

**The impact of work-family  
reconciliation  
on fertility and on fatherhood  
roles in Europe – Sweden**

**Jonas Himmelstrand**

[www.haro.se](http://www.haro.se)



**The Hungarian Presidency Conference  
on Demographic Change, March 28-29, 2011**

Budapest, March 30, 2011

Dear Reader,

This is a transcribed text of the presentation given at *The Hungarian Presidency Conference on Demographic Change* in Budapest on March 29, 2011. I gave the presentation in my role as the family research expert and a national board member of the Swedish family organisation Haro. The text pretty much follows the actual presentation, only some mild editing has been done.

As this presentation was given with a special target group in mind, it may leave some questions which this text cannot answer. Some of my other writings may answer these questions.

I am working on an condensed English translation of the Swedish book on which much of the research material in this presentation is based on. When this book is published in late 2011, it should hopefully answer even more questions.

On the links below you will find more written work in English by me. There is also a link with the possibility to pre-order the English book.

Regards

Jonas Himmelstrand

**Links:**

The Haro organisation, [www.haro.se](http://www.haro.se)

Jonas Himmelstrand, articles in English: [www.mireja.org/articles.lasso](http://www.mireja.org/articles.lasso)

Information on the English book: [www.mireja.org/english\\_book.html](http://www.mireja.org/english_book.html)

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# **The impact of work-family reconciliation on fertility and on fatherhood roles in Europe – Sweden**

**Jonas Himmelstrand**

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**The Hungarian Presidency Conference  
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Work-family reconciliation and the new role of fatherhood are part of modern family policies which have been tried in Sweden for nearly 40 years. Sweden has a comprehensive day care system with a focus on gender equality and full-time female employment. But the results of these policies are starting to show and they are mixed. On one hand it is a Swedish best practice to invest generously in early child care. On the other hand it can be called a Swedish worst practise to use this investment, for children 1–5 years of age, exclusively on day care.

My name is Jonas Himmelstrand. I am Swedish and I am here as a representative of the Swedish family organisation Haro. I am married and have three children, which is not many compared to several other Haro members.

Haro is the leading Swedish family organisation with a critical view on Swedish family policies. I have the privilege of being the family research expert on the Haro national board. Four years ago I published an in-depth analysis of Swedish family policies and its outcomes. Later this year I will publish the key findings in a book in English.

I have been asked to speak about the best practises on work-family balance and

fatherhood. I will do so from the Swedish perspective based on my own research and on the experiences of my organisation. As a comment to other presentations given here I would like to say that child well-being and the healthy development of children should be the starting point for this discussion in my view.

To present a clear picture of Sweden on these topics is not easy. Our best practises tend to be intertwined with our worst practises. Sweden has great statistics of low child poverty, low infant mortality, high life expectancy, gender equality and comprehensive affordable day care. But these statistics don't tell the whole story.

*We may have low child poverty and high material wealth relative to a number of other European countries, but many Swedish children suffer from a high emotional poverty.*

Nevertheless, a clear best practise is the Swedish 16 month parental leave which means we have no babies in day care. But after these months of parental leave the picture changes dramatically.

One could argue that a best practise in Sweden is investing 15000 euro per child and year in 90% of all 18 month–5 year olds. The backside of the coin is that it is our government which decides on how to use the money, not the parents. No national support is given to home care – children cared for by mummy, daddy, a granny or other relative or close relationship.

It can also be called a Swedish best practise to encourage fathers to take out more parental leave. Swedish fathers take out about 20% of all parental leave. However, this figure hides the fact that the actual time in which Swedish children are in the presence of their parents, has sharply dropped in the last 40 years due to the day care policies.

Also, this discussion about fatherhood is basically about fathers who take parental leave when the child is 8–16 months old. Most of fatherhood happens later and is then continuous until the child is an adult and beyond. Also in this respect the figure on fathers taking parental leave does not tell the whole story of fatherhood. As I will soon show, there is whole new paradigm of parenthood emerging in Sweden with very active fathers, to which these figures do not do justice.

Let us look at the basics of the Swedish child care model.

