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## Marte Meo: A video-supported counselling method



### Abstract

*The Marte Meo intends to activate and support development processes of children. By means of video recordings, a new perspective on already familiar situations is made possible and the natural, development-supportive behavioural patterns of the person looking after the child are encouraged. In this process, the constant resources- and solution-orientated perspective on children and adults is absolutely crucial.*

### 1. Introduction

Marte Meo roughly translates »on one's own strength«. Individuals are to be encouraged on all levels to use their own strength in order to activate development processes of children, parents and professionals.<sup>(1)</sup>

More than 30 years ago the Dutchwoman *Maria Aarts* developed this video-based counselling method. The starting point was her work in a remedial care institution for children with an increased need for support. It was her wish to include parents more actively in the education process. She built on the emotional attachment between parents and children and purposefully supported existing parental abilities that are beneficial for a positive development of children. For years, she observed and analysed what makes for a good parent-child-relationship and what supports a mutual feeling of being understood. Two

basic principles shape her work until this day: »Don't talk about problems, but look for opportunities« and »Don't explain, but show it by means of images«.

Instead of offering advice, it was essential to closely look for the positive things that are present in short video recordings of everyday situations and above all to notice what can be done concretely. This, the parents are shown quite plainly by means of selected video sequences, demonstrating how well they support their child in these situations. They were encouraged to increasingly use these approaches in their daily life and to practice them step-by-step. Thus, they were able to strengthen and develop further their existing educational abilities.

*Maria Aarts* also founded the first form of a daily care centre for children who would have otherwise been put into foster homes. The method – then known under the name of »Orion Video Home Training« – was recognized by the Dutch ministry in 1985.<sup>(2)</sup> The successful work of this institution also convinced the German youth welfare service: first participants from Germany were trained in the method in 1992.<sup>(3)</sup>

In order to be able to develop her ideas and approaches further, Aarts founded an independent network with »Marte Meo International«. By now, Marte Meo is successfully used in almost all social-paedagogical areas, far beyond the initial work with families: from work with infants, children and teenagers in families and paedagogical institutions to work with old people who are ill and in need of care.

## 2. Basic assumptions

*Maria Aarts* has deliberately developed Marte Meo for the daily life of parents. In her publications, the »everyday« is also an important principle.<sup>(4)</sup> Therefore, she has not written a delineation of the theoretical background. However, she collaborates in many university programmes and in Germany, initiatives are developing to scientifically consolidate the method. In the textbook of the Marte Meo method, it says regarding the theoretical back-ground for the praxis:

»It is a matter of developmental psychology and here especially the attachment theory and infant research, the social-cognitive learning theory, the neuro-sciences, the communication theory, the theory of symbolically communicated interaction and systemic theory. These constituent parts form – eclectically combined in praxis – the theoretical concept of the method.«<sup>(5)</sup>

For the use of Marte Meo in day care centres, the following basic principles are essential:

### 2.1. *The basis for a beneficial development of children is the natural interaction from parents/teachers with the children*

An infant depends on interaction from the first day of its life in order to develop and to learn. Adults react to this need in a completely »normal and natural« way with a couple of basic behaviour patterns. The perceptive adult reacts intuitively to expressions of the infant: he/she turns towards the child, adopts into a higher pitch of voice, and imitates the child's sounds or names, for example, what it does. This gives the child the assurance that its behaviour is good, that it is being noticed and respected. In turn, this contributes positively to the development of self-perception. In the shared joy of such moments, an emotional attachment is established. Language is stimulated and developed, that is to say, not only concrete words, but simultaneously sounds, rhythm, intonation and atmosphere as well as the feelings associated with this.

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**Marte Meo encourages professionals to consciously notice, use and purposefully further develop their own abilities.**

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### 2.2. *Marte Meo is development support, no therapy*

Especially children with special needs can benefit from Marte Meo. But the method does not replace a necessary therapy. Numerous case studies show that problematic behaviour is often caused by unsuccessful communication and can respectively be improved through conscious interaction. Children with special needs require adults with increased educational/parental abilities that can be made visible and learnable by means of the video analysis. Development support always starts with the question: what can the child already do? What does it not have developed yet and how can this be supported concretely?

