

Parents in Gentofte

Kindergarden
- Humlebien
- Spirekassen

Percent
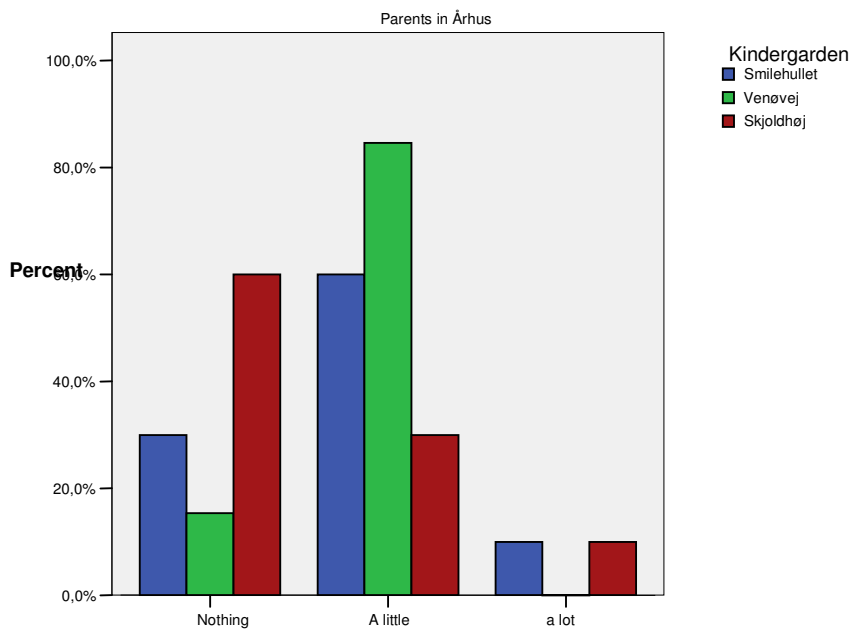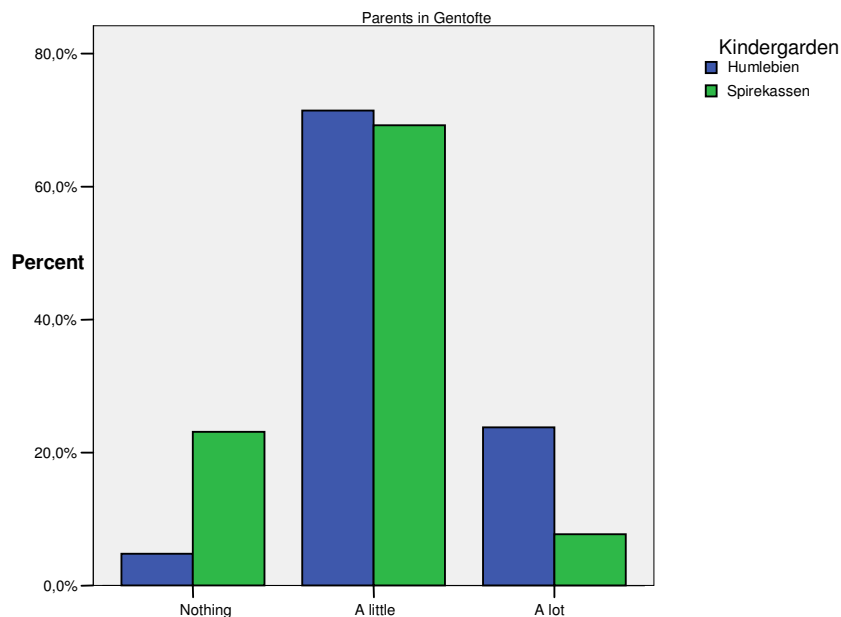
How much have you heard about the Save the Children Denmark anti-bullying project from your child's pre-school institution?

In the course of the interviews, many parents indicated that they are very interested in hearing more about the project, especially about getting more information about how their own child's pre-school institution was planning on going about the project in concrete terms. Several parents also indicated an interest in making an effort to support the project and requested information about what *they* can do to prevent bullying.

However, the staff and parents alike struggled when attempting to suggest *how* the parents can assume an active role in *Free from Bullying*. They merely agreed that it would be appropriate.

One of the factors mentioned by the management in all three of the pre-school institutions as being significant in relation to ensuring motivation and a sense of ownership among the personnel as well as parents is support and attention "from above". The participation of the Crown Prince of Denmark in the project was perceived as being very important in relation to generating attention about the project as well as the general problem of bullying, while the support of the mayor of the municipality, the councillors and social education consultants on the everyday level was also regarded as being quite central.

- How can the project be disseminated and a sense of common ownership over the project ensured?
- Which organisational steps can be appropriate and necessary to take in relation to getting the entire personnel group involved?
- How can the parents assume an active role in *Free from Bullying*?
- Which steps ought to be taken in relation to organisation and social education in order to anchor the project in the everyday routine in the institution?

Bullying in the pre-school institution?

What is bullying? Does it take place among pre-school children? We have posed these questions to the personnel as well as the parents and children. One conclusion is that bullying is a difficult concept to work with. It can be difficult to define and even more difficult to see in everyday practice, as there is a considerable grey area in relation to common teasing.

Save the Children Denmark defines bullying as the "systematic persecution or exclusion of a single person by a group in a place where the person is 'forced' to be"[2]. Almost all of the personnel and the majority of the parents share this understanding as they describe bullying as teasing or exclusion that is systematic or constantly directed towards the same child; however, some of the parents have a slightly broader understanding of bullying. For example, 15% of the parents believe that there is talk of bullying if a child occasionally is kept outside of a game or activity, while none of the personnel share this perception. Similarly, 15% of the parents respond affirmatively when asked whether there is talk of bullying if a child is occasionally hit, pushed, bitten or the like, while only 4% of the personnel share this opinion.

