

**vpro**

# Hunted

Episode #3 I'll count to three...



An 8-part podcast series by Jennifer Pettersson

VPRO Radio, 2018

## HUNTED - episode #3 I'll count to three...

**Tune:** *Hunted* tune

**1. Voiceover:** This is *Hunted*; I'm Jennifer Pettersson, and in this series I bring to you what I discover in the unknown world in which our children spend their days from 9 to 5. This series arose from surprise, frustration and curiosity about the things that most people who were born in this country seem to find completely normal, but which for me are difficult to understand.

**Laila:** (yawns)

**Jennifer:** Är du trött?

**Laila:** Not in Swedish...

**Jennifer:** Oh, right, we're going to speak Dutch, aren't we?

**Laila:** Yes.

**2. VO:** My oldest daughter Laila.

**Jennifer:** How was school today?

**Laila:** Fun, but sometimes the teacher gets mad... because, yeah, all teachers do that.

**Jennifer:** Oh? Why do they do that?

**Laila:** You know, because, about whatever doesn't go right. In gym class, or, you know.

**Jennifer:** What didn't go right today?

**Laila:** Just, you know! I can't explain it to you.

**Jennifer:** But did she get mad at you?

**Laila:** No, at the whole class. But that happens with kids. Strict. Yeah, she can't really manage. I mean, um... she can't do everything.

**Jennifer:** You mean, you also understand why she gets so mad? But maybe it's also because she's alone with so many children. There's 29 of you. Hard to keep the class under control.

**Laila:** And sometimes she says sorry, but that's good for now. I don't have anything more to say about that.

**Jennifer:** Oh...

## **Music**

**3. VO:** What do parents really know about what happens at school? We drop our children off, and then scurry away to our jobs. And then when we pick them up, they hardly tell us anything. I really want to know what happens there.

So I've decided to sit in on a preschool class for a whole day. I've come to a Catholic primary school in Zeist. The teacher is Linda, who I've heard good things about.

**SFX:** teacher's office

**Linda:** How long does that drying take? Four hours.

**4. VO:** It's 8:30 AM. All the teachers are sitting together drinking tea. Eleven women in all.

**Linda:** We can... I'm going to open the door. (not me, me)

**5. VO:** Miss Linda. Blonde, tanned, dressed stylishly with jingling bracelets. When she speaks of the children she teaches, her affection for them is obvious.

**Linda IV:** They're still so pure... I really enjoy being with them. Of course, there are times you could just shut them up in a closet but they all really just want to do their best.

**Linda:** Good morning!

**6. VO:** Linda is a teacher who seems to be able to handle anything.

**Linda IV:** If they're being difficult or don't want to listen, it's really easy to just turn them around and steer them towards good behaviour. You can still really get that out of them.

**Jen:** How do you do that?

**Linda IV:** Well, positive reinforcement! Mainly, just a lot of positive reinforcement.

**7. VO:** If things go wrong, it's never the children's fault, she explains. And the extreme workload that so much has been said about, she hardly notices.

**Linda IV:** Sometimes it's busy and sometimes you're tired, but you know, that doesn't have anything to do with the job. All that means is: you don't feel good that day, or you've got problems at home, but not that there's too much to do here, or anything like that.

**Linda:** Wow, don't you look fantastic!

**8. VO:** It's not uncommon for Linda to work 60 hours per week. And that's not counting the administration, which she does on Sundays.

**Linda IV:** No, it's not. And then sometimes I've slept poorly... And then they come to you like: I need a hug. I need a hug. So sweet! I have the greatest job in the world!

**9. VO:** Linda really does seem to be a superhero on the job.

**Linda:** Good morning, Anouch!

**10. VO:** She works full time, and knows the children and their parents well. Better than well. She knows what day each of them is home, and she even recognizes their bikes.

**Linda:** Where's your bag?

**Child:** Papa.

**Linda:** Well, that's nice, isn't it. How was your dentist appointment yesterday? Was the dentist pleased?

**11. VO:** The children are trickling in. They are all the colours of the rainbow; they come from Thailand, Spain, Poland, Surinam, Turkey, Morocco, and many other places besides. But the majority of them are Dutch and white. As soon as they come in, they grab a puzzle.

**SFX:** Background noise

**Linda:** Go on, get a game.

**12. VO:** The classroom is bright and spacious, and the 26 students fit comfortably. Drawings of red grapes and cut-out piglets decorate the windows. The desks are adorned with tulips in vases, which the teacher has purchased with her own money. Each vase bears the text *'Today is a perfect day to start living your dreams'*.

**Linda:** Good morning everyone, look at me please. This hand. Would you put Toto in the basket?

**13. VO:** Julian, a boy with short blonde hair, puts his teddy bear away and goes to sit on his mother's lap with his fingers in his mouth. He seems closer to 2 than 4 (the age when Dutch children start school, or 'group 1'), and is in the 'zero group': new in the class. And he's not the only one.

**Linda:** Was everything good? Did you have to cry in the car?

**Child:** No.

**Linda:** No? Wonderful. Then you get a sticker, because I think that's very brave of you.

**SFX:** Bell rings / "We're clearing up" (song) / kisses ('I'll stand there and wave')

**14. VO:** The children kiss their parents goodbye.

**Music:** Drone (threatening)

**Linda:** Boys, why is it taking so long? And Chaima, sit down!

**15. VO:** And suddenly the atmosphere changes (*read lightly*)

**Linda:** Emany, do I have to send you to a 10-day course for clearing up? You always take so long.

**16. VO:** Emany is a boy with short, black hair, and a pleasant face. He will get a lot of warnings today. And some punishment.

