



Child Well Being and Quality of Childcare

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The Child Care Transition

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My name is Jonas Himmelstrand and I am the family research expert of the Swedish family organisation Haro (www.haro.se). Haro is the leading Swedish family organisation with a critical view of Swedish family policies. Haro families may have among the most experienced parents in Sweden giving home care to their children for the first 3-6 years of their children's life.

I am here to comment on the UNICEF Innocenti report, "The Child Care Transition", which I have read in its complete version, and the presentation of this report made by Mr. Leonardo Menchini at this workshop. I will first focus on the theme "the potential of harm" in the report, using the Swedish example. Sweden is today, in some aspects, an example of the potential of harm in early child care. Then I will give some other comments on the report. My comments are based on my Swedish book "Att följa sitt hjärta – i jantelagens Sverige" (eng. "Following your heart – in the social utopia of Sweden").

Sweden – an example of the potential for harm in early child care?

The indicators used in the report puts Sweden in a top position. But real-life Swedish outcomes tells a different story. This means we may need additional indicators in future research in order to correctly evaluate quality and effects of early child care.

Sweden is a rich nation with an all inclusive social security, a high educational spending, healthy life-styles, low child poverty, and one of the best health care systems in the world. The material indicators are outstanding by any international comparison. The outcomes should be excellent. But in some respects they are not, and this makes the Haro organisation concerned. I will come back to these outcomes in a moment.

Differing from Nordic neighbours Finland and Norway, which both have home care allowances, Sweden only supports out-of-home child care on a national scale, which is a big frustration to many Swedes, especially home parents. Sweden has had this out-of-home-care-only model for more than 30 years. Sweden has all through this period had a low child poverty, but many indicators suggest an escalating emotional poverty among Swedish children and youth – a new and perhaps unique situation in Europe today. Material wealth alone is not enough for child well-being, emotional wealth is perhaps an equally or even more important factor.

On its initiation in the 1970s the Swedish child care model was expected to deliver the following outcomes:

- Greater gender equality
- Improved child social development
- Improved child academic development
- To even out social class differences
- To liberate mothers from motherhood instincts
- Greater adult life satisfaction through more paid work, and less family work.

Today 30 years it later is evident that these goals have not been reached, in spite of favourable material circumstances.

Let us look at some of the ingredients in the Swedish child care model:

- No babies in day care – only parental leave first year. This is great, but then comes a dramatic shift.
- A full 92% of all children 18 month to 5 years of age are in day care.
- Day care is of very low cost to parents, typically 120 euros/month.
- Day care tax subsidy is more than 15 000 euros per child and year.
- There are no national home care allowance, nor home care tax benefits.
- Dual earner day care-model is strongly encouraged both culturally, and financially by the tax system and government institution opinion-making. Parents will be persuaded, during medical checkups of children, on government institution home pages and through media, that children above one year of age need day care for their development, and that parents need work for their well-being.
- Home care is discouraged, and in a sense socially marginalized.

The outcomes during the 30 years in which this child care model has grown are quite staggering. All the following data comes from Swedish government data or other acknowledged sources. In most cases it is the 2000s compared with the mid 1980s.

- **Deteriorating psychological health in youth**

Psychosomatic disorders and mild psychological problems are growing at a faster rate in Sweden than in any of eleven comparable European countries – Finland, Denmark, Norway, Hungary, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, Spain, Wales, Scotland and Sweden. Since the 1980s they have tripled among adolescent girls and now affect one out three young girls. Government officials comment these facts by saying: "We are very concerned, and we do not know the reason for this development."

- **School results – from top to average in 35 years**

Sweden used to have among the best school results in the world 35 years ago. Today Sweden is merely average, and actually below average in maths according to the PISA report. It should be noted that this is in sharp contrast to neighbouring Finland which comes out on top in PISA.

- **Serious discipline problems in Swedish schools**

According to the TIMSS study Sweden has among the most serious discipline problems in schools in Europe today including truancy, tardiness, disturbances in classrooms and bad language.

- **High rates of sick-leave, particularly among women**

A study is presented in the Swedish medical journal *Läkartidningen* 2005 with the headline: *"Who can work until 65 years of age? – not the women, more than half quit work life early"*. Psycho-social issues are cited as the strongest reason. This is the first generation of Swedish women trying out the Swedish model of working and having children at the same time.

One can ask what was gained by forcing children and work at the same time, if one anyway loses five–ten years of work life because of early retirement?

- **Day care staff top the sick leave statistics**

Three Swedish experts argue in their book *"Förskola för de allra minsta – på gott och ont"* (eng. "Day care for youngest – for good and bad") that this is caused by the "lack-of-meaning syndrome" due to the deteriorating quality of Swedish day care. Day care personnel were trained for a job they cannot perform because of too big group sizes and too high child-to-adult ratios.

