Children’s Advocacy Centers (Barnahus) in Sweden
Experiences of Children and Parents

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Abstract This article is based on an evaluation of Children’s Advocacy Centers (CAC) in six municipalities in Sweden 2006–2007. The study concerned cooperation between different authorities (police, social services, public prosecutor, forensic medicine, pediatrics and child psychiatry) responsible for children who were suspected of being exposed to sexual or physical abuse. It is anticipated that use of CACs will improve the quality of investigations and that the legal process should thus be facilitated and rendered more effective. Qualitative interviews were carried out with 12 children and 22 parents at the different centers. Interviews included their experiences regarding the place and the premises, the treatment, earlier contacts with professionals, information and access to treatment and support. The results show that both children and parents appreciated the child—friendly and safe environment and the kind treatment by the staff. Information from the professionals was of crucial importance. The different processes taking place in connection with interrogation and assessments were potentially (at times) difficult to understand. It was at times difficult for the professional actors to take both the children’s, the parents’ and the families’ perspectives into consideration especially in relation to the suspected offenders. Voices from children and parents have contributed to deepened understanding about the complexity in applying a child—centered approach and a child perspective within the domain of child protection. The evaluation generated important knowledge with implications for practice and further development of Children’s advocacy centers.

Keywords Children’s advocacy centre · Client perspective · Child-centered approach · Evaluation · Sweden
1 Introduction

Voice and experiences of children who have been abused have been silenced and neglected for a long time in practice as well as in research. Children’s needs for protection and care have often been inaudible and responses from professionals have been unsatisfying. Research with children as informants about their own experiences of victimization is very rare (Neerosh and Goddard 2006). In practice, handling of the cases involves multiple investigating agencies, sometimes without coordination, which could unduly cause further traumatization and exacerbate children’s and caregivers’ stress. Forensic interviews have taken place in police departments, at schools, social services office or at home and have been conducted by untrained investigators (Jones et al. 2007; National Board of Health and Welfare 2006). The increase in reports of child abuse over the years has, however, led to increased attention and development of new child protection services in many countries. Development of child—friendly environments, named Children’s Advocacy Centers (CAC) in the US and barnahus\textsuperscript{1} in the Nordic countries, could be expected to improve client-professional relationships. These new centers coordinate the work of multidisciplinary investigation teams with the hope that greater teamwork will improve handling of the cases and make it easier for children and parents. They also offer a number of services for victims such as therapeutic interventions and support for children and families (Jones et al. 2007). Professionals included are social workers, school counselors, pediatricians, medical examiners, psychologists, psychiatrists, police, prosecutors and other people working with the legal and court systems. The responses of these professionals may be different depending on their role within the child protection system, the character of and reason for the problem to be handled. It is an urgent task to learn more about how these new offers can be utilized and how they are experienced by children and by their families (Faller and Palusci 2007).

The aim of this article is to present and discuss the empirical results from an evaluation of piloting barnahus in Sweden from the perspectives of children and parents and thereby contribute to deepened understanding of the meaning of a child—centered approach within the domain of child protection. The question to be answered is: What are the experiences of children and parents from their contacts with barnahus and different professional actors?

2 Background

The first steps towards CACs were taken in the US in 1984 and today they are widespread all over the country. They have grown from a loose network of 23 programs in 1991 to approximately 700 accredited centers and many more “associate” centers (Cross et al. 2007; Faller and Palusci 2007; Jackson 2004; Jones et al. 2007; Newman et al. 2005). These types of centers, with the same objectives, are now under development in different countries in the West. The first country in Europe to import the ideas and the concept was Iceland, where a national centre

\textsuperscript{1} In English “Children’s house”
started in 1998. Subsequently it was imported to Sweden, where it started at a small scale in two municipalities.

In 2005 the Swedish government gave an assignment to national authorities (National Board of Health and Welfare, National Board of Forensic Medicine, Swedish Prosecution Society and National Police Authority) to start pilot studies at six locations in different parts of the country (National Board of Health and Welfare 2008). The number of barnahus is now continuously growing in the Nordic countries. The target group is children that are suspected of being victims of sexual and physical abuse. The objectives are to offer a child-friendly environment, under the same roof, for the forensic interviews, medical examination and support. Children should not unnecessarily be forced to tell their stories repeatedly to different people in different places. They are interviewed in a designated room by a specialized police investigator. Multi-agency representatives and the child’s lawyer are invited to observe the interviews from a separate hearing room (co-hearing). The interviews are videotaped and can be used in court during the formal proceedings. Barnahus in Sweden could, according to the local and regional government autonomy, be organized in different ways. The resources designated to the centers vary depending on the local context, such as structure, ideology, political priorities and local history. Common to all centers is that they define the target group as children under the age of eighteen, exposed to physical (in “close relations”) and sexual abuse. The policy varies between different barnahus on the attitudes towards the alleged perpetrators. They are allowed to come to some of the centers but prohibited from others. Parents are included in the target group at some centers but not at others. Some barnahus offer crisis intervention and treatment while others do not (Johansson 2009).

