

A Preschool in Tune With the Times

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LAGUNA BEACH—Anneliese's Preschool for children is a child, itself, of its own time.

It exists during an age when mass distaste for war is being matched by a movement toward non-violence and concern for the environment.

And so it teaches its pupils to love the earth and its creatures, channel aggressiveness into nonviolent activities and recycle, when possible.

Anneliese's children are unherded but supervised, undisciplined but controlled, participating in a kind of education in which they acutally have some say-so.

Every parent may not like it, and to them blonde, German Anneliese Schimmelpfennig just smiles and says, in very broken English, "Don't come here, then."

Because the children of the parents who DO like it are happily wallowing in dirt and animals and treehouses and gardens.

They are admonished not to bring war toys (even the bang-bang, shoot-'em-up-type of play with sticks is discouraged).

They help Anneliese's husband Paul make a compost pile from discarded vegetables he picks up at a local grocery. He grinds up the vegetables in a compost grinder-shredder, then waters them down and turns them over occasionally.

The children are encouraged to feel the mulch, to "see how warm it is," Schimmelpfennig said, "then they can see just why things can grow."

"It's something you can never get across to them just by talking about it."

And then the children sprinkle the compost onto their own organically grown plants, and help pick off bugs instead of using insecticides or pesticides.

They go to class—the ones they choose to attend. Anneliese gives them choices between music, painting, Montessori, science, sense development and acting.

Once they choose a class, they must stay for the half hour period.

And though they aren't required to participate, everyone usually does just because it's more fun

than sitting by himself.

In the art class they happily splash color onto large sheets of paper.

"One boy came in and told us to leave him alone because he felt grouchy," Anneliese said. "We handed him some paper and paint and let him take it out that way instead of on us."

"He made a grouchy painting, then he started to be happy again."

In the music class, Anneliese teaches the Orff-Schulwerk method of musical development, where children learn to play instruments and work off their frustrations by making "constructive" noises, as well.

"It was for a long time in my head to find a way for children to express themselves without screaming," explained Anneliese who arrived here from Munich, Germany, about four years ago.

"Screaming makes them nervous. It's better to sublimate these feelings and turn them into creativity —into art and music."

17-Room House

And so last May, to house all her ideas and children, Anneliese and her husband, who teaches German literature at UC Irvine, and the Daniel Leegants bought a 17-room house at 758 Manzanita Drive.

It used to be a nursing home but within a few short weeks the two couples transformed the grounds into a fairytale world that send the memory reeling back to walks in Bavaria, to stories about Huckelberry Finn and the adventures of Robinson Crusoe.

There's a giant pile of wood and sticks that looks like it just happened to fall there—but didn't—that gets trod upon by exploring feet.

There's the "super tree-house" and the chicken coop and the special play equipment Anneliese's cousin made—monkey bars in the shape of a house, a "crazy swing" that's really a bar that moves sideways.

There's a swing set Anneliese said she bought as a concession to parents who asked her why she didn't own one ("It's not conducive to really using your imagination," she said, "but not many understand this, so I bought it.")

And there are the hills—lots and lots of hills—covered with lots and lots of dirt.

"Many parents just don't understand about dirt," Schimmelpfennig said. "They think that dirt's dirty."

"But we like to have the kids get a basic feel for soil and water," he continued.

"It's fundamental," his wife interjected. "Kids just like it," adding that a good mud pie can be just as useful, and a lot cheaper, than a trip to the child psychiatrist.

And so, the children from 2½ through 6 years old munch on a snack of bread and jelly and talk to their friends. "It's amazing what they can do on their own if they're just left alone for a little while and given a chance," Anneliese explained.

They make up games to play on the "crazy swing," check to see if their corn plants have sprouted or if one of the hens has laid another egg.

And they participate in an acting class led by Kasper of the traditional German "Kasper" puppet theater.

Kasper is an impish hand puppet who, along with his pals, is expertly manipulated by Anneliese.

Kasper reminds the children to hang up their coats and teaches them manners.

He leads the children on adventures, sometimes, across the property to a small, wooden house where the good witch puppet lives (she's good because she throws raisins after the puppet shows are over).

'Save the Crocodiles'

Kasper's No. 1 enemy is the crocodile puppet and when the children yell "Kill the crocodile!" Kasper reminds them that there aren't too many crocodiles left in the world so this one, as well as all the rest, should be preserved.

The children at Anneliese's Preschool are taught the value of recycling society's surpluses—everything from the vegetables Schimmelpfennig rescues from grocery stores to old sheets and diapers which are donated by parents and are used for art projects.

Old bottles get painted and papered and old socks are used to make more hand puppets (they haven't purchased any art paper since the school started, Anneliese said).

And at the end of the day, if the children still feel tense, aggressive, Anneliese prescribes more art, more acting.

If it's a cold or foggy day, she and Mrs. Leegant close the draperies in the oversized living room, build a fire and have a quiet puppet show before the parents arrive to take their children home.



1 = eins
2 = zwei
3 = drei
4 = vier
5 = fünf