**Linda:** OK. 1, 2, and the last count (hint) is... 3. Will you manage? Will you manage, Erva? Legs under the table... 1...

**17. VO:** The teacher begins counting.

**Linda:** Two...

**18. VO:** ...The children are sitting absolutely properly, looking straight ahead, with arms crossed...

**Linda:** Three...

**19. VO:** ...You could hear a pin drop.

Emany raises a hand, but the teacher ignores it. Evi will also raise her hand, repeatedly, until she is too tired to keep it up; then she supports it with her other arm. In the end, all hands go down again by themselves. Later, I asked the teacher why the children who put their hands up didn't get to speak.

**Linda IV:** You can be talking about the weather and then one of the kids will be sitting like that and say: 'we ate pancakes yesterday'... I mean, sometimes it's just about nothing at all... (laughs) And, ah, I know very well which children always have something to say whether it is about the topic or not, and sometimes I just say no, not right now, and then when we're outside they come to me to tell me, you know, tell me what they had to say.

**20. VO:** So it's not the idea that they raise their hands at all. After all, there is no time to give everyone individual attention.

**Linda IV:** Besides that, it's just really hard, ah, because you always have the feeling that you're not giving some of the children the attention they need.

**21. VO:** ...But she has come up with a way to deal with that...

**Linda IV:** There's a trick I use, if I think that a child is getting away from me, then that evening I try to imagine what it was that he wanted to say. You know, just what was going on with him today? And if I really don't know, then I think, okay, then tomorrow I better pay a little more attention to that kid.

**22. VO:** ...But once a day, no matter what, they all have their own attention moment, Linda explains, and like at many schools, that's when they're sitting in the circle.

**Linda:** Okay, now I'm going to see who gets to come and sit in the circle. Everyone take their seats.

**23. VO:** ...One by one, as quiet as mice, the children take their chairs and sit in a circle.

**Linda:** Yes, that's wonderful! Very good. Don't put yours right against anyone else's, because it's never very nice to sit with your chair against someone else, is it? Leave a little space in between. Good, yes, good Erva...

**24. VO:** ..After five exasperatingly long minutes, they're all sitting.

**Linda:** Well, that was very smooth!

**25. VO:** The circle can begin.

**Linda:** Yesterday it was free, what was that again, free, who knows? Was it free time, or was it something else?

**Child:** A free country.

**Linda:** A free country. And, and...

**26. VO:** Today they're talking about freedom.

**Linda:** So what do we have, because we're a free country?

**27. VO:** ...something that I will be thinking about a great deal at the end of this day.

**Linda:** Oh, you didn't hear my question, because you're talking while I'm speaking... I see a lot of fidgeting! Sit up straight, because otherwise this is going to take a long time.

**Jennifer:** Children have relatively little freedom at school to move and talk, and certainly if you compare this with Swedish children of the same age. And I find myself wondering what is better for them?

**Linda IV:** Yes, I really think, I mean I find it very contradictory, of course, because, ah, right now it's something of a trend, that children should get what they want. And of course that's true, but I think you also have to teach and that you can't always get

what you want, and you don't always get something just because you feel like it. That's just not how society works. And you have to, um, prepare them for that, to be able to function in society. So it's very contradictory.

## **Music**

**Linda:** OK, so, the word of today is 'GOOD'. What are some good words?

**28. VO:** Daisy and a girl with a pug nose and a blue streak in her blonde hair know some.

**Daisy:** Like sweet... and I also know a few bad words.

**Linda:** You also know some bad words? OK, let's hear them then?

**Daisy:** Shit!

**Linda:** Oh-oh-oh...

**29. VO:** The children cover their mouths with their hands in shock.

**Linda:** That really is a very bad word, isn't it, and you can't say that word, isn't that right?

**30. VO:** Linda reads a story about bad words.

**Linda:** Just a rotten, shitty day, and he's fed up with everything...

**31. VO:** The children listen in rapt silence...

**Linda:** That's a bad word, Freek.

**31. VO:** ...Some children fidget in their chairs. A girl plays with the threads of her dress, a boy is picking his nose, one yawns and others begin to do the same. I wonder how many of the children can follow the story.

**Linda:** Who has an idea about how we can help Freek? How can we...

**31. VO:** Maysa, a cute little Moroccan girl, wants to sit on the teacher's lap. Later, Linda promises.

**Linda:** We'll go round the circle, okay? Listen, you can say one thing, so think very hard about what you want to say, because otherwise we'll all be sitting so long in the circle and we'll all be fidgeting and no one wants that.

**31. VO:** After half an hour, the children have the chance to say something.

**Linda:** Good morning Erva, did you want to say something?

**Erva:** Yes, do you think mama and me made clothes?

**Linda:** Did mama buy those clothes for you?

**32. VO:** Erva, a Turkish girl of four years old, with serious dark eyes and long dark hair makes a 'round', by going around to each child in the circle and stopping dutifully at each to show them her new yellow t-shirt with butterflies on it. Later, Sofie shows her green ribbons and Amina shows her necklace. Toddlers watch the children making each round with great earnestness, and whisper comments as if they are style reporters at a fashion show.

**Child 1:** I saw pink on her nails.

**Child 2:** Yes, she had that yesterday too.

**33. VO:** ...but giving all the children a turn also takes a long time.

**Linda:** Good. 1, 2, and the last count is 3.

**34. VO:** Each time the teacher threatens to count to three, the children cross their arms and sit up straight as an arrow.

**Linda:** Good morning, Maysa.

**Maysa:** Good morning.

**Linda:** Do you have something to tell us?

**Maysa:** Yes, I, I, have a new magic shirt.

**Linda:** I don't think it's really new, is it, but I understand that you really would like a chance to stand on your chair. Go ahead.