An interdisciplinary team representing law, sociology of law and social work was appointed to conduct the evaluation of the national pilot on behalf of the abovementioned national authorities (Åström and Rejmer 2008). This evaluation was the first to be conducted on barnahus in the Nordic countries. Qualitative studies on CACs giving voice to children and parents have neither been undertaken in the Nordic countries nor internationally.

2.1 Evaluations in the United States

A national multi-site evaluation was conducted in the US. This entailed comparing the effectiveness of four centers with non-CAC communities (Cross et al. 2007; Faller and Palusci 2007) including a quantitative study on families’ experiences with child sexual and serious physical abuse investigations (Jones et al. 2007). Nonoffending caregivers’ satisfaction with the child abuse investigation was measured using a 14-item Investigation Satisfaction Scale. This scale was designed to assess overall levels of satisfaction with how the investigation was conducted and how well caregivers felt that children were treated by investigators. Children’s satisfaction was measured by using a 4-point Likert-style scale. Questions asked: how well they felt during interviews; how well investigators explained what was happening to them; how well investigators seemed to understand kids; how they felt about the number of times they had to talk with investigators; and how they felt after talking with investigators. The results indicated that caregivers in CAC cases were
more satisfied with the investigation than those from the comparison sites. There were few differences between CAC and comparison samples on children’s satisfaction. Most children expressed moderate to high satisfaction with the investigation but a notable percentage described dissatisfaction with some aspects of the investigation. Twenty percent felt “very scared” during the forensic interviews and felt worse after talking with the investigators; 11% did not think that investigators understood children very well or at all; and 19% did not think that investigators explained what was happening to them. The authors state that the CAC model is still evolving and that more information is needed about how investigation reforms can best improve children’s experiences.

Faller and Palusci (2007, p. 1027) summarize the results from this part of the evaluation by frankly stating:

After all the energy and economic investment in the CAC movement from a child’s perspective, a CAC investigation may not seem better than an ordinary CPS/law enforcement investigation.

They furthermore point to the complexity of evaluations within this domain. Communities implement the concept in different ways depending on their particular structure, history, context and goals (Cross et al. 2007), which limits comparisons within as well as between countries.

3 A Child—centered Approach

_Barnahus_ represents a practice of advocacy characterized “as an activity of representing and defending children’s interest, practiced by professional adults and offered as service to children” (Reynaert et al. 2009, p. 522). The concept implies that environment, treatment and interventions should be child—centered, which includes work for as well as _together with_ children.

Childhood Sociology (e.g. James et al. 2002) as well as the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted by the United Nations in 1989, have had an important influence on development of a child—centered approach in research, legislation, policy making and different measures taken to realize children’s rights (e.g. Reynaert et al. 2009).

The national pilot project in Sweden and the organization of collaboration between different authorities and interested parties at national, regional and local levels, point to a strong societal commitment to questions related to children that have been subjected to serious crimes. It reflects what could be called a _societal child perspective_ with a point of departure in the collected knowledge about children, legislation and conventional view of children in a society. Implementation of programs and policies are in turn dependent upon _adults’ child perspective_, i.e. adults’ knowledge about and view of children manifested in child—friendly treatment, attitudes and measures. Furthermore we have to take _children’s own perspective_ into consideration which means what the child sees, hears, experiences and feels (Tiller 1991; Andersson and Rasmusson 2006).

Qualitative research that is closely connected to the theme of this article is found in research on children’s experiences of abuse and violence (Neerosh and Goddard
as well as parents’ experiences of treatment and meetings with different professional actors (Lindell 2005), on forensic interviews (Cederborg 2000) and children’s rights to participation (Gilligan 2001; Dahlstrand 2004; Sinclair 2004; Stern 2006; Reynaert et al. 2009).

