

Good practices for promotion of mental and physical health in schools

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My dear ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to seduce you gently to one of the most beautiful places that I know – that place is the *potential space* of playing and dialogue. I would like to show you the immense significance of this space for the unfolding of bodily and mental health – including the joy of learning - by way of some examples from the school and from the clinic. First, however, allow me a few theoretical reflections on the concept of prevention through the model of Salutogenesis and its connection with potential space. The first person to have occupied himself with the universal significance of potential space for mental well-being in childhood and youth - as well as in adulthood - was the brilliant Donald Winnicott (1896 until 1971) and it was he, who coined the term.

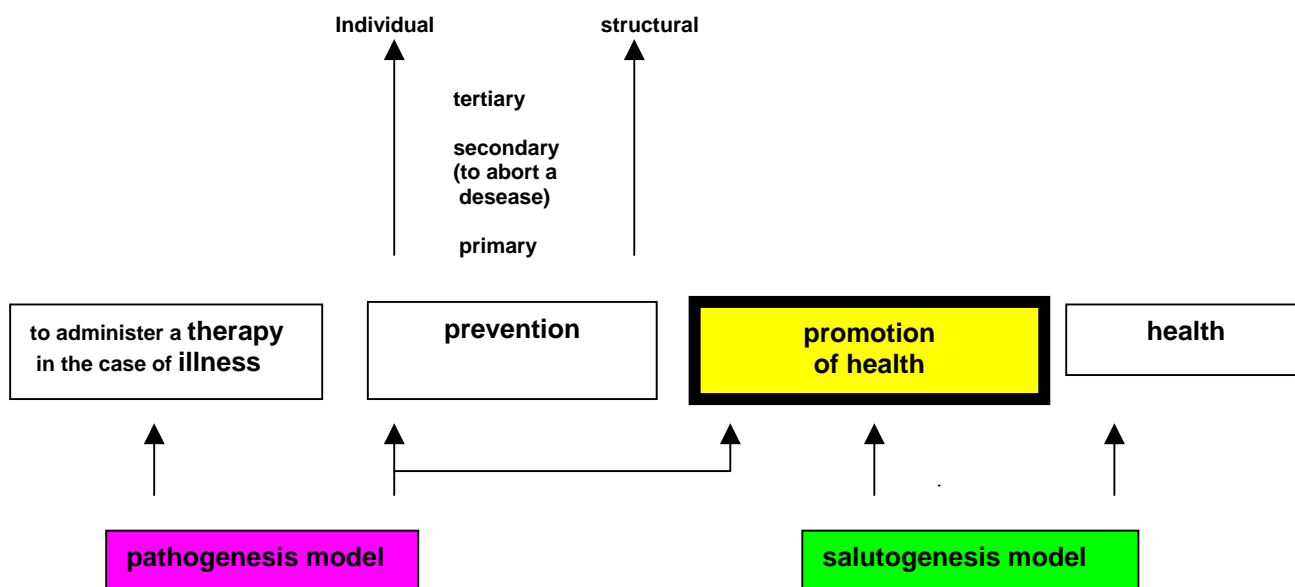
Potential space is not visible but it can be experienced. What is meant are the interstices that naturally open up during play and in dialogue and, of course, in playful dialogue or dialogical play. These are the spaces between the fantasy of a child and, for instance, the sand pile in front of the child, or, equally as well, the spaces between persons deep in dialogue. One can lose one's self in these interstices – and be enriched from those spaces upon one's return to the normal. It is within these interstices of playing and dialogue that the "sense of coherence" (called SOC in the following) emerges.

"Coherence" comes from the Latin and means something like "connection," "consistency," "integrity" or "to have internal and external stability". Persons with a strong feeling of coherence can cope with the burdens and insults of their lives more effectively. They react to them less often with prolonged stress reactions.

The "sense of coherence" is the central idea of the salutogenesis model of Aaron Antonovsky (1923 until 1994). Antonovsky developed the concept of the sense of coherence, respectively the theoretical model of salutogenesis while questioning women born between 1914 and 1923 about their health after menopause. Some of the questioned women had been imprisoned in concentration camps.

What did *not* surprise Antonovsky was that more than 60 % of the formerly imprisoned women found themselves in significantly worse general states than those who had not experienced such atrocities. What, on the other hand surprised him was that 29 % of the women who had been imprisoned, reported themselves to be in relatively good mental and physical health. In seeking an answer to the question of why these women remained so healthy despite the maximal stress-load they had lived through, he developed the model of salutogenesis. This model asks about forces that sustain and restore health. According to Antonovsky, good health is something other than merely the absence of disease. In contrast to his views, the normal, classical medical model of pathogenesis asks exclusively the question of what makes a person sick. The preventative concepts, that derive from the model of pathogenesis aim at identifying sickness-causing factors and fighting them as soon as possible. The preventative concepts of pathogenesis and salutogenesis do not exclude each other but, rather, complement each other. Over the course of the years, under the concept of health promotion, both models have been combined.