**35. VO:** Maysa has a magic t-shirt with a strawberry that changes colour if you rub it.

**Linda:** I've already spoken to your mother about it and we've agreed that if you sit there rubbing your shirt all day then we're going to turn it inside out, and that strawberry will be on your tummy. All right?

**SFX:** laughter

**36. VO:** She asks the teacher if she can sit on her lap a second time. No, go sit down, says the teacher.

**Linda:** All right, we're going to sit up straight. 1, 2, 3. Good morning, Emany.

**Emany:** Good morning.

**Linda:** Do you have something to tell us?

**37. VO:** Emany had raised her hand three times already without being called.

**Linda:** What did you say? I couldn't understand you.

**38. VO:** Now that he's finally been called, and has a chance to speak in the circle, he suddenly seems to have nothing to say.

**Linda:** Put your arm away from your...

**Emany:** No, teacher.

**Linda:** Okay, good morning Chaima.

**Chaima:** Good morning.

**Linda:** Do you have something to tell us?

**Chaima:** Me and Rehan...

**Linda:** One thing, okay? Think about it, one thing. Right?

**Chaima:** Me and Rehan have the same...

**39. VO:** But just a little later, he (Emany) can no longer sit still.

**Linda:** Emany, now you're really causing a problem! This is your last warning, and next time you're going to go back to your desk. You didn't want to say anything when it was your turn, but you're just talking the whole time. Now you'll be quiet and otherwise I'm sending you out of the circle. Look at me. Do you understand? What did you say?

**40. VO:** Later, when I'm sitting in front of Linda, I feel just like a small child who would do anything to avoid being the object of the teacher's anger. Struggling to find the right words, I ask what feels like a difficult question.

**Jennifer:** Ah... Well, because what, well, what struck me most was that, that you are stricter than I had expected.

**Linda IV:** Yes, yes, yes, clarity. They really need clarity. Yes, I always say that I'm not strict, I'm clear.

I've been working here for 14 years now and you simply see that it's becoming a different generation. And you really see, you can just tell that many of these children have no boundaries at home. I had, last year, I had a kid in the class and the parents

told me, we have no rules. See, the thing is, you're not doing your child any favours with that, because everyone needs boundaries, and a lot of children are not getting that at home any more.

And when I'm strict, I'm never really angry. I act as though I'm angry or something along those lines, and I think that's the difference, that, that you can't get really angry, because I mean, well, they're children, aren't they, and it's your job and, ah, what I can do is get educationally angry, you might say.

**Jennifer:** And you really have big eyes.

**Linda IV:** (laughs) Yes, well, you don't see that yourself, do you...

**Jennifer:** And you really know how to give the evil eye.

**41. VO:** Linda learned her job the hard way. She started her career in special education.

**Linda IV:** Yeah, my first year in the classroom, that was really hell (laughs). It really was and I, I still tell people that if I had known that in advance I never would have gone into education, because that year really was, ah, it was really terrible. The, I'm serious, chairs really flew around the room. Windows got broken. But that was really psychoanalysis, that was really heavy stuff and I was 23, yeah, well, what did I know. And those kids were 14. When I think back on that I just don't know how I managed. Yeah, there was the one kid who every single, every Monday after he had been home had these violent mood swings, I was constantly bruised all up my arms. And at some point it hit me, just make sure the shoes come off when he comes in on Mondays, because you know he's going to start kicking.

**42. VO:** Then the day comes when a young man comes at her with a pair of scissors...

**Linda IV:** Yeah, I, he, I had to make him do something and then he was standing in front of me and he said: 'I'm going to stab you to death.' And I said: 'Fine, but first you need to clear up.' And so he gave me the scissors and he went and cleared up.

**Jennifer:** Weren't you scared?

**Linda IV:** Well, you know, later on you realize that when you think about it sometimes you're shaking, but not at that moment, you can't show it at that moment, I didn't let myself show any emotion or fear, and that was really hell. And that was when I really learned really well to find my limits and define them. And I still have that moment whenever something happens in class, when I think: do I want this? No, well, so that means I have to take action now. Because if you go past your own limit, then things get really hard.

**Jennifer:** And do you ever see any of your fellow teachers doing that?

**Linda IV:** Yes.

**43. VO:** Linda is relatively strict, but I've also seen preschool groups that are less so.

I had to think back on the teacher that Laila had that first year. He couldn't handle the stress of 27 children at the same time. By the morning handshake, he was already turning red. He acted very irritated and made sarcastic comments to the kids.

When I stayed at school one day to help I understood it better. The children were all demanding attention at the same time, they all have something hurt, they were fighting, and they all had to go to the toilet right away. It was chaos.

Linda's class is much more under control. But then, after sitting still in the circle for nearly 40 minutes, there's a sudden commotion.

### **Music**

**Linda:** Jack, go to the toilet right now!

**44. VO:** Jack, a blonde boy with a bowl cut, has to throw up in the classroom.

**Linda:** Go to the toilet! Now! Go!

**SFX:** children responding: ew! aaah!

**Linda:** Don't worry about it, you're not in trouble, it just happens. Come now! Let's all just sit down.

**45. VO:** The teacher mops up while Jack sits alone before the toilet in the hall. She calls towards the toilets...

**Linda:** Are you all right?

**46. VO:** Below the door, the soles of his shoes can be seen.

**Linda:** This is when the teacher decides to put a video on, so she has a moment to go call his mother.

**SFX:** Child: she's going to turn on...

**47. VO:** In the meantime, Jack is back in class, with a green bucket on his lap in case it happens again. Next to him is D'rellyo, a quiet boy, who indicated at least half an hour ago that his tummy hurts too.