### 2.3. *Kindergarten teachers usually possess good natural interaction skills. By using Marte Meo, they are encouraged to consciously notice their own abilities, to use them and to purposefully develop them further*

Positive communication elements are, for example,

to get into contact with children, to look at them in a friendly way, to speak with a clear voice in an adequate pitch and pace, to address the children at eye level. Marte Meo wants kindergarten teachers to consciously notice these abilities and use them in a well-directed way.

To reflect on one's own educational activities and to develop these further can take place through coun-

selling by a colleague who is supported by a trained Marte Meo professional or in the context of one's own training in the method. In either case, this means to get accustomed to the idea of making a part of one's own activities visible for everyone. About five minutes of daily interaction with individual children or a group, e.g. in a caring situation, during meals, in a free-play situation or in the morning circle are filmed



*The recordings make subtleties visible.*

## CASE EXAMPLE

**A totally different child**

*Leon, a boy with multiple disabilities in an integrative group, made a particularly impressive development. Upon entering the kindergarten, the three-year old was able to sit on his own, but did not walk. Sporadically, he uttered sounds. The parents had received the diagnosis that their child would probably never learn to walk.*

That Leon was accompanied with Marte Meo happened by coincidence. A member of staff of the day-care centre needed video recordings relevant for her Marte Meo training. One of her colleagues was willing to be filmed with a child a few times in the space of a few months for a few minutes and to analyse these recordings together. From the group of children she picked Leon, »because he will stay in the kindergarten for at least three years in either case and I would like to follow and support his possible development«, as she expressed her choice.

For the first video recording, the kindergarten teacher was supposed to be alone in a room with Leon in order to avoid distractions and to be able to record sounds better. His favourite place was chosen for this: a box filled with sponges, in which he liked to sit and obviously enjoyed it when adults or children engaged with him. »Unfortunately, he doesn't initiate contact with others and is predominantly passive. I'd like to integrate him more into the group,« said the kindergarten teacher.

The first video sequence shows Leon sitting in the midst of the sponges and moving them with his hands. The kindergarten teacher sits down with him and participates in the game. The evaluation of the recorded scene focussed on two main points: what things has Leon already developed, which initiatives does he show in the free play and what can one detect in the contact with the kindergarten teachers?

and later analysed. The Marte-Meo perspective enables kindergarten teachers to see in which moments they naturally support the children's development. If this happens repeatedly, the lessons learned can become an integral part of the children's behaviour.

**2.4. A picture is worth a 1000 words**

Marte-Meo lives on images and video recordings. Impressive images of positively experienced situations are kept in mind and can be recalled again and again. The lively, intuitive and direct interaction of children and adults is in such intensity only noticeable in images.

At all costs, the legal preconditions necessary for the video recordings have to be clarified beforehand:

- The recordings are voluntary.
- Children may only be filmed if the parents express their consent.
- Professional confidentiality must be given.
- The film sequences are only shown under the conditions agreed upon before. Another use or publication is only possible in case of an individually granted permission.

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**In short video recording of everyday situations, the main concern is to realise what positive things already exist and what can be done concretely.**

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The analysis of the video sequences offers an abundance of insights and suggestions. To witness one's own demeanor and behaviour, together with the subsequent reaction of the child or a group is very memorable and motivating. The analysis of the recordings opens opportunities that transcend a normal observation. One can:

- repeatedly watch individual scenes and discover new things time and again,
- contemplate miniscule gestures and movements in slow motion more closely,
- enjoy impressive scenes together in the freeze frame,
- magnify and emphasise particular impressions with closeup views.

*Maria Aarts' sister Josje has developed possibilities of the use of Marte Meo in schools and day-care centres.<sup>(6)</sup> According to her, two main task fields in day-care centres require a different behaviour of the*

It became clear that:

1. Leon shows spontaneous initiatives: he moves the sponges with his hands as well as with legs and feet, sometimes more, sometimes less actively. Sponges that escape over the rim of the box he sometimes follows with his eyes.
2. The kindergarten teacher participates actively and enthusiastically in the game. She speaks with the boy, smiles at him and gives him many new ideas on how to play with the sponges. A few times, he reacts to her address and looks to her, – but mostly only when she already looks into a different direction so that their looks never meet.

Already few images show what could help Leon in his development. He was to get the opportunity to develop in the »Marte-Meo-time«<sup>(\*)</sup>, at first with a focus on: waiting, following and naming.

