Children's Houses – Barnahus: Today and in the Future

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1 Background

Barnahus are based on the American Children's Advocacy Center model, and have emerged in Sweden in the past ten years. The Swedish Barnahus model is a collaboration where the authorities responsible for a child who is the subject of a criminal investigation interact under one roof in a child-friendly environment. The joint investigative measures seek to optimize the quality of the investigations, interventions and treatment of the child.

Today there are about 30 Barnahus around the country. They have developed differently depending on local conditions and engagement and the variation between them is great: they differ in terms of size, organization and financing. Common to all, however, is that the target group includes victims of both physical and sexual crime, that the police and the social services are represented, that the police interview is conducted there and that the interior is child-friendly.

The overall aim of Barnahus is to let the best interest of the child be a primary consideration when a child is the subject of a police investigation, and to put the child’s needs at the centre, letting the authorities adapt to the child and not the other way around. The purposes of Barnahus are thus several. First they should create a child-friendly environment where the police interview, the medical investigation, the child protection services risk assessment and psychological treatment can be done in one place. Secondly, inter-agency cooperation under one roof should optimize the conditions for better quality in the police investigations, the risk assessment and psychological treatment of the child.

2 Purpose and Questions

This article describes the activity and the ambitions of Barnahus in Sweden: Where are we today and what development is needed? Key questions are what should be required of Barnahus, if there is a need for national coordination, and whether specific legislation is needed. Another question is whether there are areas that need more and appropriate research.
3 Children’s Rights

Through the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Optional Protocols, we promise to protect and promote children’s rights. The CRC States that children are bearers of their own rights and that childhood is entitled to special care and assistance. Each State has a responsibility to ensure the child its rights (Article 4). Thus both Swedish and international law grant children rights based on the fact that children are vulnerable and need greater protection than adults.

A child’s right to protection and safety is especially vital for children who are victims of violence and abuse. The Convention States that every child has the right to protection from all physical or mental violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation (Article 19), and a right to be protected from sexual abuse and exploitation in prostitution and pornography (Article 34). Further, the child victim of abuse or exploitation is entitled to rehabilitation and social reintegration (Article 39). These rights are closely linked to the basic principle of the CRC concerning the child’s right to protection from discrimination of any kind (Article 2), the best interests of the child (Article 3), the right to life, survival and development (Article 6), and respect for the views of the child through participation and information (Article 12).

Protecting children from violence and abuse and providing them with rehabilitation is a difficult task. Criminal law is in this context in many ways limited. The standard of proof required in a criminal case is high and most police reports concerning crimes against children do not lead to prosecution.¹ Nor does conviction of an adult who committed a crime against a child automatically mean that the child is protected. Despite a conviction, a parent can still be the child’s guardian and maintain custody. Criminal procedure, however, fills a number of important functions for children’s ability to obtain protection and rehabilitation. The criminal investigation helps the child protection services to identify his or her need and thus provide the protection, support and rehabilitation to which he or she is entitled. The criminal procedure can also have a therapeutic function by ensuring the child its right to be heard and recognized and compensated.² In addition, the police investigation can also identify a potential offender and therefore future victims can be protected.

² Diesen, C., Terapeutisk juridik, Liber, Stockholm, 2011.