Neerosh and Goddard (2006) conducted interviews with 9 children, 9–18 years, about their experiences with abuse and assault and their meetings with different professional actors. They described positive as well as negative experiences. On the negative side were professionals who were ignorant and didn’t believe in their stories and who could not bear to listen to their very difficult experiences. On the positive side were good treatment, support and relevant helpful measures. Furthermore the child—friendly environment of the consulting and waiting rooms was much appreciated.

Lindell (2005) gives an account of the results from interviews with five mothers suspected of child abuse and their experiences during contacts with different authorities. They described how the specific incident triggered crises within themselves and within their whole family. They felt angry that this had to happen to them, worried about not knowing what was going to happen and feelings of not being heard and respected. At later stages feelings of sadness over lost time and lost relationships arose. Significant others had sometimes been able to help orientate them towards other prospects. It could be difficult to get adequate help and they talked about how they tried to find assistance in a way that Lindell (p. 28) denotes “shopping around for help”.

Cederborg (2000) has formulated guidelines for forensic interviews with children. It is about using a language that the child will understand, listen more than talk, take a neutral approach, avoiding body contact, flexible thinking about the child's actual situation and experiences, and child orientation. It is important to have a quiet and secluded place suitable for the child's needs. To have a desk with chairs on either side is not recommended. Access to good technical equipment such as microphones and video cameras is very essential.

Article 12 in the CRC sends out a very strong message about the importance of listening to the child’s voice and opinions whether listening as parent, professional actor or authority. There continues to be, however, a wide gap between rhetoric and practice with much left to be done to realize children’s right to participation (Stern 2006). Research provides us with evidence of the importance for children to have an opportunity to participate in planning and decision-making. Many reasons supporting children’s participation have been documented and argued for (Gilligan 2001). Dahlstrand (2004) describes how children can appear in three different roles within child welfare, informants, co-actors and actors. Being informant means that the child is given the opportunity to tell their stories and express opinions and wishes; being a co-actor means that the child is listened to and given the opportunity to take part in a dialogue about solutions and measures; being an actor means that the child is seen as competent enough to make their own decisions. However, children’s participation is complex in relation to different levels of involvement, different contexts and different activities and evaluations are lacking on outcomes of participation for children, adults, services or organizations (Sinclair 2004). It is a special challenge within child welfare to balance protecting children and giving them increased room for action and opportunities to participate actively. Controversies between children’s rights versus adults’ rights and between children’s needs and family problems are actualized. These controversies have become particularly
noticeable in connection with the increased awareness of children’s rights and the view of the child as a separate individual (Reynaert et al. 2009).

4 Methods and Material

The evaluation consists of five different studies: 1) legal perspectives on children as victims of crime (Pavlovskaia and Åström 2008); 2) assessments conducted by the social services (Friis 2008); 3) collaboration between authorities—organization, content and activities (Johansson 2008, 2009); 4) process and content of the forensic interviews (Rejmer and Hansen 2008); and 5) experiences of children and parents (Rasmusson 2008). The last mentioned report forms the basis of this article. The overall focus of the evaluation was from a child rights perspective and on the collaboration/interaction between the professional actors. It had its point of departure in an analysis of norms, interventions, effects, processes, cause and effect and fulfillment of goals (Nilstun et al. 1982). Three sites were chosen for comparison of results but comparisons were difficult to carry through because some of the centers in the pilot got a late start, which limits the possibilities to generalize the results. The evaluation was intended to generate knowledge that could be used in the further development of barnahus in Sweden and thus had a formative approach as well (Robson 2002).

The study, presented here, is qualitative using thematic and semi-structured interviews. In total, 34 interviews have been conducted; 22 with parents and 12 with children aged between 8 and 16.

4.1 Ethical Considerations and Preparations

Children that come into contact with barnahus are often in a vulnerable position and for the most part they have been in touch with several professional actors who interviewed them about sensitive subjects, a fact that could influence our likelihood of obtaining consent from their parents. If the parents also were offered an interview, it was conceivable that they became more positive towards allowing the researcher to interview the children. If we did not get the opportunity to interview children we would nevertheless, through interviews with parents, have access to the experiences of clients’ of the barnahus system. Being the subject of a report to the police and an investigation due to suspected abuse, is often a serious trauma in a family with consequences for everyone involved. Jones et al. (2007, p. 1071) emphasize that the experiences of parents influence how the children perceive the investigation:

Less attention has been paid to non-offending caregivers´ experience about the investigation. Parents’ attitudes about the investigation are likely to influence how children themselves experience the process.