# Swedish child care model

- \* **No 0-1 year olds in day care – only parental leave.**
- \* **92% of all 18 month-5 year olds are in day care.**
- \* **Day care low cost to parents, 90% tax subsidized.**
- \* **Actual day care cost > € 15000 per child/year.**
- \* **No national home care allowance, or tax benefits.**
- \* **Day care and dual-earner household encouraged.**
- \* **Home care discouraged, and socially marginalized.**

- In Sweden there are no babies under one year of age in day care. This is due to our long parental leave of 13-16 months. It is a Swedish best practise.
- Of all Swedish children 18 month – 5 years of age, 92% are in day care for various amounts of time. Day care from 18 months of age is a Swedish norm.
- Swedish day care is subsidised by taxes to more than 90%. Hence the cost for parents to use day care is very low, typically 120 euro a month for the first child. No family ever pays more than 285 euro per month, regardless of family income and number of children in day care. This is called the maximum fee (maxtaxa), a fee constructed to encourage parents to use day care.
- The actual cost of day care in Sweden is more than 15 000 euro per year and child, according to the Swedish government research institute.
- There is no national home care allowance for those who choose home care. However, in a small number of municipalities there is the possibility of a small allowance of about 300 euro per month maximum. This can only be used when the parental leave has been used and only until the child is three years old – there are

several rules making it difficult to use. This expressed political reason for these difficulties is the fear among some political parties that the allowance would become too popular.

In Sweden all taxation is fully individualised and there are no possible tax reductions whatsoever for families or for home care.

- Day care and a dual-earner household is strongly encouraged by all Swedish government institutions.
- Similarly home care is strongly discouraged in Sweden by the government, the state institutions, the health care system, the pre-school teachers trade unions and the media. The strongest reasons for this is gender equality, every child's "right" to go to day care and that parents are said to do better in the labour force than in the daily care for their children, which in turn is said to be done better by trained pre-school teachers.

I will now present the less pleasant outcomes of the Swedish model. Please remember that this is a country with high material wealth and a low child poverty.

## **Swedish model outcomes**

- \* **Strong decrease in psychological health in youth.**
- \* **Discipline problems and poor results in schools.**
- \* **High rates of sick leave among women.**
- \* **Day care staff top the sick leave statistics.**
- \* **Deteriorating parental abilities, even middle-class.**
- \* **Quality in Swedish day care is deteriorating.**
- \* **Total fertility rate – high in Europe, low in Nordic**
- \* **Highly gender segregated labour market.**

- **Strong decrease in psychological health in youth.**

Many Swedish studies put emphasis on this fact, and concern is expressed. 20-30 % of our adolescents show signs of continuous psychological stress with worries, anxiety and physical pain. This is three times higher today than 25 years ago. According to a government study this decrease in psychological health is faster in Sweden than in any of 11 comparable European countries: Finland, Denmark, Norway, Hungary, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, Wales, Spain and Scotland.

- **Plummeting results and discipline in Swedish schools.**

Sweden has in 30 years gone, from being among the best in the world in school results, to being merely average. The discipline in Swedish classrooms is poor. The situation is among the worst in Europe.

- **High rates of sick leave among women.**

Again, this is among the highest in Europe. The reasons are psycho-social. Many Swedish women who have had full-time employment while having small children retire between ages of 55-60 because of various medical psycho-social reasons.

*One can ask what was gained by forcing child care and work at the same time, if one anyway loses ten years of work because of early retirement.*

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

Swedish day care staff top the sick leave statistics, especially when it comes to long-term sick leave.

- **Deteriorating parental abilities, even middle class**

An EU-sponsored study by Swedish school researcher Britta Johansson showed that even healthy, intelligent and reasonable Swedish parents have difficulties in being parents today. According to her they lack knowledge about children's needs and cannot set limits. She writes (my translation):

*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.*

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

- **Quality in Swedish day care is deteriorating.**

Three Swedish acknowledged experts write in recent book that the quality of

Swedish day care is no longer high, and that some children will definitely have their development impaired because of this lack of quality.

- **Total fertility rate – high in Europe, low in a Nordic comparison.**

Both Norway and Finland have higher fertility rates than Sweden. Neither comes to the 2.1 children needed for full population reproduction.

- **Highly gender segregated labour market**

Sweden has a highly gender segregated labour market. Women typically work in care and education and men in industry and higher public offices.