**Linda:** I'll just go and get a bucket for you as well, because I can see where this is going.

**48. VO:** The vomiting incident sets the class into disarray for a full ten minutes. This means sacrificing the maths lesson that the teacher had planned.

And then Jack has to vomit again.

**SFX:** Vomiting sounds from Jack

### **Music**

**49. VO:** It's almost ten o'clock, time for the children to take their snacks from their bags. The idea is for this to happen in silence; anybody who talks, the teacher warns, has to put their bag back in the hall.

**Linda:** Ah, listen, I just don't like this. Thank you Evi, this helps, all this talking doesn't help, shhhh Julia. If you speak, your bag goes back, Emany. Just go get it.

**SFX:** children walking around.

**Linda:** Oh, I'm sorry, you must be new here?

**50. VO:** She's talking about Daisy, who has already started on her banana before everyone is sitting. Daisy is one of the older children, and should have known the rule already.

**Linda:** Shhhhh! Now the teacher's going...?

**Children:** To get coffee!

**Linda:**...and you will all be...?

**51. VO:** The teacher makes a zipping-lips motion as she goes to get coffee.

**Linda:** Very good.

**52. VO:** The children understand, and eat in silence.

**Linda IV:** Normally, during the meal breaks it is absolutely quiet here, because you can't eat and talk at the same time so they don't eat, and then once again I've got to deal with all the angry mothers who say they haven't eaten. And they need it, because they've been together the whole day, there have been no moments that they can just withdraw a little bit and then you see that the class also relaxes at that kind of moment.

**Linda:** I want to see who can eat and drink the most quietly. Let's see if... I can give a sticker to someone.

**53. VO:** D'rellyo still has a tummyache, but is still sitting in class – there hasn't been time to call his mother.

**Linda:** Yes, I'll go in a moment, just as soon as Jack gets picked up I'll call your mother, ok? Is there anyone else who needs to go home? I'll go and ring right now.

**54. VO:** Almost every child raises their hand.

**Linda:** (laughs) Yeah, sure! Now, just keep eating. One minute to go!

**55. VO:** It's almost time to go outside and play, but before that happens they must all be silent.

**Linda:** All right, now I'm going to look and see who my little angels are. Oh Maysa, look at how nice you're sitting, Amira...

**56. VO:** Maysa seems to have forgotten that the teacher promised she could sit on her lap.

**Linda:** And you, Hind, excellent.

**57. VO:** One by one, they take their jackets.

**Linda:** Levi, you can be the first to get your jacket. Would you please show everyone how it's done?

**58. VO:** It's nearly 15 minutes before they're all outside. Everyone except Emany; he has to stay inside. I ask him why.

**Emany:** Because yesterday I hid.

**Jennifer:** Where did you hide yesterday?

**Emany:** Under the ladder of the slide.

**Jennifer:** Why did you do that?

**Emany:** Just because. I didn't want to come inside.

**Jennifer:** Was it fun outside?

**Emany:** Too fun.

**Jennifer:** Too fun.

**59. VO:** The punishment: more sitting inside. Was that really necessary? I ask Linda.

**Linda IV:** This is a little boy who really, really needs to learn that you follow the rules, because otherwise, ah, well maybe next time he won't come inside at all. And, ah, yeah this is really a kid who would play outside all day if you let him. That's, that is really his very favourite thing. And it's true, he's one of those kids who really does need to move a lot. But yeah, in a little while he'll be moving up to the next class and there he won't be able to... you know, he'll have to stand in line with the others, he might be able to be one step out of line but not five, because that's not a line anymore.

**Jennifer:** No, and as an outsider I look at the children who have to sit still, who have to wait a long time, who can't, who maybe want to play outside a little more that are not allowed to. And I must say, when I think about that I feel for them a little.

**Linda IV:** Yes, I understand that. Yeah, and I get that, of course, you know, and it is hard, because you see that he needs it. And you see that, of course you do, but you know, that's just how it is in the Netherlands, the children don't decide. The teacher decides. Yes.

**Jennifer:** And the system does, too.

**Linda IV:** And the system, yes.

**Jennifer:** Because you depend on it, too.

**Linda IV:** Yes, I'm dependent on the system, yes, yes, I'm a cog in the machine. Look, I could let the children play outside all day because they need it, and because that's what's fun for them, but then they'll move up to the next class, and then I'll hear it from that teacher, hey, what have you done with these children? They can't do anything! Yeah, you know, that's just how it is.

**60. VO:** But actually, Linda says, the four-year-olds should be playing outside as much as possible.

**Linda IV:** Play, play, play, play, play, just play the whole day long, because that is so important for their development. But you have to, ah, by the end of my class you have to be teaching them a little bit of work skills, because they're about to go on to the next class. If they don't have any work skills, then the teacher in the next class is going to say: "What the heck have you been doing all this time?"

**61. VO:** I wonder what this approach does to small children. I'll be going back to the class to find out, but first I'm going to Smalle Ee, a village in rural Friesland. Population: 50.

**SFX:** Car driving

**Jennifer:** Wow, what a place...!

**62. VO:** Here, out amongst the fields and sheep, lives Sieneke Goorhuis-Brouwer. She spent her career as a specialist in remedial education and was endowed professor in speech and language disorders at the Groningen University Medical Center. She even received a royal distinction for her work. She is now over 70, but still active.

