

An interview with Hugo de Jonge

Making Rotterdam child-friendly: “Cooperation and a wide-angle view are key”

Rotterdam has a reputation within the Netherlands and beyond for its progressive approach to social policy and its focus on improving life for the city’s children – in particular the ‘Rotterdamse meldcode’, a Code of Conduct on domestic violence that the city pioneered and which is being taken up at a national level. *Early Childhood Matters* interviewed the Alderman for education, youth and families of Rotterdam, Hugo de Jonge, to find out more about what the city does for its young children.

Rotterdam was the European Youth Capital in 2009. Why do you think the city deserved that title?

Rotterdam is one of the few cities in the Netherlands with a growing population in the age group under 27. Most cities are ‘getting older’, Rotterdam isn’t. Given that fact, our ongoing dedication to support the development of Rotterdam talent is largely focused on youth. The European Youth Capital project provided a central stage for all sorts of activities.

The project proved that Rotterdam is a lively city with a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds and a shipload of youthful talent. Our youths are quite capable of organizing events for their peers. Their fresh, professional approach was very successful in terms of attracting the right crowd, and combining the cultural and educational aspects of our city.

In addition, the project showed the overwhelming amount of activities initialized and run by both public and private institutions. It is clear that the city itself takes the initiative, not just the ‘city hall’.

Why do you feel the city of Rotterdam is a good place for young children to grow up?

Children usually only experience the street or neighborhood they live in, so the city of Rotterdam works closely with schools and other institutions to provide our children with a dynamic and pleasant environment to grow up in. We pride ourselves in Rotterdam on having an exceptionally wide view of our social policies, pro-actively involving all stakeholders who can possibly be relevant in improving life in the city.

In October 2010 we summarized our approach in an English-language booklet entitled *Rotterdam, city with a future: How to build a Child Friendly City*. This set out four practical building blocks; each with numerous specific metrics we aim to reach:

- Child Friendly Housing: for example a minimum of 85 m² floor space for apartments with a private outdoor space;
- Public Space: for example a pavement big enough to play on, at least 3-5 m wide, on one side of

every street, preferably the sunny side;

- Facilities: for example a minimum of 300 m² surfaced area in school playgrounds, with a 2:1 ratio of surfaced area to greenery;
- Safe Traffic Routes: for example speed reduction measures and no-through-traffic zones.

The booklet describes other practical ideas Rotterdam is pursuing, such as cultivating semi-wild green areas for children to play freely in, and establishing 'play streets' with go-karts and skipping ropes provided for children to borrow. The booklet will be published on www.rotterdam.nl/kindvriendelijk.

What do you think are the biggest problems faced by young children living in Rotterdam?

One problem is the space they have to play. This is under increasing pressure. The growth in traffic and the increasing density of population and buildings are providing direct competition for playing spaces, even in the suburbs.

That is why, as part of our 'Child Friendly Rotterdam' programme, we invited the people of Rotterdam to look at their surroundings and tell us what they think needs improvement; for example school children taking digital photos of things they like and dislike in their environments and providing ideas on how to improve these.

Often the results were surprising. For example, we found out that some cycle routes which adults are happy to use are frightening to kids, because they are secluded and dark or because they have to cross difficult and busy streets.

A pilot in eleven focus areas was very successful, encouraging us to roll it out into more areas. The sense of pleasant living and safety have actually improved, according to surveys.

A second problem is that many young children have parents who do not speak Dutch very well. As young children are mostly guided by their parents, these young children do not participate in social activity as much as they might. Of course, this adds to the problem of them not learning the language.

My policy on education puts more emphasis on language than before. One of the key factors is pre-school education, where very young children start learning Dutch from age two and a half while acting out everyday situations.

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"When targeting hard-to-reach groups, we take their social environment into account and focus on their needs" - Hugo de Jonge, Alderman for education, youth and families of Rotterdam.



The Bernard van Leer Foundation is concerned with the question of how we can ensure cities are as supportive as possible to the care and learning needs of young children. One important aspect of this is consulting children themselves about what they want from aspects of city life such as urban planning, early learning services, housing, etc. Does the city of Rotterdam have policies on getting input from the children themselves on decisions impacting their lives (e.g. city planning, early learning services, housing etc)?