Both parents and personnel alike primarily describe bullying in terms of exclusion from the group and verbal abuse, while some of them also indicate that bullying involves physical violence. Bullying is typically described as *deliberate* actions directed at hurting another person. For the parents and personnel alike, the descriptions of bullying as a phenomenon circle around a "bully" and a "victim", while only a single respondent describes bullying in terms of a group phenomenon.

The graph below indicates that the vast majority of the personnel and parents draw a distinction between bullying and teasing as concepts:

---

[2] Helle Rabøl Hansen 2003 in "Fri for mobberi – Sådan gør vi", p. 7

Is there a difference between bullying and teasing?
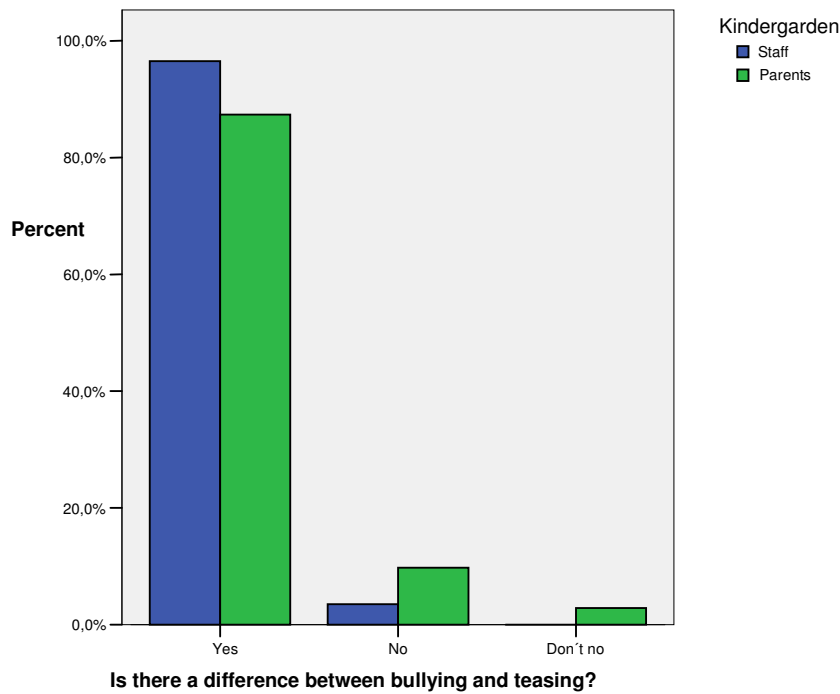
Bullying is generally perceived as being different – and worse – than teasing. 97% of the personnel and 87% of the parents share this perception. However, the interviews indicate that in relation to concrete situations, this distinction is neither simple nor unambiguous. Many parents and personnel were hesitant as to which situations they would label as bullying in their own everyday experience. For many, this hesitation would appear to be related to the age of pre-school children and thereby how systematic and deliberately they are capable of acting.

When does bullying begin to be a real problem? Do pre-school children bully one another, or is it a problem that first emerges among school-aged children? The graph below indicates that 78% of the parents questioned and 93% of the personnel believe that bullying can transpire between pre-school aged children.

Does bullying occur among pre-school aged children?
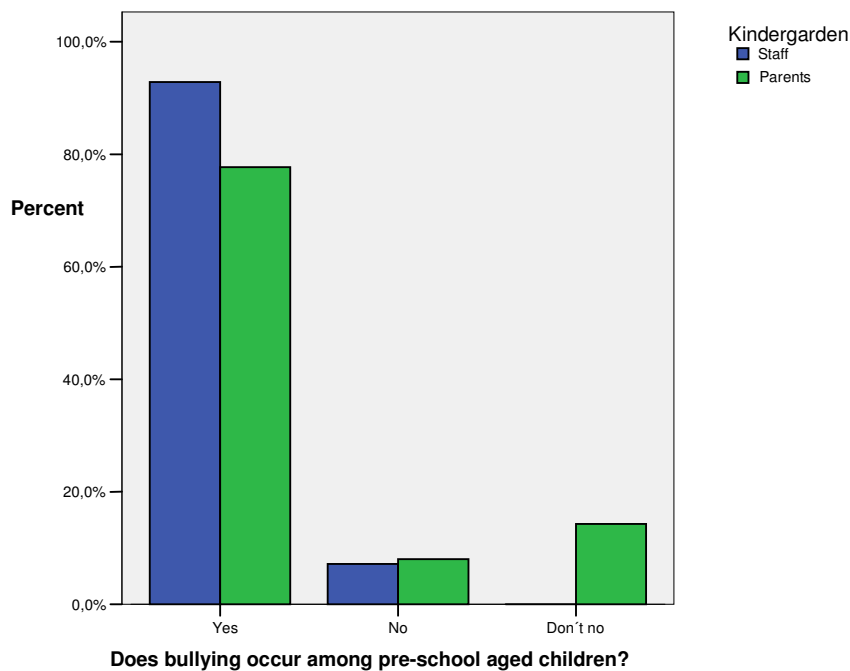
Similarly, the majority of the parents and personnel believe that bullying also takes place in "their" pre-school institution. However, there is considerable disagreement *within the individual institution* as to whether bullying takes place. We generally experienced a sense of uncertainty in relation to using the bullying concept in relation to the actual practice in the institutions. A limited number of persons could provide concrete descriptions of incidents of bullying. These incidents were always related to the eldest children in the pre-school institution. One childcare professional explains:

> *I see it first when they become part of the group of five-year-olds, and I see it first from February and thereafter, because by that time they are so old that they are very aware of their actions, and then there are times when things that are not nice happen. But yes, I would claim that bullying takes place in a pre-school institution. Not much, but it is there.*

- What does the uncertainty about what bullying actually is mean for the project?
- Is it something to be worked with? If so, how?
- What are the consequences of the lack of agreement within the institution about whether bullying takes place in the institution or not?
- How come there are so many people who believe that bullying takes place among pre-school children and yet so few are able to provide specific examples?
- Why do some of the parents have a different understanding of bullying then the personnel do?
- Does bullying always consist of deliberate actions or can children bully one another without being aware of it (e.g. by repeatedly rejecting the same child)?

What do the children say about bullying?

The follow-up research project has carried out interviews with children, as we feel it is important also to allow children to have a voice and articulate their views on bullying, teasing and friendship. Partly in order to acquire more knowledge about whether children perceive the phenomenon in the same manner as adults, partly in order to acquire a sense of the significance that children feel their relations to one another have for their lives in the pre-school institution. Many of the children wanted to participate in the interviews. They were curious and shared enthusiastically about their everyday experiences with their friends and acquaintances in the pre-school institution.

Most of the children are familiar with the concept of bullying. However, the children do not draw the same distinction between teasing and bullying that the adults do. Many of the children use the concept of "bullying" interchangeably with "teasing". Three of the children have something to say about what bullying is:

> *To tease. Something you don't laugh at. And when you say that it isn't fun* (Girl, 5 years old).

> *When you are bullying and you just don't want it. That is bullying* (Girl, 5 years old).

> *Bullying is when you keep someone outside of the game you are playing* (Boy, 5 years old).

Some of the children describe bullying as something other than teasing, as reflected in the following statements:

> Bullying is: *"that you are teasing one day, and then there is another day where you are teasing, and then there comes another day where you are teasing, and then there is another day where you are teasing … the same person* (Girl, 5 years old).

> Bullying is: *teasing … just a lot worse* (Boy, 5 years old).

> *If you tease every day, then you are bullying* (Boy, 6 years old).

The statements above indicate that these children see bullying as something worse than teasing and characterised by some measure of regularity. That which the descriptions provided by the children have in common – whether they are distinguishing between bullying and teasing or not – is that it is something unpleasant, which affects your feelings. Three children talk about what it is like to be bullied, teased, or kept outside of a game:

> *I was once the only child who was not allowed to be part of a game with the others. And they said: 'You can't be with us, you toad'. And then I started to cry* (Boy, 4 years old).

> *I felt a little alone* (Boy, 6 years old).

> *When people bully you, you become sad* (Girl, 4 years old).

Almost all of the children we interviewed have experienced episodes in which they were kept outside of the games other children were playing. However, the children react differently to being rejected. Many of the children say that they find an adult who can help and comfort them when they feel snubbed or who can possibly help them become part of the game. Other children find others to play with or simply play on their own. Nevertheless, most of the children say that the presence and possible intervention of adults is important when situations arise that are difficult to tackle.

The descriptions provided by many of the children about their friendship, playing and teasing reflects that they have listened carefully to what Dorthe Rasmussen from Save the Children Denmark, together with the childcare professionals from their institution, have told them and talked together with them about in connection with the presentation and start of the project. In conversations and interviews with the children, we experienced that they used the concepts and aspects of the presentations quite a bit. For example, many of the children talk about "fun teasing" and "serious teasing", and several children referred to situations from the Save the Children Denmark instructional posters when explaining what it means to be a good friend or to tease one another. The descriptions provided by the children about bullying often include reference to the teddy bears they were given in connection with the visit from Save the Children Denmark to their pre-school institution. The children are quite pre-occupied with their new teddy bears; many had given their teddy bear a name and made clothing and beds for them. Many of the children tell of how they use the teddy bears for comfort and help if they have been teased or get sad:

> *If others are doing that bullying stuff, then you are supposed to say something to an adult or find your bully-teddy* (Girl, 4 years old).

> *The teddy bears can comfort you, and then you can talk with them a little bit* (Girl, 5 years old).

> *If you don't have any friends to play together with, then you can imagine that the teddy bear is a friend* (Boy, 6 years old).

> *You can take your bullying-teddy out of the drawer and say, 'Stop'!* (Girl, 4 years old).

As indicated by these quotes, the teddy bears have become a symbol of caring for the children, and they help give them the courage to dare to speak out when someone is teasing them.

The children place great significance on the sense of togetherness in the group in the pre-school institution. It is important for them to be included in the group when playing in order to have a sense of belonging. All of the interviewed children place great importance on their friends in the pre-school institution. They are the ones they related to, for which reason they are an important foundation in their everyday life, play and time together. Most of the children also mention that the best thing about being at pre-school is having friends that they can play together with. The children are very aware of who is playing together with whom. One five-year-old girl explains what it means to be a good friend:

> *It is if you play together a lot. And if you say that you like each other. And also if you play something together than you are not allowed to do* (Girl, 5 years old).

The children themselves point out that you are a good friend if you invite other children to participate in your game. But friends and acquaintances also play an important role in relation to helping and comforting one another when sad.