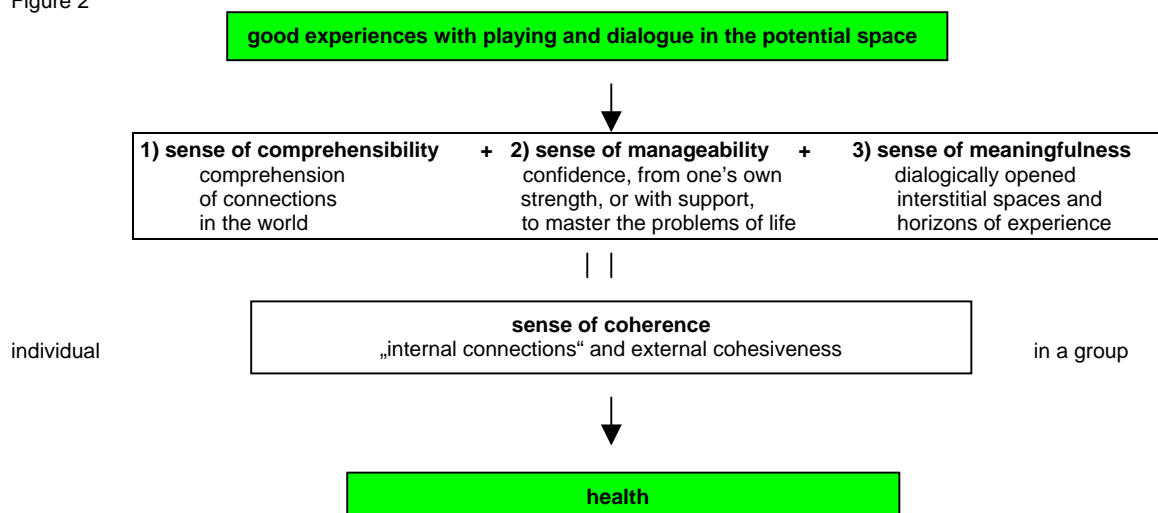
Figure 1



The SOC in the salutogenesis model can be used to describe an individual, a couple or a group.

The SOC is defined as follows: "... a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable, and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement." (Aaron Antonovsky, 1993)

Figure 2



Antonovsky himself developed a questionnaire for the SOC. This is still used today as a valid measuring instrument from the age of twelve on. Antonovsky thought that the sense of coherence in the life of a person over thirty could no longer be positively altered, but rather, crumbled away with age. Here he was wrong. Several investigations have shown that the SOC can also be cultivated in adulthood. Here, in particular, the interstices between playing and dialogue that I mentioned at the outset are appropriate in cultivating the SOC – as studies carried out in other clinics and mine als well have shown.

Comparison of scores collected from in-patients (N=33) at admission and discharge

Meyer, C. (2005) Christian Hospital of Quakenbrück

	At Admission	At Discharge
Sense of comprehensibility	38.7 ±10.1	41.7 ±8.1
Sense of manageability	38.7 ±6.9	42.4 ±8.3
Sense of meaningfulness	33.5 ±6.8	38.1 ±8.0
SOC - total score	110.9 ±21.4	122.2 ±21.1

The increases of the SOC total score and the three subscales are - at a margin for error of only 1% (or 5% for the subscale, "Sense of manageability") – highly significant.

The questionnaire for SOC defuses the evaluation dilemma of primary respectively universal psychosocial prevention. This dilemma arises because preventative activities from which one could expect effectiveness can escape detection because of inadequate evaluation and programs that can be evaluated are often only minimally effective.

With the instrument of the SOC questionnaire, however, not only a development in the direction of stabilisation of the SOC can be detected but also a reversal. Thus, within the framework of an investigation of the alterability of SOC during psychotherapy, medical students of the Medical School of Hannover were studied. To the consternation of all, the results showed that the SOC became less during their studies.¹ And this, of all things, in future physicians!