**SFX:** doorbell, door opens.

**Jennifer:** Good morning.

**Sieneke:** Good morning, hi! Well well, 10 o'clock sharp, very punctual...

**63. VO:** Sieneke Goorhuis is one of a small but very vocal group of experts who are extremely concerned about how small children are being handled in the educational sector.

**Jennifer:** So let me get straight to the...

**Sieneke IV:** Yes, just go ahead and start...

**Jennifer:** ...point. So what do you think of the state of Dutch preschool education?

**Sieneke IV:** It's a crisis. Because these toddlers, they're under much too much pressure, it's being dictated much too much from above what children need to learn, much too early. And what's been forgotten that from 0 to 6 a child is going through a completely different, development at that stage is of a completely different nature, so it needs a completely different approach than the development of older children.

**64. VO:** Sieneke says that up to about age 7, children learn the most by following their own curiosity. Required learning material, however playful it may be, disrupts the child's natural development much more than it helps.

**Sieneke IV:** Because these young children are developing from the inside out. And that is a very different process than the children from, ah, age seven and up, which is the point from which you can effectively start directing the process from the outside, and start saying okay now you have to learn this and now you have to learn that, and then they're at a place where they really love learning new things.

**Jennifer:** So then it's not a good thing if we, ah, in our groups one and two, the age fours and fives, start preparing for that school kind of learning when they're six.

**Sieneke IV:** Yeah, but it is school-type learning, because it's actively preparing them for school. And that's not necessary. What you have to be going for is making sure that these children can express themselves verbally as best as they can, that they develop their motor skills as well as they can, develop thinking, these are the things we don't need to do very much about, and it seems we just don't really get that these children learn themselves if we put them in a challenging and stimulating environment.

**Jennifer:** And what is a challenging and stimulating environment?

**Sieneke IV:** Well, an environment that follows the child. That looks at what a child is ready for and opens up activities right there.

**Jennifer:** And, that learning-through-play movement? What do you think about that?

**Sieneke IV:** Right, that is, I just think that's a smokescreen. Because what they're saying is: yes, we have a teaching program, but we do it with play. But the difference is that it's still a program that has been conceived by adults and that the adults think the child needs to do. And what's happening now with the toddlers that they're sending to school in, yeah, Rotterdam, it just makes me want to cry.

**Jennifer:** What's the impact when a child doesn't have enough freedom to play and to be active?

**Sieneke IV:** Well, then they get socially, emotionally, particularly emotionally unstable. They are constantly being inhibited in the things that they want to do, so, uh, they develop this uncertainty about their own functioning. And that's exactly what we don't want, children have to learn to be sure of themselves! We're taking this confidence away from them, because we're inhibiting their spontaneous development.

**Jennifer:** But is there research about this, are there studies that I can look at?

**Sieneke IV:** Well, yes, the only scientific studies there are have looked at the effects of preschool and early childhood education. And that has produced exactly zero results.

**65. VO:** And indeed, a recent analysis of a 15-year study of preschool and early childhood education programs given to toddlers paints a depressing picture. The effect of these programs is, and I quote: 'smaller than small'. But does this mean that ordinary preschool education is pointless? Is it making children underconfident and unstable, as Sieneke claims? I can't find any information about this. No wonder, she says...

**Sieneke IV:** Yes, that's because they don't want any research about this. What they want is research that shows that the program-based approach works.

**66. VO:** When I ask Sieneke what she bases her claim on, she gives me a long list of names of educational experts...

**Sieneke IV:** Pestalozzi, Fröbel, Montessori...

**67. VO:** ...all long dead and who wouldn't be able to say much about present-day preschool education.

**Sieneke IV:** Piaget worked on this, Vygotsky worked on this...

**68. VO:** ...but, she says...

**Sieneke IV:** These people weren't crazy, they made very good observations and today neuroscience is proving them right.

## **Music**

### **Telephone rings**

**69. VO:** I phone Jelle Jolles.

**JJ:** Jelle Jolles speaking...

**Jennifer:** Hello, good morning.

**70. VO:** Professor at the neuropsychology department at the Vrij Universiteit Amsterdam.

**JJ:** Good morning.

**Jennifer:** This is Jennifer Pettersson.

**71. VO:** ...He is the Netherlands' leading authority on the subject of learning and the brain. He tells me there's no switch that flips at age seven, that makes a seven-year-old ready for school-based education, that hasn't yet been turned on in a four-year-old.

**JJ:** Well, first of all, there's a tremendous difference between children. There's children who, ah, at age four, um, can already achieve a lot with school-based performances, while others just aren't as interested at the same age. And then you've got children who, at age four, are only interested in playing, and then at age five perform very well in school.

**Jennifer:** But knowing that there are huge individual differences, is that taken into account in Dutch preschool education?

**JJ:** No, it's not.

**72. VO:** And then it becomes clear that actually, Jelle Jolles more or less agrees with Sieneke Goorhuis, because he says the same thing that she does, that the best thing is for children to be able to follow their own impulses within an inspiring environment that offers support and direction.

**JJ:** The brain says: develop everything in here. Develop your muscles. It sends out orders to the muscles: move, move, move. These activities make the muscles develop. It's the same thing with language: talk, talk, talk. That's simply because the

brain is saying: through activity, you, uh, you gain experiences, and these experiences are recorded in new connections in the brain, and then you are accelerating the process. Yes, we know that sitting in a chair and waiting for your turn until the teacher calls you is not doing that.

**73. VO:** ...because children have a hard time holding their brains back.

**JJ:** There is something that we call impulse control. And that is something that at the ages of 12 to 14 is not yet very, ah, well-developed, certainly less so in boys, and so in preschool this is even more so.