- Does it mean anything – seen from the perspective of the children – whether there is talk of bullying or teasing?
- How can the preventive bullying work help support the sense of togetherness among the children? What can the parents and the institutions do?
- How can we ensure that the ideas in the project are actually integrated in the way the children play together, i.e. that they are not just words?
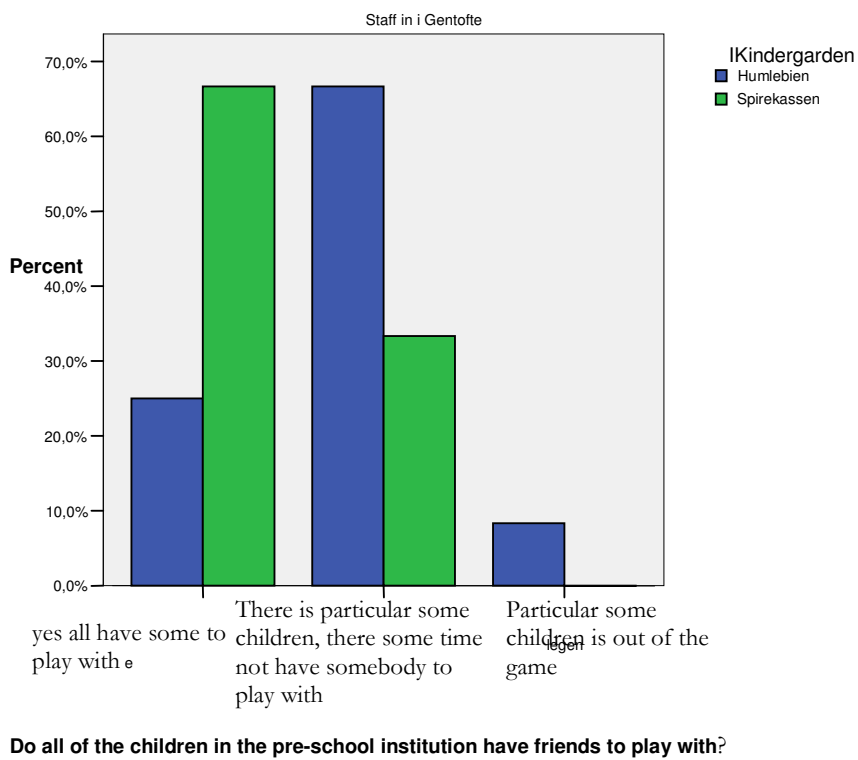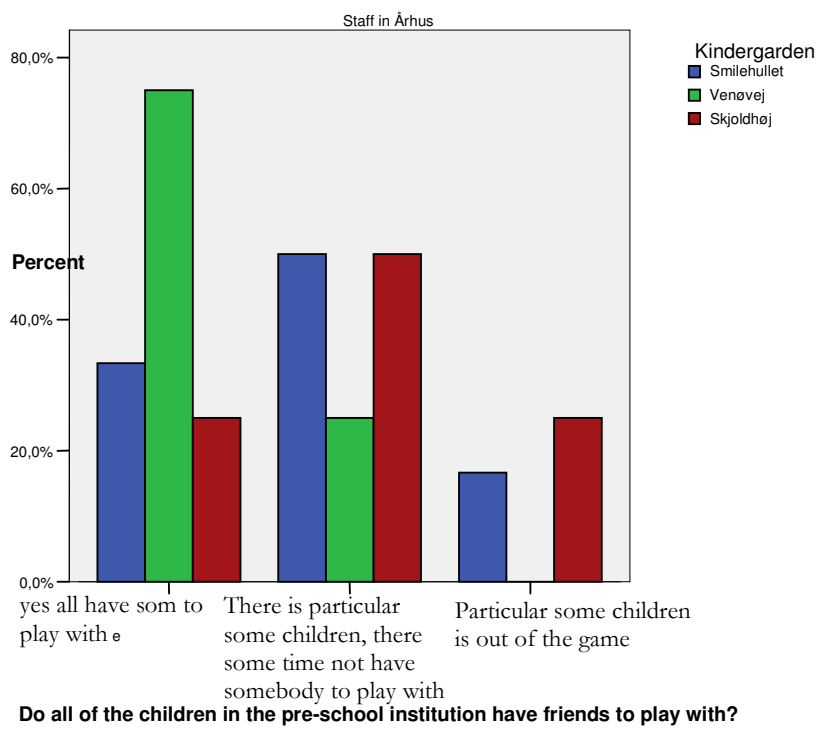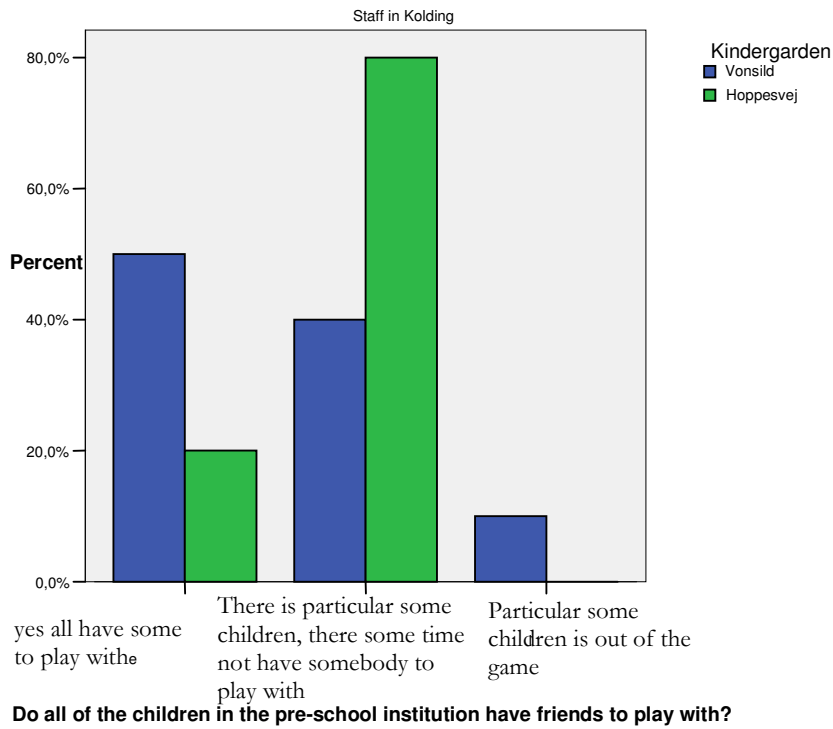
Anti-bullying work