Before the background of the flooding of pupils and teachers with tests to obtain objective measurements of knowledge after PISA, specially in Germany, and in light of the frightfully fragile health of pupils and teachers, it seems all the more necessary not to neglect consideration of the bodily and mental health of all involved in the teaching process. Instead of additional objective tests of knowledge, the simple questionnaire to determine the SOC ought to be administered at the proper times: What are the initial values for a whole school class? Does this change, for example, during the course of the school year? Can interactive, creative-dialogical processes – also in the sense of working on projects – have a positive effect on the SOC of a whole class or learning group? It seems not unlikely. It should be tried and evaluated! I think helpful could be therefore the SOC short version questionnaire of Leipzig (2000) with only nine items.

From research in infants, we know that further brain development of the person along with his or her SOC are based on interaction with her or his reference person according to the basic plan of the duet or of dancing together.² We feel this activating power of playful-dialogical interactions not only during the first days of our human existence, but also at its end: if we go into a rest home and liberate the dull-spirited elderly from staring endlessly at the television set – if we sing with them, dance with them, it is constantly surprising how lively, happy and *mentally present* these people can show themselves.

By making music in general as well as by singing - as a particular salutogenetic resource, the release of neurotransmitters activates processes that are of great significance for the sense of coherence and for learning. In the frontal brain dopamine is released that is responsible for good moods as well as for concentration and impulse regulation, in the central grey matter it is

¹ Sack, M. (2004): Mündliche Mitteilung.

² Milch, W. (2000): Kleinkindforschung und psychosomatische Störungen. Psychotherapeut 45, 18-24.

the endorphins that are responsible for freedom from anxiety, for the promotion of calmness and for the alleviation from pain. And when we sing together in a choir, oxytocin is released that aids us in achieving a good feeling of social relationships. From the just mentioned playful-dialogical interaction between mother and child a strong binding is insured. This is connected with the certainty of being benevolently perceived and recognized.

Secure binding allows the child to release himself or herself from the relationship with the mother and to approach its environment with curiosity. Martin Dornes summarized the results of the observational infant research with the statement that he wrote, "...the pleasure of exploration and the feeling of being able to bring about and to recognize sensible relationships in the outside world, are central motivators from the beginning of life on."³ This has to do with learning processes based on primary motivation in the sense of a desire to learn that results from the security of binding. Without this security of binding neither the primary motivation to learn nor the learning effect can unfold adequately.

The *desire to learn* as a partial aspect of spontaneous and active *exploratory behaviour* results from the securing of binding, that is, positive relationships to one or several reference persons. Research into binding over the last decades has been able to show this impressively.⁴ For psychotherapy too, as a particular form of learning, the results from binding research are valid: If, in a relationship, I am insured that I have a secure place in which I feel cared for and, if needed, will be comforted, then I can, under my own power, risk going out into unknown terrain; I can take part in an expedition to an unknown and dangerous continent. This continent can lie within or external to my self. The creative way there, according to Donald Winnicott, always leads over the potential space.

From the perspective of binding research, this ideally runs from earliest childhood on in a task division between mother and father. The mother provides the emotional security and comfort in critical moments without monopolizing; the father serves the need, "...according playful-exploratory investigation as well as appropriate and prompt feed-back."⁵

Teachers, particularly of the creative subjects but also, within certain limitations teachers of the "cram subjects" can take over these motherly and fatherly functions. Those who will profit most from such situations are those children who, in their development up to the present, have had only few occasions of *common attention* from both parents - or who have suffered more parental interference or thoughtlessness.⁶

From the psycho-physiological point of view, a strong body-spirit composition that results from a strong security of binding of the small child and school child is broadly identical with her or his SOC. And the SOC always unfolds from social relationships. The significance of SOC is, with a few words, not so easy to describe: neither for good health nor for positive learning processes. That is the reason that I have brought a photo with me so that you can "see" what such a feeling of coherence looks like.

Picture 1

The subject here is a pictorial community production of a 2nd grade class - in which the children could paint pictures of flowers on a 1 x 1 meter canvas. No flowers were painted over. The children discovered that their flowers always looked much more beautiful together than when theirs were alone on the canvas. The delight of the children over their successful work, with which they identified, is recognizable without any difficulty. SOC *in statu nascendi* ...

Picture 2

The identity of the individual isn't lost in this community effort but rather is well preserved, even heightened. And every child knew who every flower had painted - the *others* were also recognized in this production.

Children experienced the same thing with the community picture, "Square Circles."