That meant concretely: ideally, the kindergarten teacher took about 10 minutes of her time every day for an intensive 1:1-contact with him. She followed him in his free activities. Turned towards him, but without joining in or making suggestions, she waited for him to show an initiative. This, she immediately named in the following way: »Yes, now you are taking the sponge«; »You are moving the door« and waited whether he would react.

That was supposed to help him to perceive himself more consciously and to discover and activate his own »gold mine«<sup>(\*\*)</sup>, that was then immediately positively affirmed. If he uttered any sounds, the kindergarten teacher repeated them in the same pitch, mirrored his facial expression, »now, you are looking at me«, smiled at him and shared his joy, »now you are smiling« and named his possible feelings: »You like that, that makes you happy.«

In the film sequences resulting from such situations one can virtually feel how he got to know himself better and better and increasingly developed further in his way and in his own pace.

kindergarten teachers in order to be able to support the children in their development: the so-called free play and structured situations such as non-simulation games or group activities.

### 3. Development advancement in free play situations

Generally, children in day-care centres experience long periods in which they explore materials, live out their fantasy, discover their world with enthusiasm and joy and are able to develop their potentials, alone in free play or together with other children. Professionals should recognise this and support them in doing so. Essential Marte Meo elements for this task are »waiting – following – naming«.

#### 3.1. Waiting

For this first element, *Maria* and *Josje Aarts* often use a very inspiring simile: every child is born with a gold mine that holds various chances for growth and development.<sup>(?)</sup> They take the initiative, use their energy and become active. Normally developed children frequently sparkle with energy and ideas. Others require support from adults. Video recordings of such situations can show that rendering this assistance is not as natural as one might think. Adults take part very actively for the best, make suggestions, bring in new ideas and influence the free play. Sometimes, the child can only react, and thus does not use its own »gold mine«. Especially, when children do not do or say anything, one tends to fill these moments of silence. But for some children it would be more beneficial in this situation if the adult would »only« sit next to them and give them time for their own initiative, as small as they may be.

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**Problematic behaviour often is caused by unsuccessful communication and can respectively be improved by conscious interaction.**

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#### 3.2. Following

To attentively follow the child's initiative with looks, thoughts and feelings mean to get to know it better, but also to adapt to its individual pace. When one follows the child, it feels noticed and affirmed in its behaviour. In the free play situation the child decides about its actions. Only in that way, the child can – and the adult that follows his/her actions – find out

He regarded and examined objects near him, became more active physically and started to look for contact to adults and children. Half a year after the start of the Marte-Meo-work, Leon was able to walk a few steps and uttered many new sounds/words. A few children noticed that the kindergarten teacher consciously repeated Leon's utterances and sounds and perceptively adopted this by speaking »in a Leon way« with him as well.

In a conversation with Leon's mother, she described her gratefulness about the way in which she was involved in this process by the kindergarten and developed new parental abilities: »Now, I have a totally different child. He is much more active, though of course not as easy care anymore. Currently, he develops further without assistance. Finally, I can just be a mother to him, no longer make gymnastic exercises with him against his will to stimulate his musculature. I believe in his abilities more now, also push him more and can wait if he wants to do something and no longer relieve him of everything. I'm very proud of him.«

#### Annotations with »A totally different child«:

(\*) »Marte Meo-time« is »development time«, as *Maria Aarts* says. Then no problems are discussed, but it is solely time for development.

(\*\*) *Maria Aarts* often talks about »gold mines«; gold mines that people are born with. The interview with *Prof. Dr. Gerald Hüther*(\*\*\*) deals with this topic. Gold mines denote the particular interest and talents of every child. Children need adults to notice their initiatives. This succeeds in the best way in everyday moments of playing and living, especially in so-called »free everyday situations«. Therefore, parents/ paedagogues are encouraged when working with Marte Meo to notice and name the children's initiatives: *In the exact moment in which the child shows an initiative, one should provide words to describe it. Thus, the child can learn: I am*

what it is really interested in and one can take up at the child's level. Some children often switch between activities and are not able to keep themselves busy intensively or over a longer amount of time. If one consciously follows their action they can experience this sympathy as support.