**Jennifer:** But could it be that offering school-type programs, required learning material, at too young of an age can have a disruptive effect on a child, or could this, ah, accelerate development?

**JJ:** It may very well be disruptive, because a child that isn't ready, uh, well they can learn to read letters, and words, etc. But the effort it takes them to do this comes at the expense of other things that the child might be learning at this stage. So it just means that it's taking away from the development of other functions. It's as simple as that. So really, there's not much of a reason to start these things so terribly young.

**74. VO:** I ask whether early learning might actually be harmful.

**JJ:** Ah, well... it could be harmful if the child is forced to learn to read letters if the brain isn't at all ready to do that, because it's busy trying to learn other things. Then it can be counterproductive, because you can develop a kind of reading phobia. The child might develop an aversion to reading, and then you're making the job much harder.

## **Music**

**75. VO:** ... and the consequences go further than that...

**JJ:** All children are curious by nature, because it's in the brain. See, most children are born curious. At the age of five, they still have this curiosity, less so at seven, and by nine they don't have it at all anymore. Because at nine, they're already into the track that society dictates for them, and that's not a good thing, because what you need for the development of children who are going to be adults later is innovative people, creative people, curious people, enterprising people. And it's that whole youth and toddler years that's the preparation for that.

**SFX:** children coming inside

**Linda:** Okay, listen up! Children with a workbook...

**76. VO:** Back in class. After fifteen minutes outside, the children are back inside and the older children, group 2, get an assignment. The teacher explains what they need to do.

**Linda:** The first page, see? Colour this page.

**77. VO:** The instruction takes three minutes, and she explains all the pages at the same time.

**Linda:** Then we go to the next page, here, you see a crown, and then find the same crown over here and then colour it. Here you see the crowns with diamonds. Count the diamonds.

**SFX:** children talking through the instructions

**Linda:** Don't start yet, because I...!

**78. VO:** I check a few of the children to see whether they have understood the assignment.

**SFX:** class sounds

**Jennifer:** What do you have to do?

**Chaima:** I don't really know, because I just went to the bathroom.

**Jennifer:** Hmm, do you know what you are supposed to do? No? And here, on this page?

**Child:** Look for the same thing?

**Jennifer:** Look for the same thing? No, it says here which crown is different.

**79. VO:** I also check whether Maysa has understood.

**Jennifer:** How's it going?

**Maysa:** Good.

**Jennifer:** Good? You've coloured the king very nicely, haven't you?

**Maysa:** Yes, and here I've coloured everything that's the same..

**Jennifer:** Oh, hang on...

**Child:** Actually you're not supposed to do that.

**Jennifer:** You've coloured in all the crowns, but actually I think you were supposed to only colour the same ones, not all of them, but that's ok.

**Maysa:** Yeah but these two are actually...

## Music

**80. VO:** Maysa followed a logic all her own. If this had been a test, she would have been given a failing mark. It seems that preparing the toddlers for the next class is no easy task.

## Music

**Linda:** All right, we're going to sit up straight. One, two, three.

**81. VO:** It's 12 o'clock...

**Linda:** Right up straight.

**82. VO:** ...and time for lunch.

**Linda:** Daisy, have you forgotten how to sit up straight? Isn't that funny, that I always have to remind you. Now listen up, it's time to eat our lunch. So just sit up straight...

**83. VO:** ...In silence, the children take their bags, they're not allowed to run or skip, and they walk rigidly out of the classroom. It takes ten minutes for all the children to get their bags. The children wait in silence while this is going on. They also have to eat in silence. I ask Sieneke about the importance of silence and sitting in silence.

**Sieneke IV:** Look, I don't have a problem if in these preschool groups they say you play in the schoolyard, and now we stand in a line and go back inside and we do this in an orderly fashion. Okay, you can have these moments where you have to be quiet, but you can't require them to be quiet for ten minutes, you just can't do that. They have to move, they have to talk, that talking to each other is language development, that running around is motor skills development, oh, oh, oh, oh...

**SFX:** whistle sound with straw

**84. VO:** Like some of the other children, Emany makes a piercing sound with the straw from his juice pack. Linda gives him a look that could kill. He stops. Despite this, around 12:30 Emany will get a hug from the teacher, just like many other children.

**Linda:** It looks like it's hug time. Oh, ooh, oohh!

**SFX:** children giggling

**Linda:** 1, 2, 3, time to eat, because in a minute you won't be finished with all that jabbering. And certainly not you, you need to stay inside to eat your lunch again.

**85. VO:** It's time to go outside, but before they do the children first have to take their jackets...

**Linda:** Okay, I'm going to see who can hang up their jacket first... No, you go back and hang up your jacket right now...

**86. VO:** ...and stand quietly in line.

**Linda:** We're going to see if Julian can go get his jacket properly and put it on properly.

**87. VO:** It takes the class ten minutes, but then they can go outside.

**SFX:** Children shouting, schoolyard sounds

**Child:** Who wants to come and...

**88. VO:** The schoolyard is made up of tiles and is surrounded by trees and bushes. On the schoolyard there's a big sandbox and a jungle gym with a slide. Today Linda is monitoring the kids with another teacher. They sit in the sun and let the children play. Ze voetballen, fietsen en zoeken naar beestjes.

**Child:** Hey, look, a marble!

**Child:** Marble!

**89. VO:** Daisy's playing with her cousin Melanie, who also has two blue streaks in her blonde hair. In the classroom they sit next to each other, but they're not allowed to talk to each other. Right now they're digging in the sandbox together to try to find the bottom.