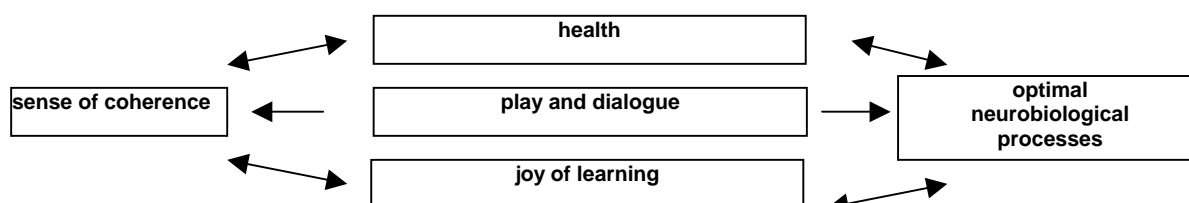
Pictures 3 - 4

First, the Kandinsky picture, "Square Circles" was discussed with the children from a second grade class. Then, each child was allowed to "cast a spell on" three or four beer coasters. For the children as well as for the adults who later saw the community picture, it was an unforgettable experience to discover that the individual beer coasters together were much more impressive than three or four beer coasters alone on a table.

In school, the feeling of coherence in the process of creative activity can strengthen the cohesiveness of the group. This cohesiveness of the group corresponds to the cohesiveness of the mother in the process of binding.

The SOC affects a reduced fear of living and more calmness under stress. This has a decisive influence on our health and ability to learn. Because with a strong feeling of coherence there are relatively few acute stress reactions against which the feed-back regulated stress hormone is significantly released. When, however, with insufficient SOC, fight-or-flight reactions

Figure 3



³ Dornes, M. (1993): Der kompetente Säugling. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer.

⁴ Grossmann, K. E. & Grossmann, K. (2007): Die Entwicklung psychischer Sicherheit in Bindungen – Ergebnisse und Folgerungen für die Therapie. Z Psychom Med Psychother 53, 9 – 28.

⁵ Grossmann, K. E. & Grossmann, K. (2007): S. 20.

⁶ Grossmann, K.E. & Grossmann, K. (2007):S.24.

come in rapid succession, the tissue- and cell deactivating influence of cortisone, for example, inhibits the immune system, or, as a further example, postoperative wound-healing is retarded. In particular brain tissue, as highly active "constant reconstruction tissue," is retarded in its formation / re-formation and ongoing activity. Due to these factors, our learning efforts are, to a large extent, unsuccessful – because we remember learning material only by a corresponding synaptic transformation.

A strong SOC in a class or learning community also usually goes with a pronounced "fair play." By "fair play" here is meant the benevolent perception of the other players, welcoming them, giving them the status of fellow players and giving them a fair chance of letting *their* possibilities unfold. That means, at the same time, not to want to humiliate or exclude them. Remember the painting of the flowers: no flower was painted over! It was rather the case that the children discovered how important the blossoms of the others were for the effect of their own. I think those are principals, that have already been put in place in Scandinavian countries over the last decades.

Fair play preventatively hinders shame, humiliation and self-scorn. This is also of great significance for the prevention of addiction, because the fatal element of self-scorn is its solubility in alcohol or narcotics.

Formulated in salutogenetic terms, a young person with a strong SOC and with its accompanying self-esteem, does not need narcotics to be able to live with her/him self. In school this is demanded everywhere where the creative product is valued as something offered by the child and is not scored by grades and possibly devaluated. Because children identify themselves with their creative products. The painting, for example, *is* also the child. If the painting is devaluated, the child is also devaluated. If the painting is valued as it is, the child will also feel that it is valued – as it is. This does not exclude encouragement to try out new things. On top of this it is important to realize that not only the product, but the creative process that led to the product is, salutogenetically seen, of great significance for the SOC.

In general the process itself, the creative activity, should be encouraged and should be held in high esteem instead of immediately judging just the product. Every creative process is a journey to an unknown continent. For this we need, first of all, external companions whom we internalize in the form of our sense of coherence.

Some examples which follow should make this clear.

Pictures 5 – 16 *

As a conclusion you may say: **Good practices for promoting mental and physical health in schools are those which promote the SOC, the sense of coherence, in the potential space.**

Thank you for attention.

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*pictures 5 – 11 with thanks to Hans-Martin Haist, Villa Eigen-Sinn, Freudenstadt

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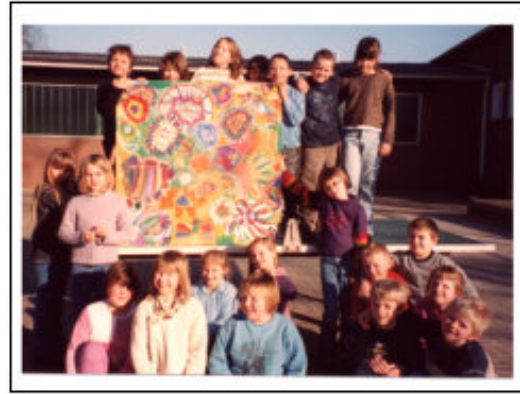
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