#### 3.3. Naming

When kindergarten teachers name the child's actions with encouraging voice and a friendly face, they activate the »gold mine« and affirm it in its actions. For the child, this can also mean that it notices more consciously what it is doing in that very moment. Simultaneously, it hears the fitting words – an essential part of language development.

Naming is often better than questioning. A common situation: a child draws a picture, the adult wants to share in and shows interest: »What are you drawing there?«

Questions require an answer, and especially insecure children can thus be made even more insecure. Irrespective of this, not every child is aware at the beginning of the drawing process what it wants to draw, but the drawing develops as it goes along. »Naming« would be an alternative here. In video images, it is noticeable, how this is revealed in the child's posture and facial expressions. For insecure children, questions are reasonable if one knows that they can answer them in order to then clearly and positively affirm this. In the case of other children, questions help to really learn something about them or to engage in deeper conversation with them.

Certainly, children also show initiatives that one cannot approve of or that one has to forbid for safety



*Wait and see what kind of impulses the child shows.*

*being noticed, what I do is important and is respected. It starts to trust its own initiatives and is enabled to socially interact.*

(\*\*\*) AARTS, M.; HAWELLEK, CHR.; RAUSCH, H.; SCHNEIDER, M.; THELEN, C.; interview with HÜTHER, G. (2014). *Marte Meo: Eine Einladung zur Entwicklung*. ISBN: 978-90-75455-31-1 (Book 258 p. + DVD). Eindhoven: Aarts Productions.

reasons. In this case, naming for support of that behaviour would not be advisable: »I see that you are cutting the picture book into pieces...« A comprehensible angrily uttered »stop that« will usually bring that behaviour to an end. It would then be important to explain this in a way appropriate for children. One could name the child's ambition to learn how to use the scissors. As an alternative, one could offer something else that can be cut into pieces instead.

### Kindergarten teachers are enabled to see in which moments they can support the children's development in what particular way.

Many children name their actions spontaneously – an essential part of their ability to play and their cooperation skills in interaction with others. This makes them predictable for their playmates, ideas are exchanged and a joint game can develop. By means of systematic encouragement following the principle »waiting – following – naming«, many isolated children were already able to learn to form relationships and to really be a playmate. A regular and intensive 1:1-supervision needed for such processes is not possible and also not required with every child in the routine of the day-care centre. If it is not possible to have ten minutes of intensive contact, then maybe five or two instead. In many situations of daily life, opportunities for this present themselves. Every child wants to be noticed and respected. This applies to »normal« children as well as to the quiet, inconspicuous children that sometimes run the risk of being overlooked.

## 4. Development support in structured situations

In the free play, the child's initiatives should have priority. Other situations are clearly structured and concentrated on a certain result. In this case, guidance from the paedagogical professionals is required. In this connection, it has a development supportive effect when professionals name their own initiatives. If the adult, for example, accompanies his/her actions with words when changing the nappies, the child receives several messages. It is prepared for what is about to happen. That makes the adult's actions predictable and gives the child a feeling of security. It starts to connect the words accompanying the action with, for example, the bodily parts and gets to know the words better and better until it can start using them itself. The carer follows for example also the child's movements and names its feelings. Hence, the child gets insights into its own emotional world and thus learns to get itself know better once again. Furthermore, naming also supports the child's ability to pay attention. In the video, one can often observe very well how a child follows every movement, every word of the adult with its eyes wide open.

Guidance in structured situations means to specify step-by-step what is being done and to immediately affirm if the child's behaviour goes into the right direction. It is astounding, how infants barely a few weeks old can already »participate« and cooperate in this.

A main task of kindergarten teachers is to direct and guide children on their own or in groups. That is usually extremely difficult and exhausting. But it is necessary in order to structure situations and to



*Choosing the important images with the Marte-Meo-perspective.*

help children with controlling and regulating their behaviour. Therefore it is worthwhile to analyse what can contribute to a positive group process. In the development of Marte Meo, situations in day-care centres, schools and groups that were felt and experienced to be beneficial, were evaluated at image for image. What exactly contributes to a positive atmosphere in shared activities, what kind of behaviour did the kindergarten teacher show and how did the children react to that? What helped them to remain attentive? From these analyses, the following elements that contribute to a positive guidance were formulated:

#### 4.1. Making a clear start

In structured activities in groups it is important that everyone knows and notices when the activity starts. Short sounds or utterances like »now«, »so«, »erm« help children to consciously turn to the group and to control their attention. The children's willingness to participate is even higher when noticeable contact to them is being established by means of friendly, encouraging looks and gestures. A variably used voice in a pace suitable for children and in different pitches as well as attractive sounds also invite the children to participate and help to make the whole affair more interesting than a purely matter-of-fact »today we will do...«

#### 4.2. Being socially aware

Positive guidance also means to look around the group over and over again. How do the children react? The same situation can provoke totally different reactions. If these are named, every child feels understood and at the same time the ability to empathise with others is stimulated. Can I give room for contributions of the children? Do they need time in order to process new things? Experienced kindergarten teachers »know« their children and can provide positive guidance in advance: e.g. clearly explain what a child can do in that moment instead of telling him/her what it must not do.

#### 4.3. Affirming desired behaviour

To affirm desired behaviour has an extremely positive and motivating effect. The shared joy provides »emotional food« for both the children and the kindergarten teachers. Especially children who do not naturally show a desired behaviour almost thirst for approval and affirmation.

#### 4.4. Creating a needed focus

In group activities one can see very quickly if all children are »present«. In order to achieve this, it is helpful to create a shared focus of attention. This, one can achieve by naming one's own actions, e.g. »I will now fetch...« This helps the children to follow. In video recordings, one can observe very well how every pair of eyes looks with interest in the same direction. Children who can be easily distracted may need more explicit signals in order to be able to concentrate. Marte Meo elements useful in this case are, for example: to »elevate, enlarge« information by particular emphasis with voice and gestures. Other children need support in order to control their behaviour: »Ellen, see, now it's Sophie's turn; I'm curious what she will have to say.« Ellen might not manage to do this for very long, but then she at least practices for a moment to follow the shared focus – which can then be positively affirmed.

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**Impressive images of positively experienced situations are kept in mind and can be recalled again and again.**

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### 5. Discovering chances

Marte Meo can be used supportively in day-care centres in various ways. There is no fixed schema that has to be followed. Which elements are most sensible at which time, for whom, and in which situation depends on the individual problem. This is worked on in the evaluation of the video recordings, the most important element of the Marte Meo process. From the plentitude of information the decisive images are chosen with the assistance of experienced Marte Meo professionals. In doing so, one works with the existing resources. From this, one usually picks a point to work on (e.g. waiting for a longer amount of time, naming feelings, affirming initiatives) that has to be specifically focussed on for a while. This happens according to the »**Marte Meo 3-W-concept**« – **When, What, Why**: That is to say, in which suitable moment can one do what exactly and why is that beneficial to the child's development?

The »Marte Meo perspective« in a game of picture pairs could mean in addition to the joy at playing and searching for the right pairs: in which moment can I expand child A's vocabulary by naming many things myself and »giving words« to him, how can I help



child B to pay attention to the order of the game and to remember it, and how can I »lift« information for child C when it is no longer its turn and share joy at playing and excitement with child D and thus have a share in everyone's enjoyment in the game. This can make the difference between a playmate and a professional guardian. In the foreground stands the search for chances that allow individual development support.

#### Annotations:

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#### Literature and other materials:

- AARTS, MARIA; HÜTHER, GERALD (2008): *Symposium Interaction and Development. Marte Meo-praxis and neurobiology, a dialogue between: Maria Aarts and Prof. Dr. Gerald Hüther*. DVD. Eindhoven: Aarts Productions.

*Informationen about events, opportunities for training and further education in Marte Meo and local contacts can be found at [www.martemeo.com](http://www.martemeo.com)*

#### SUMMARISED FOR THE HURRIED READER

Marte Meo is a video-based counselling method that has been developed for the work with parents by the Dutchwoman *Maria Aarts* more than 30 years ago. Today, it is used in nearly all social-paedagogical areas of activity. Marte Meo aims at supporting development processes of children and adults. In order to do this, the focus is first put on what the child is already able to do, what it has not yet developed and how they can be supported. The task for the paedagogical professionals is to notice the development supportive patterns of behaviour and to promote these. In doing so, the video recordings make a new perspective on everyday, familiar situations possible.

### Further Information:

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- Professionalization

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