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The problem seems to be that the Swedish political leadership ignores the importance of the child-to-parent attachment. Modern attachment psychology says clearly that the emotional bond child-to-parent cannot be replaced with even the best curriculum, learning or pedagogical methods.

*One could say that the basic problem with Swedish family policies is that individual child care has become a state political decision based on political ideology, rather than a parental decision, based on the needs of the individual child.*

## What do Swedes want?

- \* **A large number of studies during the last decades show that a great majority of Swedish women and families want more time with their small children.**
- \* **A recent study showed that 7 out of 10 mothers want to be home longer with their children. Young mothers want it more than older.**
- \* **More than half of the mothers believed that more mothers would want to be stay-at-home moms, if they could.**

Swedish people clearly want parents to have the choice to care for their children themselves at home. This is also the conclusion in a European study made by Mouvement Mondial des Mères, "Realities of Mothers in Europe".

A few of these Swedish parents have gone to action. After 40 years of family policies based on day care and full-time women employment we see a movement beyond this model, a new family paradigm coming from pioneering families, with new solutions to motherhood, fatherhood and work-family balance.

These parents want both to care for their children and to work, but they do not want it at the same time. *They do not want to have to work and have small children at the same time.* In fact they want one parent to be home for the first 3-5 years in a child's life and then work part-time until their children are 18-19 years old.

*What is interesting is that these pioneering Swedish families are not coming from traditions or from religion. That is gone in Sweden. They are solely motivated by the experience of attachment with their children, and their observations on how well this makes their child develop.*

Here are some characteristics of this new family paradigm – don't ask our government about it, they will deny its existence.

## A new family paradigm

- \* **Mother & father, equally committed entire childhood.**
- \* **Early home care by mother, supported by father.**
- \* **Conscious father care growing from 2-4 years of age.**
- \* **Strong emphasis on parental emotional attachment.**
- \* **At school age, many mothers start own business.**
- \* **Family receives children directly from school.**
- \* **Some families even homeschool their children.**
- \* **These are large families, typically with 3-6 children.**

- **Mother & Father, equally committed, entire childhood.**

Father and mother are equally committed to the care of the child, both in time and in emotional commitment, on an 18 year basis – not just an 18 month basis.

- **Early home care by mother, supported by father.**

The value of early motherhood and breast-feeding is acknowledged in these families. Also acknowledged is the support which the mother needs in her small child mother role, a support the father will provide.

- **Conscious father care growing from 2-4 years of age.**

These parents agree that the mother does the early child care, with the support of the father, and that the father starts taking a bigger role at around 2-4 years of age, an age when other children go to day care. From the perspective of an 18 year old childhood their parental contributions will be both substantial and equal.

- **Strong emphasis on parental emotional attachment.**

These parents have discovered the power of emotional attachment in parenting, as is well expressed by Canadian psychologist dr. Gordon Neufeld in his book “Hold on to your kids – why parents need to matter more than peers”.

- **At school age, many mothers start their own business.**

When the children all go to school many mothers start working part-time, in their own business, in voluntary work, in politics or in a regular job. These mothers come with power and conviction into work and into society with deep personal experiences which are hard to find anywhere else.

- **Family receives children directly from school**

They use no out-of-school activities. Mother, father, relative or neighbour receives child directly after school and talks about what happened during the school day.

- **Some parents even homeschool their children.**

Some parents, because of life-style or because of having highly sensitive children or otherwise, choose to home school their children. This is a fast growing educational movement in many western countries. Research show that the results are excellent both academically and socially.

- **These are large families, typically with 3-6 children.**

From a demographic standpoint these families have to be understood and supported. They have many children, and they take good conscious care of them.

No research has yet been done on these pioneering families. But if one puts together international research with the Swedish experiences, the outcomes seem clear. These children typically do very well emotionally, socially and in school.

A summary of what can be learned from 40 years of modern Swedish family policies could look like this:

## Swedish family lessons

- \* **Generous parental leave keeps babies out of day care.**
- \* **Raising children costs money, someone has to pay.**
- \* **Government needs to be neutral to form of child care.**
- \* **Equal financial support regardless of form of care.**
- \* **Encourage parents conscious choice of care.**
- \* **Home care as a respected part of work-life career.**
- \* **State child care, make child care a political issue.**
- \* **The family is society's foremost institution for close relationships – a key to health, growth and maturity.**

- **Generous parental leave keep babies out of day care.**

Swedish day care starts only at 12 months of age – a Swedish best practise.