The European Youth Capital project and the programme 'Child Friendly Rotterdam' are good examples of the

way we involve children at several ages. We focus mainly on input from children slightly older, generally from about ten years old. Also we have an important youth board: the Young Economic Development Board. They advise the mayor and aldermen on youth issues.

I feel it helps our city in two ways: the input helps us to understand, reach and help the Rotterdam youth through our policies. And, of course, it's a marvelous way to find and develop young talent. If you take the time and make the effort to involve children and youths in creating new policy, you will be surprised at their creativity.

From our work throughout the Netherlands, we are very aware that certain disadvantaged groups tend to find it more difficult to access quality services in early learning and care for their children. Rotterdam is progressive in its policies towards disadvantaged groups. Which groups are most difficult to reach in Rotterdam and why? What is the city doing to make services in early learning and care available for these children?

These are people with low education and low income, they combine poor language skills with low education and relatively high unemployment. The city provides pre-school and in-school education, so that children start learning Dutch at a young age. We do this in close cooperation with day care

centers and schools throughout the city.

What lessons can you share with other cities in terms of effective policies and programmes when trying to reach these groups?

When targeting hard-to-reach groups, take their social environment into account and focus on their needs. What this means in practice is that we don't just rely on traditional media channels to reach these groups. So for instance we might set up an information stall in a marketplace near a mosque, and stand there offering to answer questions or provide information. We learn a lot about what concerns the groups we're trying to reach. For example, when we used this approach to publicize language courses for migrants which would enable them to communicate more easily with public servants such as teachers at their children's schools, we came to understand that some parents were avoiding contact with schools because they were worried they would get in trouble for not speaking Dutch. This understanding helps us to design better policies and programmes to reach these groups. Nothing beats two-way personal communication.

Rotterdam is well known for its high-profile campaigning on domestic violence. Why is this a priority in Rotterdam?

It is a priority in Rotterdam because of the high rate of domestic violence and the damage it causes, especially when it concerns young children. I want Rotterdam children to grow up safely and healthily. Domestic violence seriously jeopardizes their development and can keep causing harm, long after the violence has stopped.

Does Rotterdam share experiences with other cities in the Netherlands and abroad on this issue?

Of course we do. We have regular meetings with the other three major cities in the Netherlands (Amsterdam, Utrecht and The Hague). We also take part in the International Family Justice Centre Movement, based in San Diego (USA).

Furthermore, we cooperate with the city of Göteborg and we share information with several European cities like London and Milan and with European Regions like Andalucia (Spain). Finally, the city of Rotterdam and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs cooperate with the city of Casablanca (a so called Matra-Project).

One important aspect of the Bernard van Leer Foundation's approach to reducing violence in the lives of young children is to collect more data on the issue. We feel that without good data, it is hard to establish clearly the extent of the problem and what needs to be done, and to track how successful different approaches

are. Do you agree? What kind of data exists on the impact of domestic violence on children in Rotterdam?

Of course, the extent of the problem is a continuous concern. An important objective in our campaign against domestic violence, is uncovering the hidden violence.

We have data/reports from a number of sources: the Centre for Advice and Reporting of Child Abuse (AMK); the Advice and Support Centre (ASHG), on domestic violence, honor related violence, female mutilation, child abuse, forced marriages, parent violence, sexual abuse and lover boys; several other organizations like the Rotterdam Police and mental health institutions.

What challenges does the city face in collecting data?

The biggest challenge we face is the taboo on both domestic violence and child abuse. Neither a problem family itself nor its social environment (i.e. relatives, neighbors and friends) are likely to blow the whistle. Problems like this are usually hidden as much as possible, and sometimes they are not even perceived as problems.

In some cases, both the victims and the perpetrator regard a certain level of violence as 'normal'. Any official number on domestic violence and child abuse is bound to underestimate the extent of the problems, both in families of Dutch and foreign origin. We really

need to expand the awareness on that: it never was and never will be normal.