To understand the experiences of the clients from a family-oriented perspective we additionally chose to interview parents who were alleged perpetrators.

Good collaboration with the staff at the barnahus was a fundamental prerequisite of being able to get in touch with those we wanted to interview. Careful preparations were thus undertaken in close consultation with each barnahus. A project plan describing the mode of procedure was distributed to the directors by e-mail, followed
by personal visits at all barnahus. For our own part it was essential to obtain our own impressions of the surroundings in order for us to imagine how our interviewees potentially experienced the contacts with the physical environment and with the staff.

The barnahus were asked to submit registers of those children that had been in contact with and finished their contacts with the barnahus as of 2006-01-01. That they had finished their contacts was deemed necessary in order to avoid connections with ongoing and sensitive contacts with professionals. They were recommended to submit their registers drawn up chronologically in accordance with specific instructions. The staff was also asked to remove children from the register where contact with the child for some reason was thought to be inappropriate. As far as known this only happened in one instance where the interviewee lived in sheltered accommodation. The researcher subsequently sent letters, in accordance with the received registers, to parents and children over the age of 15. When some time had past since the due date for submission of written consent, we tried to reach those who had not answered by telephone. The telephone contacts generated positive responses in many cases. Had we relied solely on obtaining written consent, we would not have conducted many interviews. The individuals we contacted more often than not had a positive reaction to getting a telephone call and were in most cases also sympathetic to being interviewed. Some were not interested with reference to being tired of talking about what happened and some gave no reason for declining. Some preferred telephone interviews.

Many parents did not want their children to be interviewed. The reasons given for this were, for example, that they had already had many other contacts, that the child recently had begun a treatment contact or that the child had a neuropsychiatric disorder and could thus not be expected to concentrate in an interview setting. Neither could the interviews be conducted where we had only received consent from one of the parents when they had shared custody of the child.

4.2 Participation

Requests for consent were dispatched to in total 74 individual parents or couples and 15 youths over the age of 15. Out of these 22 parents and two youths over the age of 15 gave an affirmative answer and were interviewed. Consent was provided by both parents that shared custody of the child for interviews with 10 children under the age of 15. It has been possible to reach both children and parents at all pilot study locations but one, where only parents were interviewed. One of these interviews was conducted with the child and parent together. In four instances children and parents from the same family were interviewed, as for the rest the interviews have taken place either with both parents (individually), with one of the parents or with the child exclusively.

The children represent different ages, although primarily teenagers, and sexes, as well as experiences from different types of offenses. Among the parents 10 (six mothers and four fathers) were alleged perpetrators and 12 non-offenders (Tables 1, 2 and 3). Three cases of abuse had resulted in prosecution and trial. Remaining instances had not resulted in legal action.

Some of the children had visited their barnahus on several occasions while others only had been there to attend the forensic interview and possibly also for a medical examination. The police had interviewed them all; five took place at police stations and seven in barnahus. Seven had undergone medical examinations, two of which
took place in barnahus and the remaining in hospitals. There is also a spread among both children and parents regarding their experiences with different types of investigations—legal, social, child psychiatric and medical, as well as experiences of contacts with different affected authorities. For the majority of the interviewees it was the first time they had these types of contacts.

We reached parents with different experiences of interactions with the collaborating authorities, either as alleged perpetrators or as non-offenders. Among the interviewed parents, eight had not themselves visited the barnahus. Thus they have only been able to express themselves in general terms about the activities there. On the other hand they have been able to contribute with experiences of their different contacts with the authorities concerned and of the course of events in consequence of the incident being reported.

4.3 Accomplishment

Out of the 22 parent interviews 8 were conducted by telephone and 14 in person. Out of the 12 child interviews two were conducted by telephone and the remaining in person.

The interviewees were, when possible, able to make requests regarding the location for the interview. They were conducted on the premises of the barnahus with a few exceptions. One interview was conducted at a school, one at a social

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welfare service, two at an assessment center, and one at a parent’s place of work. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min. All the personal interviews were recorded on an MP3 player and notes were carefully taken during the telephone interviews. The interviews were conducted in the form of conversations with the following themes forming the starting point:

- The location and the premises
- Reception
- Previous contacts with professional helpers
- Information
- Experience of the process and the possibilities to receive assistance and support

Consequently, the questions asked in the interviews did not concern the child’s or the family’s personal relationships.