**SFX:** Children in the sandbox.

**Child:** And now this one and now this one...

**Child:** Daisy, noooo-hooooo...

**Daisy:** Let's wreck it all...!

**Child:** Daisy, we'd made such a nice...

**90. VO:** But the girls are also bothering the other kids.

**Child:** Let us play too!

**SFX:** screams and crying

**91. VO:** It's not just Daisy and Melanie; other children are fighting as well. There's kicking, and hitting, and throwing sand. No one sees it until they go to the teacher themselves.

**SFX:** child crying

**SFX:** children going inside counting

**92. VO:** After the recess, it's time for the children to do some maths, but the teacher decides to do something different.

**Linda:** Now we're supposed to be doing maths, but today things are not going so smoothly, so I thought...

**93. VO:** Because the class is so hard to handle today, Linda says...

**Linda:** ...today we'll do the activity board instead.

**SFX:** children cheer

**94. VO:** The children get to pick from a number of different activities. Apart from the times they've gone outside, this is the first time in five hours that the children can decide what they want to do themselves.

**Linda:** Now, that's not the behaviour I want to see when you go to the activity board. What do you want to play with? Do you want to play with the trains? Or maybe with the horses, or with the animals in the sand?

**95. VO:** While each child struggles to make a choice, the others have to wait silently.

**Linda:** Is there someone here who doesn't remember how the rules work? You get one warning, and if I have to tell you a second time your card goes away.

**96. VO:** Choosing the activities takes ten minutes.

**Linda:** Have fun!

**SFX:** children talking and playing

**Music**

**97. VO:** The spring holidays are just around the corner, so the children get to take their drawings and art projects home.

**Linda:** If you want to take your things home, you have to clear up very quickly now, otherwise there won't be any time. This is taking terribly long. Ah, Julia, Erva, sit up

straight. I'm going to wait until it's quiet, and if it takes too long I'm not going to hand out anything and all the art projects will stay here.

**98. VO:** Daisy wants to ask a question.

**Linda:** No, no teacher teacher right now, not at all. Be quiet right now.

**99. VO:** Daisy explains that the eye of the chick she made is falling off.

**Linda:** No, I'm not going to do anything about that right now. What do you think, that I'm going to go around and glue all those eyes on right now because you all have been touching them? Don't be daft!

**100. VO:** She's talking to Daisy.

**Linda:** I've never seen you acting so daft as today. I mean it. Is there some reason that you're being so strange today?

**Daisy:** No.

**Linda:** No?

**101. VO:** It's not at all clear what she was doing wrong, except to the teacher. In the hallway, I asked her what she was doing.

**Jennifer:** What were you doing?

**Daisy:** Well, I was...

**102. VO:** She shrugs her shoulders and makes a sighing sound.

**Jennifer:** And why were you doing that?

**Daisy:** Well, I always do it at home, but no one tells me not to. I didn't know, don't, didn't know that it would make the teacher mad because it doesn't make my mother and father mad Emmett.

**Jennifer:** No, well then it's hard to know.

**Daisy:** Yeah.

**Jennifer:** Yeah.

**103. VO:** Later, the parents come to pick up the children. They want to know whether they ate their lunch and whether they were good today.

**Linda:** Okay, I'm going to see who can go get their jacket and bag...

**104. VO:** I walk out with Emany, whose mother is waiting to pick him up. I'm curious about how Emany, who had to stay inside for his punishment and is worrying about a lot of things, will describe his day.

**Emany's mother:** Emany? How was school today?

**Emany:** Fun.

**Emany's mother:** Was it fun? What did you do? Did you do anything special?

**Emany:** Yes.

**Emany's mother:** What was it?

**Emany:** Nothing!!

**Emany's mother:** Okay.

**Emany:** Don't put it in my, don't put it in my bag!

**Emany's mother:** It's ok, it's ok. It won't get ruined.

**105. VO:** He never tells me anything, his mother says as they walk away. When I go back inside, I see Daisy in tears with her mother.

**Daisy:** And then the teacher, and then the teacher told me and not Melanie but it was Melanie who started it.

**Daisy's mother:** Well, then, will go talk about it with the teacher, won't we? Do you have a moment?

**Linda:** Yes, what is it?

**Daisy's mother:** And the teacher gets mad at things that she can do at home and, here, come sit with me, dear.

**Linda:** Oh, I see, then you need to pout about it, don't you?

**Daisy's mother:** Yes, well, that's something from last week, you see, there was...

**Linda:** Well, then, tell me why you want to make a drama out of it.

**Daisy's mother:** Come on, Daisy, no, we look at the teacher when she's talking to us, dear.

**Linda:** Why do you want to make a drama out of it? Look at me. Come here and sit with me.

**106. VO:** Daisy doesn't want to sit on the teacher's lap.

**Linda:** No, no, don't be like that, otherwise mama will go out and wait in the hall. Did you think it was a good day today? Look at me: did you think it was a good day?

**Daisy's mother:** It started this morning, actually, she didn't want to go to school.

**Linda:** Hey! Listen, there's nothing wrong with having a bad day once in a while. It happens to everyone. I still like you, you know. You know that the teacher sometimes has a bad day too, right?

**Daisy:** No.

**Linda:** No, there's nothing wrong at all, if you have a bad day sometimes, is there? But then sometimes, I have to bug you, just a little bit, when you're not behaving, right?

**Daisy:** Yes, but it was Melanie who started with the banging on the cabinet.

**Linda:** Yes, but that's what I mean, you know, you were doing things all day. I think you're ready for the holidays.

**Daisy:** Yeah.

**Linda:** Yeah, but there's nothing wrong with that, because I still really like you, you know. Okay?

**Daisy:** Yeah.

**Linda:** You were just being a little weird today, you were just weird Daisy a little bit today. But you don't have to cry about that. Come here and give me a really big hug, okay? Okay? Yes.