Another important aspect of domestic violence which is under-appreciated is the impact on children witnessing violence - they can be severely affected by this, even if they are not physically subjected to violence themselves. What is Rotterdam's experience with early detection of violence against or witnessed by children 0 – 3?

In 2007 Rotterdam developed a Code of Conduct in partnership with other stakeholders in the future of our city's children, ranging from schools and kindergartens to medical service providers.

The initiative emerged from an awareness that a more holistic and integrated approach was needed to tackle this issue. It was pioneering work

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and reflected our strong commitment to try to really solve problems using the policy tools at our disposal, rather than just regarding policy implementation as a box-checking exercise.

The Code of Conduct consists of a variety of tools such as protocols and training courses which we adapted

for different groups of professionals who work with children, to detect and report signs of violence and abuse.

For example we have Centers for Youth and Family (CJG), where all children between 0 and 19 years see doctors at various moments and stages in their lives. The purpose is not just to check physical health; the medical professionals also look for signs of domestic violence or abuse. If they suspect a child lives in a violent, or even life-threatening environment, there are protocols they can follow to report problems and have them addressed accordingly. This approach is quite useful.

Our focus is on abused children as well as children whose parents have violent relationships. Institutions such as the Centre for Advise and Reporting of Child Abuse (AMK) and the Bureau for Youth-care are priceless partners in the battle against violence, for the city of Rotterdam and numerous other parties.

A relatively new instrument has also proven useful in our battle: the possibility to prohibit violent offenders access to their own homes, thus protecting the other members of the family.

The Code of Conduct we developed has had a real impact. Since it was introduced in 2007, reports of abuse have increased from many sources, showing that taboos are being broken and people are becoming more willing to speak up. We are glad that this success has been noticed elsewhere in

the Netherlands and is to be adapted into national legislation, probably in 2011.

What are the main challenges?

The main challenges are:

1. the provision of sufficient care for children as victims and as witnesses;
2. the prevention of domestic violence and child abuse;
3. to put an end to the transfer of domestic violence from one generation to the next generation.

What is Rotterdam's policy on ensuring care is provided to children that are a witness to violence?

Our policy approaches the problem and the environment as a whole, and we involve all possible parties to address any issues. More concretely:

- We subsidize youth care.
- We give added priority to youth programmes.
- We set up close cooperation between several organizations through tools like the Code of Conduct.
- We established so-called Local Domestic Violence Teams, which form a powerful link in the entire network. Such teams consist of people from the police, general welfare services, children's welfare services, and the regional health department, to name a few.

Again, cooperation and a wide-angle view are key.

If there were unlimited resources, what else would you ideally like to do to prevent child abuse?

Ideally, I would like to set up a long-term, multi-spectrum prevention programme for children who have suffered from violence as a victim or as a witness. I would like to include all relevant private and public parties, to ensure the problem is addressed holistically, from every possible angle.

What are the main lessons Rotterdam can share with other cities interested in tackling domestic violence (specifically on early detention and care for children under the age of 8)?

We learned that these measures can be very successful:

- The introduction of the Code of Conduct of reporting domestic violence and child abuse ('Rotterdamse meldcode').
- More intense cooperation between partners (e.g. Police, ASHG, AMK, Women's shelters) in the local domestic violence teams.
- Enhanced involvement of daycare centers, kindergartens, family doctors, social workers and schools.
- A network of mentor mothers for families at risk.
- Specialized approaches to various types of domestic violence, such as elderly abuse and honor related violence.

International experience (for example in Sweden) indicates that the involvement of men is crucial in campaigns against domestic violence. Do you agree? How does the campaign in Rotterdam approach men?

The entire approach includes men. That applies to the help we offer to offenders and to families. Offenders are often obligated to accept this help, and are helped by men. The campaign also includes men, both in the target audience and in the material supporting the campaign.

Who would be an ideal spokesperson to approach men in Rotterdam (and the Netherlands) on the issue of domestic violence?

One needs several ambassadors for specific target audiences. Ideally, one should have someone that people feel familiar with and close to, since the problem of violence and abuse is such an intimate thing.