Child-Care Policy Arenas: 
A Comparison between Sweden and the United States

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ABSTRACT

A comparison of Swedish and American policy-making arenas (structure, culture, and programming) for young children is the topic of this paper. Swedish child-care experience is more highly developed, bureaucratized, and politically coordinated. American practice is much more custodial, maintenance oriented, and politically fragmented.

In most societies, the responsibility for the young child historically has belonged to the family. However, as nations have industrialized and urbanized, some degree of extra-family child care has emerged in many places. In the past decade or so, both Swedish and American child-care arrangements have become a notable public policy issue and in large part because of the increasing numbers of mothers with young children who have joined the work force in both countries. Our objective in this paper is to compare the political arenas in which the child-care policies of the United States and Sweden have evolved. We will discuss briefly some of the major child-care programs of the two countries, synthesize the policy culture underlying Swedish and American child-care programs, identify the policy framers who interact to determine the child-care policies of each country, and evaluate the relative advantages and disadvantages of Swedish and American child-care policy.

Why compare the child-care policy processes of the United States and Sweden? Both countries are at a similar stage of advanced industrial development as evidenced by per capita income, life expectancy, and other socio-economic measures. In addition, the countries share a common background of European civilization, constitutional government and quasi-market economies. Beyond their similarities, they also present an interesting study in contrasts. Sweden has a small, highly compact population (less than five percent of the United States) characterized by stability and homogeneity. The
United States has been distinguished by its large, dispersed, and culturally heterogeneous population. The dominant American cultural themes of relevance stress individual competitiveness and private, voluntary-group efforts. In contrast, Swedish society has valued social deference and group consensus-seeking which promote public responsibility for the quality of social life. It is the contention of the authors that these differences in orientation also manifest themselves in contrasting patterns of public policies for child care.

Child-Care Programs - The Programmatic Dimension

In the United States, at least prior to the Reagan administration, public funding or subsidies as well as guidelines and support for child-care programs have come largely from the federal government (e.g., Title XX-Child Care)* However, circumstances in the United States, given its large population and federal system, encourage fragmentation of services for child care. As a consequence, a plethora of state and local health, education, and social services agencies administer and supervise these programs, with little apparent coordination. In Texas, for example, Grubb and Brody (1982) found substantial intrastate inequalities in non-school programs for children including Title XX, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFCD), and so forth. Other states exhibit a similar pattern, for example, California (Kirst, unpublished), Michigan (Duane and Bridgeland, 1978) and New York (Garms, unpublished).

Sweden, as a relatively small centralized society, has an integrated child-care system of center-based arrangements; the development of children is an important and publicized national goal (Dodge, 1979, p. 255). First, and parallel to but not as extensive as the American kindergarten, Swedish national law requires that municipalities provide all six-year-old children with a year of “part-time nursery school” with a direct fee (Melsted, 1979, p. 4). Second, there has been much expansion of “day nurseries,” which offer services to children between six months and seven years, five days a week between 6:30 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. (Fact Sheets, 1982). The ratio of children to staff in these Swedish child-care centers is 4 or 5 to 1 (Fact Sheets, 1982, p. 3). Because of the wide variation between states and communities in the United States, comparable figures are difficult to determine. However, in a major study of American day-care centers, Coelen, et. al. (1979, p. 28) found the “average actual child/staff ratio in the U.S. (to be) 6.8 children per adult.” The Swedish public policy objective is to ensure, by about 1990, openings for all children (Melsted, 1979, p. 4). Third, and in response to the “inadequate supply of day nurseries, local authorities have been subsidizing ‘child minders’ to provide day care in homes” (Fact Sheets, 1982, p. 1).

* Actually, both federal and state support on Title XX have declined about 14% since the Reagan administration took office (Blank, 1983, p. 5).