**107. VO:** Afterwards, I ask the teacher what exactly Daisy was doing wrong.

**Linda IV:** Daisy was not following the rules at all, she was trying all kinds of things to break the rules. Not sitting up straight, when she normally sits so properly, she, ah, was talking the whole time when she, when she knew that she was supposed to be quiet. Ah, she was slamming toys around in the hallway. Um, well, yeah, she was really just out of control today, compared to her normal self. She sees that she's losing control of herself and just starts acting weirder, so you try to rein her in a little bit, for her sake too, because it doesn't make her happy when she has a day like that.

**108. VO:** I didn't see any of all that myself, but then, I'm not a teacher. I do wonder whether I just happened to come in on a very bad day.

**Linda IV:** It was, ah, well, it was a real Thursday. Thursdays are always, uh, just get through it somehow. I had a perfectly nice lesson plan, but so many Thursdays you

just have to let that go, because things always happen on Thursdays. (laughs) yes, it was a real Thursday, all right. That I didn't get to, that we didn't do the maths circle, or that I made the choice to leave it out. I didn't get to the games on the interactive whiteboard, maths games and language games, I didn't do that, because uh, yeah, Jack was throwing up. And, you know, that's really just, especially with the toddlers, yeah, that's just a normal Thursday. For real.

## **Music**

**109. VO:** I ask Linda what she would most like to see if she could change anything. She answers right away.

**Linda IV:** Yes, smaller classes. Really. Because you just don't have enough hands. There's just, there's hardly ever a day that you think well, I really accomplished everything I wanted to do, I gave all the kids the attention I wanted to. The days like that, I could count on one hand.

**110. VO:** You heard it right. Five days a year, she has the feeling that she was able to give all the kids the attention they needed.

When I come home I tell Jair what I saw and how it makes me feel. He's eating when I talk to him.

**Jair:** I hope you don't mind if I eat.

**Jennifer:** See, after I made the recordings with Linda, the teacher, I'm even more convinced that I really have to, uh, so I really have to see to it that we move to Sweden, and fast.

**Jair:** But, all right it's about our child, yeah I mean okay, but I really don't get it. You go look around in another city for a day and you come home thinking we have to get to Sweden as fast as possible. I just, I just don't get the connection. At all.

**Jennifer:** Well it's, it's about, I think it's, I've seen two versions of the Dutch school system for toddlers. And one version is the, the chaotic one, where there's too little time to do anything constructive except try to sit quietly and so much waiting, or else very strict and yeah, not a lot of time to learn things there, either. I just have to ask myself whether it's even possible to keep a group of 25, 30 children under control without it getting ugly.

**111. VO:** But Jair is actually excited about Linda's tough approach.

**Jair:** I would feel very comfortable sending our, our little Lova there, in some sense...

**Jennifer:** What?! Really?

**Jair:** Well now, she could really use a firm hand, I think, because she just doesn't have any sense of authority.

**Jennifer:** Okay, but is that really necessary, having it pounded in every day like...

**Jair:** Well, you have to start somewhere, and that better be before she's 18.

**Jennifer:** Yeah, but at 4?

**Jair:** I think that she, she's three and I already find it worrying how, uh, how little she listens, and I think we really should've started earlier.

**Jennifer:** Yes, when I came home and Lova was whinging, because it was my turn to take her to bed, and then I felt it too, like yeah, I could learn a few things from Linda.

**Jair:** Well, what? What exactly? Because...

**Jennifer:** Just to be clear and consistent and not so *blödiga*...

**Jair:** Arbitrary?

**Jennifer:** Arbitrary, or weak, or, uh... mushy-mushy...

**Jair:** What is *blödiga*? What does that mean, bleeding heart or something?

**Jennifer:** Yeah, a little bleeding heart, I just, it just really gets to me very quickly.

**Jair:** Is this, is that you? Or do you think that's something Swedish too?

**Jennifer:** I think that's really very Swedish, and I know that a lot of my family would find you way too strict. Yeah, Jair is a little old-fashioned, eh, and authoritarian upbringing, and all that.

**Jair:** Well, you know what I think is old-fashioned? The antiauthoritarian approach to child-reason, that we all had back in, uh, you know, the 70s, then we moved away from that. You know why? Because it wasn't working.

**112. VO:** Maybe Jair's right, maybe I'm too soft, but strict or not strict isn't really the fundamental problem. It's about something else. I keep thinking about what Sieneke told me.

**Sieneke IV:** As a teacher in group one and two, your job is to stimulate the child as much as possible to bring out everything inside the child, in language, motor skills, thinking, creativity. And the work skills, that just happens when the time is right. The work skills will come if you just give them the freedom now. So in that sense you can't make them, you can't create them, you can only break them. That's what we're doing. We're breaking them.

**Music**

**113. VO:** You've been listening to *Hunted!* Research Anne Margot van der Baan and Jair Stein. Technician Alfred Koster, editing Anton de Goede, consulting Katinka Baehr.

Our thanks to Linda and her class.

With grateful acknowledgment of the cooperation of Jelle Jolles and Sieneke Goorhuis-Brouwer.

And of course, thanks go to the Mediafonds, without which this series would not be possible.

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Next time in *Hunted!*, we look at the diagnosis addiction. Why are schools putting so much emphasis on testing healthy children for all kinds of disorders? In the next episode, learn about: The problem student, the pony, and the pill farmer.

**Jair:** The pony?

**Jennifer:** Yes, the pony. Hej då, vi hörs!