- **Deteriorating parental abilities**

An EU-sponsored study by Swedish school researcher Britta Johansson shows that even healthy, intelligent and reasonable Swedish parents have difficulties in their parental role today. The researcher says parents lack knowledge about children's needs and cannot set limits. She continues:

The public offer of full day child care seems to make many parents loose the grip of their own responsibility. They believe/want that their children are fostered by the pre-school/school and believe that the experts on their children are found there.

The researcher also says that pre-school/school cannot fill the gaps caused by lack of time and trust in parenthood from the parents.

Several scientific disciplines will point to a causal effect of the Swedish model and these outcomes. These disciplines include developmental psychology, attachment theory, developmental science and neurobiology. Added to this are a number of longitudinal studies. Several of these longitudinal studies – NICHD, EPPE and FCCC – were presented in the Innocenti report.

- **High gender segregation in labour market**

Sweden has one of the most gender segregated labour markets in the world – not only the western world. The Swedish model has not produced general gender equality, many other nations do it better with other models.

- **Plummeting quality in day care – can the political system keep the quality up?**

The quality of Swedish day care in terms of group size and child-to-adult ratios was high in the 1980s, but since the financial crises in the early 1990s the quality has continuously deteriorated, even today in spite of a very strong Swedish economy. The three Swedish experts mentioned earlier conclude that Swedish day care is no longer of high quality, and developmentally detrimental to sensitive children. The 15 000 euro subsidy per child and year to day care is not enough to provide quality today.

One could ask: If a rich country with one the world's highest tax rates can't provide subsidised comprehensive day care of high quality, then who can?

Conclusion on today's Swedish child care situation

The Swedish child care model should be subjected to careful multi disciplinary research before any other nation attempt to implement it. The outcomes of the Swedish child care model does present evidence of "a potential for harm" in the child care transition if applied on a comprehensive national scale and, as in the Swedish case, effectively taking away parental choice on forms of child care.

Other comments on the Innocenti report

The report is positively broad in presenting different views on early child care, but lacks in creating a coherent understanding of the effects, particularly in regard to cognitive development versus emotional development in early child care.

The modern neurobiological research which the Innocenti report refers to clearly points out emotion as a driving force behind cognition and psychological maturation. This is expressed both by Sue Gerhardt in her book, and Penelope Leach in her comments on the FCCC study – both referred to in the report. The implication is, of course, that emotional development is a prerequisite to cognitive development.

The cognitive research in the report is not the subject of much critique. However, there are a number of questions which should be raised about their relevance.

1) These studies typically only study cognitive outcomes and not emotional outcomes in the form of maternal sensitivity, attachment and behavioural problems. Based on the key importance of emotional development this weakens the value of these studies regarding general child outcomes.

2) Several other studies such as the NICHD, EPPE and FCCC all show increased behavioural problems with exposure of day care already higher than 10-12 hours a week for 3–4.5 year olds. Behavioural problems are often a sign of emotional defences due to stress caused by separation to those adults the child is attached to. According to NICHD the increase in behavioural problems were almost as large as the effects associated with poverty.

3) The NICHD study shows that the cognitive advantages of early day care 0–4.5 years of age are almost all gone when the children reach the age of 12. This is confirmed by other studies. When this effect is added to the increased behavioural problems one can ask whether this is not due to too much learning too early – a focus on learning which small children cannot really digest, and which actually stresses them. A recent Swedish Government investigation explicitly says that there is no evidence that an early school start enhances later learning – the line between learning in pre-school and learning in school is very thin in this respect.

4) Some attachment oriented developmental psychologists question whether there is actually any real cognitive development in day care children compared with home cared children. There is a very easily introduced systematic error in cognitive studies, they argue. Home cared children attached to their parents will regard a researcher as a foreign person, because of lack of attachment. Studies have shown that the attachment effect can be as strong as 20 points lower on an IQ test when the child is not attached to the researcher. If the researcher comes to a day care centre, he or she comes to an environment where attachment is more diffusely to the group and will gain better results by this factor alone.

5) In my own research on day care studies published in the paper *”Förskolan, forskningen och sanningen”* (eng. “Day care, research and the truth”) I found studies which were used to argue cognitive benefits being made in US ghetto areas where child support was provided. In one study pre-school was only one of several forms of support; some families received support simply to enhance their home care. Of course, such studies are of little value in estimating outcomes for European middle class families.