Anti-bullying work – relevant in the context of the pre-school institution?
The section above indicates that the concept of bullying is relevant to discuss in the context of the pre-school institution on the grounds that it contributes to focusing on the relations between children and how these relations can be strengthened.

The questionnaire and interview study indicate that there would seem to be children in all pre-school institutions that are outside of the playing that goes on, children who struggle to be part of the playing, or children who the personnel assess are the victims of outright bullying. In the meantime, it is interesting to make note that there is considerable disagreement within the institution as to whether there are children who are having a hard time.

This is illustrated in the graphs below, which show how the personnel have responded to the question as to whether all of the children have friends to play with or whether some of them are excluded.

Staff in Århus

Percent

Kindergarden
- ■ Smilehullet
- ■ Venøvej
- ■ Skjoldhøj

yes all have som to play with e | There is particular some children, there some time not have somebody to play with | Particular some children is out of the game

Do all of the children in the pre-school institution have friends to play with?

Staff in i Gentofte

Percent

IKindergarden
- ■ Humlebien
- ■ Spirekassen

yes all have some to play with e | There is particular some children, there some time not have somebody to play with | Particular some children is out of the game

Do all of the children in the pre-school institution have friends to play with?

Staff in Kolding

Do all of the children in the pre-school institution have friends to play with?

The graphs indicate a lack of consensus among the personnel about whether all of the children have friends to play with or whether some children are excluded from the playing.

The *Free from Bullying* Project builds on the premise that bullying can be prevented. The graph below illustrates that the majority of the responding personnel and parents share this perception, though many are not *entirely certain* that is possible to prevent bullying; they merely believe it is possible.

Do you believe it is possible to prevent bullying?
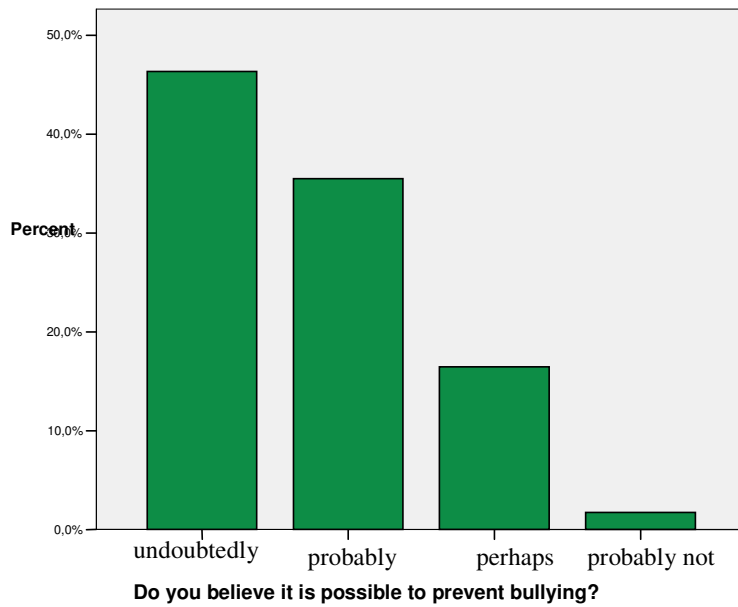
Both parents and personnel emphasise dialogue and conversations with the children as the most important tool in the prevention of bullying. Through dialogue with the parents and the childcare professionals, the children must learn to relate to one another in an appropriate manner. Several also focus on the importance of strengthening the sense of togetherness among the children. The parents are often referred to as role models; the childcare professionals less so.

And whose responsibility is it that something be done about bullying? The graph below illustrates that the parents and personnel alike perceive the parents and institution personnel as bearing the primary responsibility, while less than half are of the opinion that the institution management bears any responsibility.

Legend:
- parents are responsibility
- Personnel is responsibility
- The manager of the kindergarden is responsibility
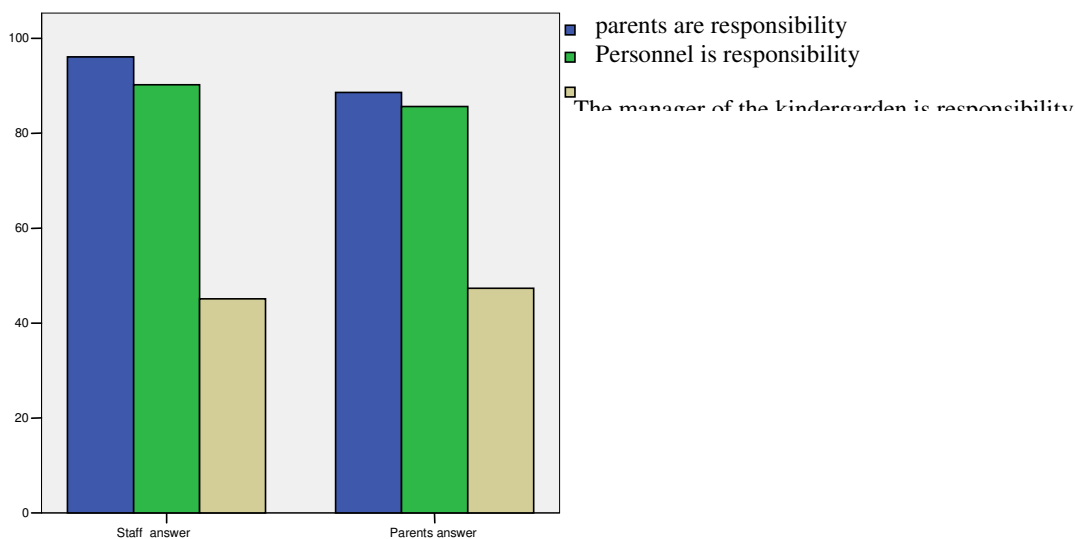
The perspective among parents and personnel on the responsibility for the occurrence of bullying

