

“You Can Feel It”

In the oldest nursery in New York, "Little Mish", an Irish teacher is teaching the children of the Lower East Side a lesson in feelings: an exciting prospect, especially in a city whose main focus is on competitiveness – as parent-author Nina Berendonk was able to discover.

If you just use your imagination a little bit, you could imagine that nothing in the last one hundred years has really changed at St. Mark's place, a small crossroads in the Lower East Side of New York. The sparrows chirp on the sidewalk, and the narrow high brownstone houses with the iron fire escapes look exactly the same as they do on the hand-colored photos of the turn of the century, found in books in Strand Bookstore.

There is only one noticeable difference: On the old photos you can see large numbers of children on the street. They stand around in small groups and look at the photographer full of curiosity - some of them are holding small siblings in their arms; many are barefoot.

These were the workers' children, who hung around around outside all day or were tied to the balcony rails, children whom Sara Curry wanted to take in from the street over 100 years ago. Curry, who herself became an orphan and raised her siblings, and who worked in a factory, first took the children home with her, educated them and gave them something to eat, until the parents returned from their tough day's work.

As she was so small, people called Sara Curry "the little missionary". In 1901 the little missionary bought the three-story brownstone house in St. Mark's place with the support of donations. "The Little Missionary's Day Nursery", known familiarly as: "Little Mish", was born - the first nursery in New York.

It is 2014, and Little Mish still exists. The brick house hasn't changed - but the character of the Lower East Side has. The neighborhood has developed into a creative hub. Close to the nursery there is a cool oriental café, tattoo parlors and small stores belonging to local artists. Toddlers are walking hand in hand

with their parents towards Little Mish. One of girls is wearing colourful angel wings over her raincoat.

"Yes, a lot has changed", laughs Eileen Johnson, who has led Little Mish for 12 years. The nursery still focuses on supporting working families from the neighborhood. A place at the nursery, costing the parents on average 1500 Dollars, around 1100 Euro, is in high demand. There are very few care facilities for toddlers in the USA, and the few nurseries which do exist don't receive state sponsorship, explaining the high prices. Especially in major cities such as New York, most young children are in the care of a nanny during the day - for around ten to twelve Euro an hour, which can easily add up to 2000 Euro per month. It's a popular profession for the many women who come to New York without training from their African, Caribbean or Asian origins. A side effect of this system is that kids do not socialize in larger groups until they start school - unless they get lucky and receive a spot in one of the few nurseries such as Little Mish. Maybe it is typical for this city that Eileen, the teacher, isn't from here. She is Irish and, as she says, left her past behind her 30 years ago.

She is friendly, open and unvarnished. She does not hide behind a persona or entertain small talk - Eileen left all that behind in Europe, including her mother, by whom she never felt loved, despite her attempts to care for her before her death.

In New York Eileen got a new start. She married an American, had two daughters and entered therapy. That is where she realized that she had been repressing her emotions for years, until she didn't know what she truly felt any more. "I am not alone in this", says Eileen, looking thoughtfully at the children's paintings hung on the stairwell in the nursery.

Eileen realized her struggles had their origins in her childhood - and thus decided to teach her nursery children how to deal with their emotions from an early age. "Emotional Education" is what Eileen calls her philosophy.

Emotional training for infants? Isn't that too demanding? "Definitely not!", says Eileen, laughing. "You simply have to keep reflecting back to children what is happening inside them – and inside the person across from them."

How Eileen accomplishes this could be seen with a group of three year olds. The teachers have placed tubs filled with water and soap bubbles on the tables in the corner of the large high-ceilinged room. Little girls are peacefully washing rubber animals in the tubs. Suddenly there is a shrill shriek. Eileen goes over to the table. "What's happening here?" she asks calmly. "She splashed me with water!" complains Polly, a small blonde girl, and points with her bubble-covered finger at Anna, a girl with dark curly hair. Eileen nods. "Polly, have you told Anna that you don't like that?" Polly shakes her head. "Then why don't you tell her. Maybe she doesn't know it", Eileen encourages.

Polly straightens herself up: "I don't want you to splash me with water!" she says firmly. Anna lowers her head, pushes her lower lip forward, turns around and walks away. Eileen puts a hand on her shoulder. "Oh", exclaims Eileen knowingly. "Now you're embarrassed. Sometimes that is the way we feel when someone confronts us." Anna glances up for a second; she seems relieved - probably because Eileen presented the uncomfortable feeling as completely normal. When Eileen turns to sort out the shelf filled with arts and crafts materials, both girls are standing next to each other peacefully and are cleaning the lions and elephants together.

Eileen expresses the children's emotions in words, thus teaching them to do the same for themselves - though she has never claimed that she always does everything perfectly. You can learn so well from her: Mistakes are OK and it's not the end of the world. When a boy interrupted her in our conversation to ask her when she could help him repair the paper-plane, her first reaction is a typical parent expression: "In a minute!"

The boy's look wavers, unsure of himself he steps from one leg to the other. Eileen notices this and says: "Wait. I actually wanted to say: No, I can't do it right now." The boy nods, tucks the plane under his arm and returns to the others who are clearing out the costume box. Eileen shakes her head: "This happens to me all the time. If I don't express myself clearly it can confuse a child. You see? He is disappointed that I can't help him – but once I explain, he knows why and where he stands with me and can now join the others in peace."

Recently Eileen and the other teachers asked themselves how they should deal with the children who interrupt the group story time with anecdotes of their last visit to the zoo, or ask questions when books are being read aloud to the group. The teachers decided to call a group session and discuss this with the children: Together they contemplated what it is like if you are telling a story and someone frequently interrupts. What do you do if it also interrupts the others? Is it possible to remember what you wanted to say and save until the end?

Eileen noticed the children like this notion. And in passing they learn how to respectfully deal with each other and ones' own needs. Eileen's approach is democratic, but still respects the need for authority. "Oh, I can get very strict when needed", says Eileen. "In that case I make myself big, like this", Eileen straightens up, "and I say: I don't like it when it's so loud! In a way in which I don't criticize the children directly but bring about calm nonetheless."

Children also need to learn boundaries and limits. A few days ago she asked the children which rules they know. Eileen can't read the children's notes without laughing: "Here, rule number 1 is the best: When I'm in the street with my mom, I'm not supposed to poop on the sidewalk."

Speaking of rules: Parents who educate their kids in an extremely competitive environment such as New York have many rules in their heads. In a city filled with the most talented bankers, artists, PR specialists and marketers, you also have to be a top parent and make the correct decisions for your children early on, so they come to believe. Especially considering that education in large cities can take place in public space - at the subway, the central park, the filled organic shop on the corner.

Eileen, the 'missionary of emotions', always has a friendly ear for parents. For example she offers them workshops in how to deal with children's anger, and occasionally reflects to the parents that they are in a perfectionist mode. Recently one of the beautiful, conscientious mothers brought some apples saying breathlessly: "They are locally produced, organic and I washed them!" "Did you make sure to wash them twice?" Eileen countered jokingly - about which they both had to laugh.

The children at Little Mish are extremely free: Willie, one of the teachers, will sit on the floor with his guitar and sing with them if it fits into the day's schedule. Later on they will spontaneously play with cardboard boxes and turn them into race cars, doll houses and even coffins using handicraft utensils. "Death often preoccupies them", says Eileen - and lets the kids carry on with their work. About the old town house, within which so many children and parents have already ascended and descended the stairs to the entrance door to the basement, lies a great peace and tranquillity.

And all around it: New York. Roaring. Vibrating.