6) The NICHD study more specifically shows that all cognitive advantages of early child care except vocabulary were gone by 12 years of age. Vocabulary scored higher at 12 years of age if the child care up to 4.5 years of age was of high quality. The NICHD study defines high quality in child care based on the standards given in “National Health and Safety Performance Standards: Guidelines for Out-of-home Child Care programs” in the US. In addition to training requirements for staff these standards include the following criteria for group sizes and child-to-adult ratios:

Child age	Maximum group size	Maximum child-to-adult ratio
0–24 months	6	3:1
24-30 months	8	4:1
31-35 months	10	5:1
36-47 months	14	7:1
48-60 months	16	8:1

In the NICHD study 11% of the different forms day care studied had this high quality. This quality is unusual in the US, nevertheless a few states has this quality as a law. This is the quality associated with cognitive gains, although even this quality did not counteract the negative effects of many hours in day care before 4.5 years of age.

No European nation can today boast day care quality even close to these standards on a national level. However, Swedish day care had this quality during the 1980s when Bengt-Erik Andersson's study was made – a study referred to in the Innocenti report. As mentioned earlier the quality in Sweden dropped quickly after the Swedish financial crises in the early 1990s. This is one of several reasons why the Bengt-Erik Andersson study cannot be said to be relevant today.

I have personally witnessed the kind of quality in the US standards in well-to-do US families. In one example both parents worked. Their two small children were basically cared for by a nanny to whom both children were well attached. The children went to a high quality pre-school for a total of nine (9) hours per week.

7) Another insight into interpreting quality in early child care is given by Sir Richard Bowlby (son of psychiatrist John Bowlby, the founder of the attachment theory) in his essay "*Stress in day care*". Sir Bowlby correctly states that quality in day care under three years of age is all about that each child has a secondary attachment figure among the day care staff, a stand-in granny or auntie or a nanny. He goes on to say that this is unlikely to happen in day care centres, although one could argue that with the quality in the US standards it could be possible. However, a child minder employed by the parent, and whom the parents trust, is a much safer bet, according to Sir Bowlby.

8) The EPPE study says that the cognitive benefits which they had found from early child care – benefits which have been questioned above – only needed a few hours a few times a week, and that additional exposure did not yield better results. This clearly shows that from the child's perspective some other early learning solutions may be much better suited for the child. A Swedish phenomena, which is unfortunately dying out, is what is called the open pre-school. This is pre-school a few hours, a few times a week by trained pre-school teachers *with a parent present with the child*. This makes the best of two worlds as it does not involve child-parent separation.

9) Coming back to the Swedish experience, if early child care generally delivered a strong cognitive development based on actual European quality day-care today, then Sweden should show spectacular cognitive results on a national level. All evidence clearly points to that it does not. On the contrary the development in Sweden is pretty much exactly what modern developmental psychology based on neurobiology and attachment theory has expected will happen when small children are separated many hours daily from their parents. Canadian psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld is a great interpreter of the modern knowledge in this area. His book "*Hold on to your kids*", co-written with Dr. Gabor Maté, definitely deserves to be mentioned next to Sue Gerhardt's and Steve Biddulph's books in the Innocenti report.

Conclusion – cognitive outcomes of early child care

The evidence available today is not enough to say with any degree of certainty that early out-of-home child care actually delivers sustainable cognitive results, let alone emotional development and health. Given that the NICHD study has cost more than

150 million USD, and that bigger studies on at least 10 000 children in different countries would be necessary to pinpoint evidence based causal effects, one can question if this is the way for humanity to go.

To recommend an implementation of child care involving a massive separation of small children from their parents on a global scale based on an incomplete understanding of the most sensitive relationship in human existence – parent and child, and especially mother and child – seems quite plainly wrong, to put it mildly.

Disadvantaged children

It is quite clear from developmental psychology, attachment theory and modern neurobiology that an early separation from the adults the child is attached to, is always painful and stressful for the child, no matter if the parent is good or bad. Actually the NICHD study shows that out-of-home child care can have negative outcomes for small children under three with insensitive mothers. This could be due to the additional separation stress.

How can one help disadvantaged children with introducing separation stress? A method that has been tried, and recommended in Sue Gerhardt's book, is to support the mother in her relationship with her child. Sue Gerhardt says there is no better time to invest in a psychotherapeutic intervention than to an insecure mother with a baby – both baby and mother will be greatly helped. Another way to do this is to give the mother a support person who comes to the mother's home and gives her general support including coaching her mothering, as well as encouraging her ambitions in what she wants to do as the child grows older. This has been tried with success. The benefits are obvious; the child is not separated from the mother, the mother learns quality mothering, the mother gets a strong attachment base for her relationship with her child during all 18 years of childhood, rather than just the early years. In addition the mother gets support in future planning of her own life.

Immigrant children

This is a similar discussion. Is the best way to introduce child-parent separation at an early age? Language is important, but parental attachment and emotional development is even more important during the early years. Rather one should make sure that solutions which reduce child-parent separation for the first 4-5 years, are easily accessible. A lack of child attachment to parents can present serious problems during adolescence with "peer-orientation" (see Dr. Neufeld's and Dr. Maté's book).

