

# Children's play in Icelandic preschools <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

Iceland is a small country, with a population of approximately 330,000, set in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean directly on the continental divide between North America and Europe. Known for, among other things, unique cuisine, the Icelandic sagas, stunning geography, and a reputation for peacefulness, Iceland is now a very popular tourist destination and a truly fascinating country. While, in many ways, Icelandic society and education represent a blend of both European and North American values, the country maintains a Nordic social welfare system that provides universal health care and tertiary education for its citizens. From an international outlook, Iceland ranks highly in economic, political, and social stability and equality.

In the fall of 2015, I spent almost four months in the capital city of Reykjavík (where almost two-thirds of the populace lives) teaching at the University of Iceland and studying the care and education of young children. Preschool is considered the first education level in Iceland; almost all children in Reykjavík spend three to four years in publicly funded preschool before they start compulsory school at age 6.

The over-arching question guiding my work was: What does the Icelandic concept of the “good childhood,” a shared Nordic value, look like in schools for young children? One of things I learned was that play was central to this concept. In fact, the Icelandic term for preschool is leikskóli, or playschool. The word “playschool” reflects the view that young children learn best through play, and this outlook distinguishes early schooling from compulsory schooling. The National Curriculum Guide for Preschools in Iceland emphasizes play as both an aim and a method. In Icelandic preschools, time frames are usually flexible and teaching methods are indirect. Children learn primarily through play and are able to move freely around the room. Over and over again during my time there, I saw how play was valued and that children enjoyed a high degree of freedom—resulting in high levels of independence and competence.

In fact, the best part of my study was watching children play at preschool! I spent 12 days in four different preschools observing in multiple classrooms, often following the children as they went outside. The following describes a day of observation at Bjartahlíð, a center for children 3 to 6 years old just a short walk from the University of Iceland's School of Education.

### Wednesday, December 2 2015

I arrive at 9:30 a.m. and head straight to the dress-up room, Söngstofa, which is a small room filled with hollow blocks, a doll bed and dolls, a small table and chairs, dress-up supplies, a boom box and CDs, children's artwork, charts, a calendar, books in a large bin, a play stove, small colored lights on the window sills, hand- and foot-print curtains, and a rug covering half the floor.

Five boys and girls are in the room engaged in constantly changing dramatic play. A female teacher brings out a basket with more supplies they might use; she observes, asks questions, and carries on conversations with the children. She leaves and brings back a bowl of orange slices—for their “breakfast.” She then brings a boy to the room, appearing to ask him if he wants to play there (my very rudimentary Icelandic sometimes made understanding situations a challenge). He talks briefly with the teacher and then leaves again.

One boy and three girls play hesta (horses). The girls (Katla, Kristín, and Melkorka) and the boy (Oliver) rearrange the blocks to make something for the horses—perhaps stalls. They play independently, but also check in with each other often. As they play, they are very cooperative, consistently saying, “Takk” (thanks) when others give them materials. Davíð, the male teacher, comes in and takes pictures of the children's structure; they are quite interested in seeing the photos

10:05 ~ Melkorka and Oliver negotiate something; she's quite confident! Later, a female teacher describes her as very clever, and Davíð tells me she speaks English. Kristín walks out of the room carefully balancing a rubber mat on her head; all the rest follow her, but most return quickly. Oliver puts on black patent high-heel dress-up boots and walks over to Melkorka's store/restaurant. He slips and falls, but he quickly gets up with a smile. Another boy pokes his head in the door and has what appears to be an antagonistic conversation with the kids in the room. Melkorka and Oliver are still at the table; Katla keeps working on the stables, saying “Craaazy!” Davíð pops his head in every now and again; the female teacher has not returned.

Oliver kicks off his boots and, while holding onto the blocks, accidentally knocks some pieces off the top of Melkorka's structure—she does not get upset. He leaves the room and Katla goes to get him; he returns. Now, the play gets very dramatic and the children move around

and speak excitedly. Oliver climbs out of the enclosure in his fancy boots; when a block slips, he falls against the wall. He lies still for a moment and looks at me; I ask [Are you] OK?, and he gets right up.

10:30 ~ Katla and Oliver are in the large block structure while Melkorka sits on top of the play stove making dramatic gestures with her arms. She yells something and Katla responds with a calm “Nei” (no). Play continues and another boy, Nól, enters the room. Melkorka tells me, in English, “The fire is over.” When I ask, “The fire?,” she responds, “That’s what was happening [in the pretend play].” No wonder it was such a drama! Now, the girls dismantle the original structure and start building a new one.

Davíð comes back in and he and the children talk briefly. Kristín, one of the original girls, returns and comments on the new structure. They talk about how tall it should be, measuring the height of the blocks against their height. Melkorka explains to me that if it gets too high it will fall down on their heads. When I ask, to clarify, “It might?,” she responds, “It will.” Melkorka and Katla have been in this room participating in dramatic play now for at least an hour and 20 minutes; who knows how long they were here before I arrived. The freedom and time they have to pursue their own interests is notable!

The girls pick up the round mats, put them on top of their new structure, and then put blocks on top of the mats. They stand back against the far wall and look at what they’ve done, saying, “Hmmm, hmmm,” while making such “thinking” gestures as tapping their chins. Then they return to the structure and change it a bit. This happens several times as they try to get it just right. Kristín returns and rejoins the play. Then Loki comes into the room (Davíð reminds him to use words, not his hands); he plays the part of the dog, down on all fours and barking from time to time. He starts messing with the blocks. “Loki!,” Katla says very sternly. He does something and she frowns and responds, “Oh my god.”

Davíð, who has come in to tell them it’s time to start cleaning up, tells me their structure is now a sauna. He helps Katla pick up while the remaining two boys keep playing. A couple of boys return; one asks Davíð a question and he answers by referring to the clock. Apparently, it is time to clean up. As always, clean-up time is much more relaxed than is common in the United States! I leave at 11:35.

My observations at this school describe numerous examples of the benefits of teacher-supported, child-directed dramatic play. While the children were obviously enjoying themselves, they were also enhancing their social-emotional, cognitive, physical, and creative abilities. Iceland has been able to maintain this focus on play in preschools despite mounting pressures to prepare children for the academic pressures of compulsory schooling. I believe we all could benefit from emulating their model.

**Region:** Europe <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** play <sup>[4]</sup>

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