It is interesting to note in relation to the responsibility of the institution staff that 10% of the personnel do not believe they share any responsibility for whether bullying goes on in their institution.

It is also interesting to consider the widespread feeling that the management does not bear a responsibility for whether bullying goes on. This can be interpreted as evidence that bullying is understood as a phenomenon that is created and proceeds between the children and where the parents and childcare professionals are perceived to have a particular responsibility to intervene and deal with the conflicts arising in the course of their daily interaction with the children. However, if one perceives bullying as an aspect of the total everyday culture within the institution, it would be natural to feel that the management has both a particular responsibility and particular opportunities for contributing to the prevention of bullying via work with the overall culture in the institution. We will briefly return to this below.

In light of the prevailing perception that the childcare professionals bear a responsibility for bullying, it is interesting to see which understanding they have of how they deal with conflicts among the children. In the interviews, the personnel generally struggled to articulate how they deal with conflicts among the children. None of the institutions we visited had written guidelines for this. Nevertheless, the personnel were of the impression that within the institution, they dealt with conflicts in a relatively uniform manner, as the new staff learned from those with more experience. The strategy that most of them described was to pull those involved in a conflict aside and allow them to give their version of the conflict one at a time. Apparently, the "spectators" were not included, which could be perceived as being at odds with the approach in our project to the prevention of bullying, as bullying is perceived to be a group phenomenon.

Two of the institutions we visited reported that they allow the children to go off to the side to sit and "think about things" if they have caused problems. Which the children describe as follows:

When you have been bullying, which you are not supposed to do, then you are sent out to your locker or you have to sit down somewhere, where you have to remain seated … or sit on the sofa until you are allowed to go (Girl 4 years).

The one who teases is scolded and has to sit down until the adults say that he can get up again (Girl 5 years).

One of the institutions has employed an social education professional to observe the group of children, as they have felt there were problems they were unable to solve. The childcare professionals were of the opinion that it had been valuable to have a new set of eyes scrutinise the problems.

- How is it possible that 10% of the personnel feel that the staff does not bear any responsibility for bullying?
- Why do most of the personnel and parents alike feel that the management of the pre-school institution does not bear responsibility for bullying?
- Many express positive interest in the perspective in the project on bullying as a social phenomenon involving more than just the children directly involved. At the same time, there would appear to be a tendency to only work with the children who are directly involved in bullying in efforts aimed at solving the conflicts between children. Is it possible to imagine the development of new approaches to conflict resolution reflecting the fundamental understanding of bullying in the project?

Bullying, well-being and the culture in the institution
In the interviews, there are few if any people emphasising the possible significance of the culture in the institution in relation to bullying – which we have interpreted in the above as being in accordance with the limited degree of responsibility attributed to the management. Institution culture is many things: including the way the daily routine is organised in the pre-school institution and the forms of knowledge, values and understandings steering the work with social education – whether consciously or unconsciously. Institution culture is also the way we relate to one another: between the staff members, between the personnel and the parents, the personnel and the children and between the children themselves. However, one of the childcare professionals did offer some thoughts about the significance of the tone in the institution:

Well, you start to think about it when you always hear the same kid's name mentioned as a problem in the playground or in an institution. I also think that you become aware of it in the chatter among the adults in the breaks: "He is just so irritating!" and that kind of thing. Then you start thinking: "Hey, is something wrong?" Because we send out signals just like the parents do.
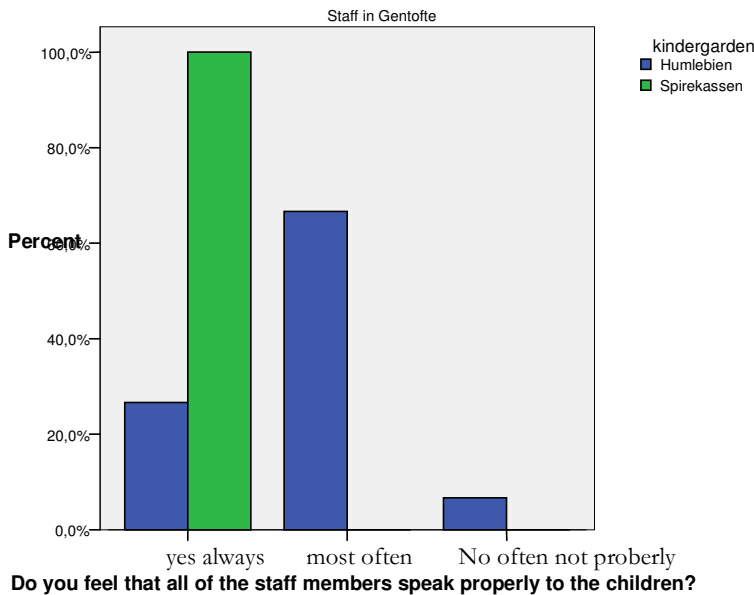
The childcare professional quoted here indicates that she feels that the way the personnel talk about the children is important; both when they can hear these conversations as well as when they cannot. Moreover, a manager from another institution mentioned that the participation in the project has made her think about how the staff members react when a child approaches an adult and tells them
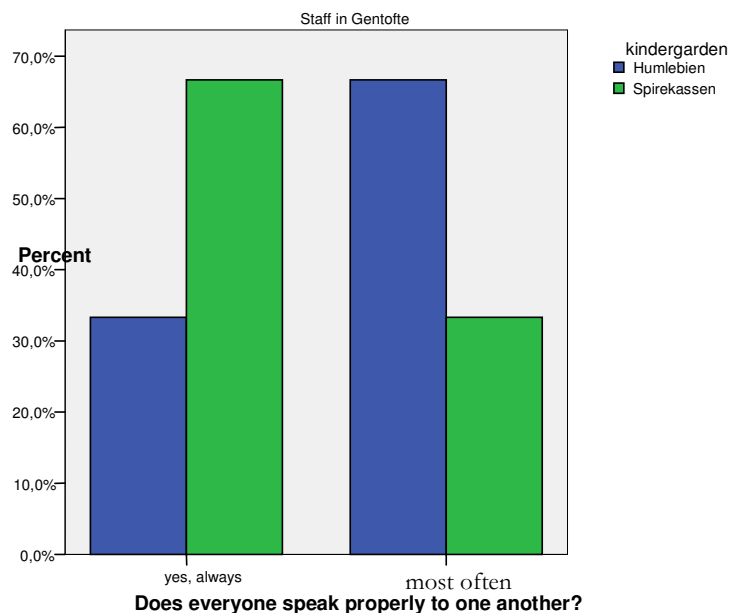
about a conflict. The personnel in the institution in question have generally referred to this as "snitching". In the meantime, the manager has started to think that this understanding might not be appropriate in relation to taking the conflicts among the children seriously as well as helping the children to find the courage and motivation to get involved in conflicts involving other children.

In the questionnaire, we enquired as to how the personnel experience the tone in their pre-school institution – both between children and adults as well as within the personnel group. In several institutions, there are considerable differences in the responses provided. While some feel that everyone speaks to one another nicely, others from the same pre-school institution perceive things very differently. 25% of all of the personnel also have the sense that bullying takes place within the personnel group, though most indicate that this is rare.
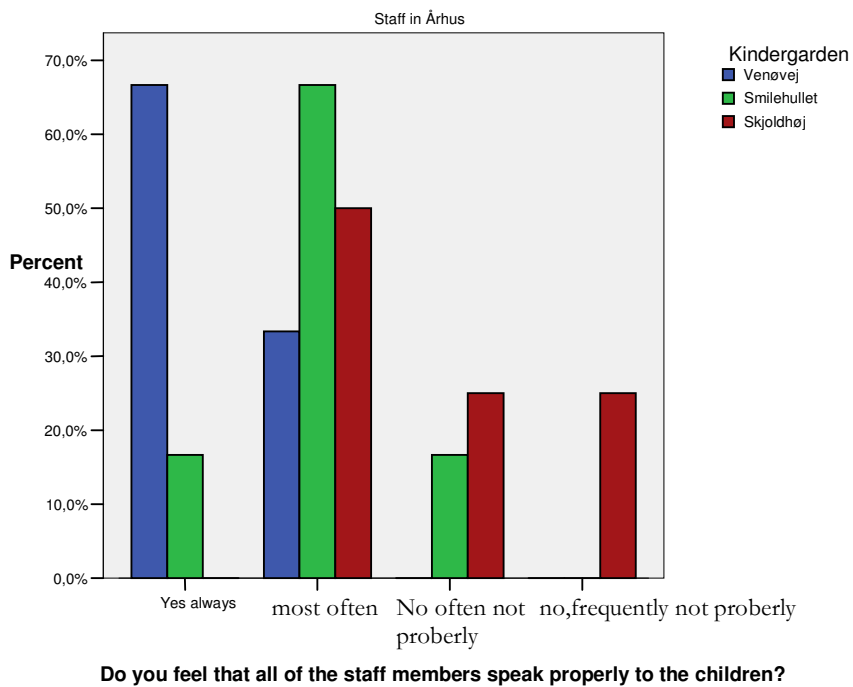
The graph below indicates how the personnel in Gentofte, Kolding and Aarhus, respectively, assess the tone in their institution, how the personnel speak to the children, and how the staff members themselves talk about each other and speak to one another.
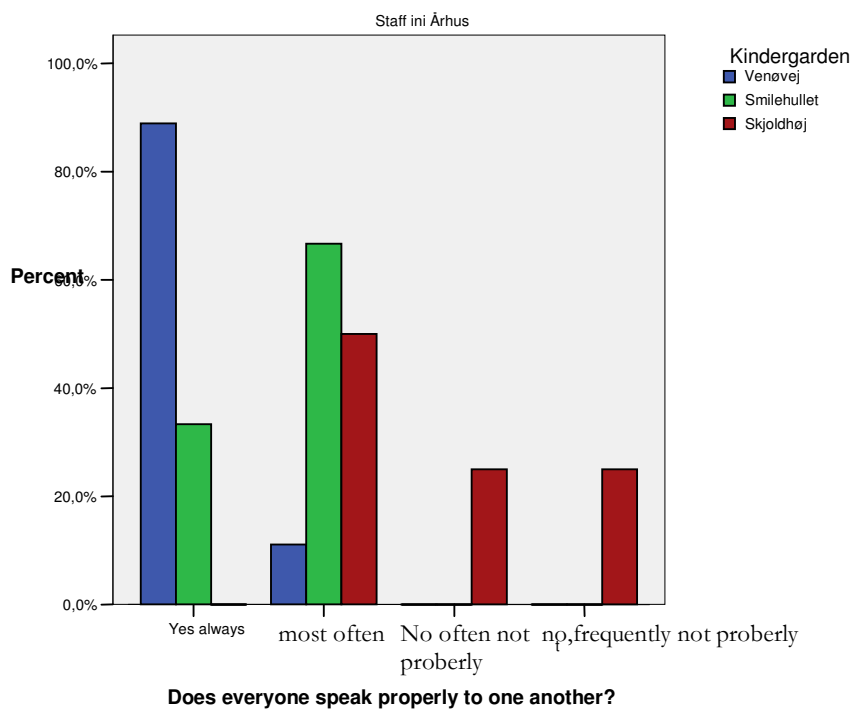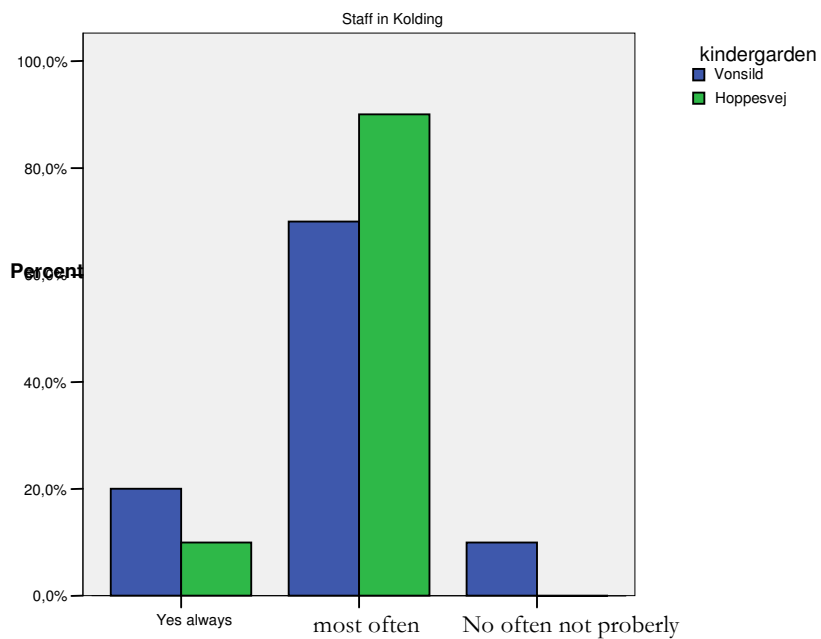
Gentofte:

Do you feel that all of the staff members speak properly to the children?

Staff in Gentofte

Does everyone speak properly to one another?

Aarhus:

Staff in Århus

Do you feel that all of the staff members speak properly to the children?

Staff ini Århus

Percent

Does everyone speak properly to one another?

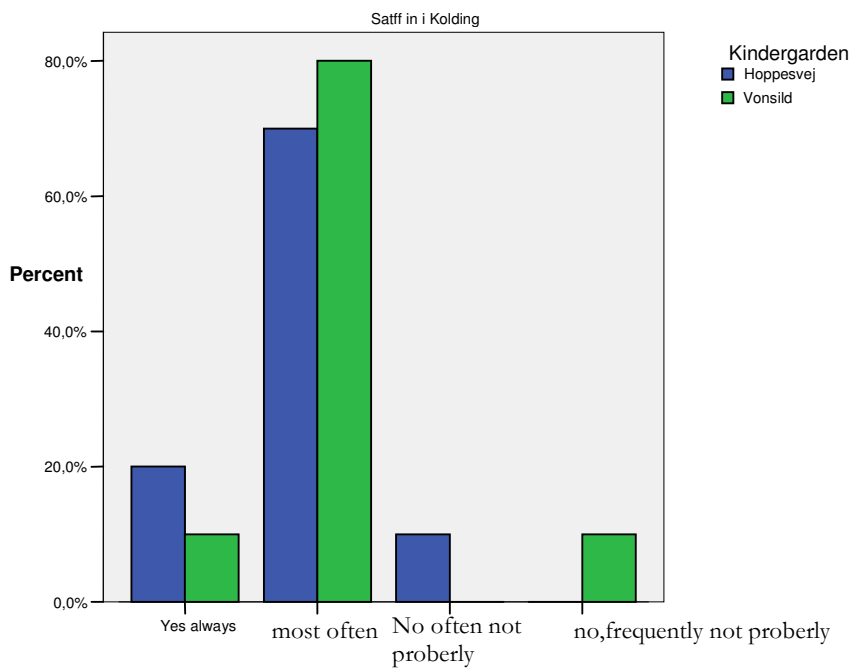Kindergarden
- Venøvej
- Smilehullet
- Skjoldhøj

Kolding:

Do you feel that all of the staff members speak properly to the children?

Does everyone speak properly to one another?

- Why and what does it mean when there are different perceptions of the tone in the institution as to whether bullying takes place among the personnel themselves?
- Does the interaction between the personnel have significance for conflicts and bullying among the children?
- Can the problems with bullying be used to set focus on the pre-school institution culture and how this culture can possibly be developed?
- How can concrete work with the development of the culture in the institution be carried out as part of the Free from Bullying project?