- **Raising children costs money, someone has to pay.**

Sweden invests a generous amount of money in early child care – a best practise – but the use of this money is unfortunately guided by political ideology rather than by child and parental needs and wishes – a worst practise.

- **Government needs to be neutral to form of child care.**

There has to be a real freedom for parents to choose different forms of care. Therefore the government need to present parents with a full choice of either day care, home care, child minders, grannies or otherwise.

- **Equal financial support regardless of form of care.**

This freedom of choice and a government neutrality to different forms of child care has to be backed up by equal financial funding to all forms of care in a way which is experienced as reasonable and fair. If day care is funded by tax money, then home care also needs to be funded reasonably equal by some form of home care allowance or tax reduction to parents making home care possible for the majority of families, whatever the constellation.

- **Encourage parents to consciously choose form of care.**

Parents need to be encouraged to use the freedom of choice in care arrangements. They need to listen to their child, to their own family situation, and to make the choices that seem most appropriate; in mother-father roles, in work-family balance and in choosing forms of care. Government needs to say that choosing forms of care ultimately must be the choice of the parents, not the government, and that government has to respect the choice of the individual family, whether home care, day care, child-minder, granny, neighbour, friend or otherwise.

- **Home care as a respected part of work-life career.**

Conscious home care of children gives rich opportunities for personal growth for the parent. More and more businesses and public work-places are realising this. A former home-parent brings with them to work a social competency and an emotional maturation which is a great contribution to all work-life.

- **State child care, make child care a political issue.**

One has to realise that political control of child care leads to political decisions on child care, which is seldom ideal. The political perspective is short, usually 4 years. The parental perspective is long, 80 years or more. Parents are simply willing to sacrifice more for their children than what is possible for any typical western political democracy to do.

- **The family is society's foremost institution for close relationships – a key to health, growth and maturation.**

Whatever the constellation and however defined, family needs to be acknowledged as society's foremost institution for close emotional relationships, as this is the key prerequisite for human health, growth, maturation and ultimately for human survival.

**Thank you  
for your attention!**

**More information about this  
presentation can be found at:**

**[www.mireja.org/110329.html](http://www.mireja.org/110329.html)**

**E-mail: [jonas@mireja.org](mailto:jonas@mireja.org)**

Another logical conclusion from the facts in this presentation is, of course, that the Swedish family model must be subjected to a thorough multi-disciplinary research before any attempt is made by any other nation to copy the Swedish model.

Thank you for your attention!

Jonas Himmelstrand

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## About the presenter and author

“Following your heart – in the social utopia of Sweden” is a book about learning and growing in my native country of Sweden.

Writing the book has forced me to dig deep into my own roots. I grew up in a newly built middle-class area of flats in the outskirts of Uppsala, Sweden. I spent my first school years in an idyllic country side school and a few years later in a big town school. But I also got to travel early in life. I started school in Berkeley, California, USA at the age of six. Later I lived three years in Ibadan, Nigeria where I went to an International School. Finally at fifteen I spent another year in High School in Palo Alto, California, USA.



Through my entire student years I lived with the ambivalence between the scientifically rational and the humanistically intuitive. In my studies I reached the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm before realising that my interest in chemistry between people was greater than my interest in chemistry between molecules. I did not begin to resolve this ambivalence until I started my own consulting business in the area of personal growth and leadership at 28 years of age.

Today I have been a trainer and coach in leadership, pedagogy and personal growth for 30 years in Swedish businesses and public offices. Since 1992 I have been co-publishing the newsletter “Strategies to Learn & Grow”. My wife Tamara and my three children have enriched my life experiences enormously and being self-employed has enabled a family oriented life style which is otherwise difficult to manifest in Sweden today.

“Following your heart...” has become an odyssey in the area of growing as a person individually, at work and in society. An odyssey with a definite goal in the idea of becoming more human, more of who you truly are.

A condensed English version of the book focusing of family policy issues is in the works for publication during late 2011.