Children are different – the Orchid hypothesis

Every child is unique, and some are more sensitive than others. The Orchid hypothesis, with strong scientific support, argues that about a third of humanity carry a "depressive gene", a gene that predicts depression in adult life. People with this gene are more likely to show up in psychiatric wards or in prison. However, the hypothesis shows that if children with this gene receive an exceptionally loving and sensitive upbringing they can develop to highly mature and creative adults, hence the metaphor

of the orchid. It is unlikely that these children will do well in any kind of out-of-home child care. In fact they could be responsible for much of the behavioural problems in child care. Parents who live with these sensitive children can witness how they are easily stressed and over stimulated. Often these children are given various neuropsychiatric diagnosis in day care, but they may develop beautifully in a caring home setting.

Quality in child care assured – is this possible or an utopia?

As mentioned the quality of Swedish day care has dropped to a level where it can no longer be called high quality, and will have detrimental effects on some sensitive children. Still, Sweden is today one of the strongest economies in Europe. It seems that the political system cannot provide the same quality of care as caring parents can. Parents seem to be willing to sacrifice much more for their own children than they are willing to give in taxes, and definitely more than the political system will sacrifice for a comprehensive day care system of truly high quality.

Swedish day care staff were very happy and optimistic in the early 1980s. Not so today. Maybe one should ask what could motivate a young pre-school teacher mother to leave her own child in day care to go to work and take care of other parents children. Survival and having a job perhaps, by maybe not much more for many of them.

What do mothers and parents want?

This leads to the question of what mothers and parents want, an issue not raised in the Innocenti report. There are many studies on this and the results are crystal clear. A majority of parents want the possibility to care for their small children themselves – this is what several Swedish studies show, and 30 years of comprehensive day care in Sweden has not changed this fact. Dr. Catherine Hakim has shown in her studies that only 20% of European women have career as their prime goal. A full 20% of the women see family as their prime life goal, and the remaining 60% want a balance of children and work. A new study by Mouvement Mondial des Mères Europe of 11 000 European mothers show that a majority of them want to take full care of their children until three years of age and then work part-time until the children are 19 years old, only then to go to full-time work. This may cause concern for some economists, but many people find relationships much more rewarding than material consumption.

Conclusion

The summary of the Innocenti report says the following:

The trend towards early childhood education and care has enormous potential for good – for giving children the best possible start in life, for limiting the early establishment of disadvantage, for advancing progress towards equality for women, for boosting educational achievement, and for investing in citizenship. Poor quality care, on the other hand, has the potential for both immediate and long-term harm.

Based on my commentary here I would have to strongly disagree with the suggested positive outcome. The studies to back up this argument are questionable and contra-

dicted by other studies. Neither have these outcomes proven achievable and sustainable on a national level in any country in the world today. There is actually a lot more facts suggesting that we are achieving the suggested negative outcomes to various degrees. Sweden, which has tried the model perhaps longer than any other country, cannot show positive developmental outcomes for either children, mothers, parents or families. Developmental psychology in combination with attachment theory and modern neuroscience also suggest serious negative outcomes from early separation of children and their parents or guardians.

I have discussed this issue in detail in my own book based on years of intense studies on this subject, decades of working with adults in business life and consulting with schools and pre-schools, and not the least my own three children and the encounters with many other children – home cared and day cared.

Investing in a good early life of children is important, but what is a good investment? Out-of-home child care, especially for the first 3-4 years, is riddled with warning signs suggesting possible harm. Home care with caring parents suggest the best emotional development, and through this most likely the best cognitive outcomes for adulthood. In fact the growing home schooling movement shows excellent academic and social results from children with engaged parents although they may never have gone to either early child care or school. Children with less sensitive parents are best helped by helping these parents to become better parents. The cases when this is not possible do exist, but they are rare and certainly cannot make the basis for general policies.

Many European families will want provisions for early child care. It is important that this is available of high quality, but without the state having an opinion of what is best for each individual child. Rather the state needs to encourage parents to listen to each of their children for their specific needs, and to the needs of the family, and then make their own individual decision. The parents need to find fair societal support for their decision. Caring for one's small children is an important existential decision for every parent to make. They need to find a solution which they are at peace with if they are to stay happy and healthy and to grow themselves as individuals.

At best full-time early child care can be an acceptable solution, if the quality of care is high, but it will hardly ever be an ideal solution for the first 4-5 years. For the first two-three years a child minder is a better solution than centre-based care. Rather, we should instead try to find solutions that cut down on child-parental separation for the first 4-5 years and definitely make sure the parents feel free to make their own choice based on their children's needs.

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