All the data from the recorded interviews with children and parents respectively were in the first step transcribed verbatim and in the second step analyzed separately with point of departure in the abovementioned themes. In the third step we went through and coded the material trying to identify new themes, similarities and differences between individuals and between children and parents as well as between alleged perpetrators and non-offenders. In the fourth step, five case studies were conducted where all the data from interviews with children and children and parents (in two of the cases, presented below) respectively were brought together into a description putting all the single experiences in context and telling the story from beginning to the end. Those cases represent different sites, different reasons for report to the police, different courses of event and various contacts with professional actors. The selection was strategic to identify interesting variations between different individuals and experiences. This material formed the basis for the final analysis where previous research was used as a frame of reference (Patton 2002). Notes from the telephone interviews have been used in the analysis in the same way but none of the quotes represented in this article proceed from this kind of interviews. All the case studies are built on recorded material from personal interviews.

### 4.4 Reflections

We were prepared that difficult memories could be brought to the fore and that the interviews could touch upon sensitive subjects. The children we interviewed were generally willing to talk and showed no signs of finding the interview situation arduous or difficult. One exception was an 8-year-old boy who clearly indicated that it was
difficult talking about how he had experienced the conversations with police and psychiatrist at the barnahus. He interrupted the interview by crawling under the table and thus demonstrated that he did not want to answer any more questions. During interviews with younger children it is important and desirable to have more than one interview. It creates valuable opportunities for the establishment of a contact (Andersson 1998). In this study, which has involved long journeys all over the country, it was however practically difficult and costly to go in for repeated interviews.

In subsequent evaluations, there is reason to reflect upon the way interviews with small children are to be carried out. It is a matter of balancing children’s right to be heard with children’s right to protection. Our conclusion is however that it is not advisable that someone unfamiliar with the child conduct an interview at one isolated occasion. If researchers do not have practical possibilities for repeated meetings with the small children, it might be a better solution to let someone well acquainted with the child and, in whom the child has confidence, conduct the interviews. Researchers can take part by formulating the questions and processing and analyzing the assembled material.

Some parents were in great need of talking about their relations with the alleged perpetrators. The alleged perpetrators additionally had a great need of talking about the relationships with their children. Thus maintaining ethical sensitivity throughout the entire interview with an open mind as to what the interviewees themselves wanted to relate was vital.

After the fact, we can establish that it was the right choice to interview both children and parents. By getting access to the parents’ experiences as well, we have obtained a considerably richer material with important perspectives on e.g. how the barnahus have defined target groups and work routines. The variation that exists in the material has provided access to both positive and negative experiences. We were unable to see a definite pattern as to whether those who consented to an interview held a positive or negative impression based on their experience with the system. All barnahus are represented in the study but the small number of interviews conducted at each location limits the possibility to making comparisons or drawing conclusions about the qualities of the activities at each pilot study location.

We accepted telephone interviews since we did not want to fail to secure an interview. The results of the telephone interviews were varied. Some provided ample information; it seemed to be easier for the interviewee to be spared an interview in person. One example is a father, who readily shared his experiences but who also led us to understand that what he and his children had experienced had been very painful. He spoke in a subdued voice and wanted to keep the conversation brief. In a couple of other instances we have found it difficult to maintain a dialogue in a way desirable for these types of interviews. In these instances we believe that the interview situation would have been facilitated had we had a personal meeting.

5 Results

5.1 Children’s Experiences

The children’s first encounters with the barnahus were similar when they came there to be questioned by the police or examined by a doctor. The younger ones, under
15 years of age, came accompanied by a parent or another adult. The older ones had in some instances made their way to the barnahus on their own. Some recounted the conceptions the word “barnahus” evoked when they heard it for the first time. Someone associated it with a daycare center and imagined a place with many children; someone formed associations with images from a police interrogation in a television detective series and yet another one pictured it as a place where one could stay and receive help. From a couple of the older children views emerged that the environment was too “childish” and that the word “barnahus” forms associations with activities for small children. But the design of the environment was generally appreciated and it came to light that the children had noticed and appreciated the colors, toys and furnishings. The treatment by the staff and police was described in positive terms by all of the interviewed children. On the other hand there were some children who had reacted negatively with regard to the video camera and expressed that they had felt supervised and controlled.

It was uncomfortable. When they turned the video camera on when I started talking. I felt watched somehow. I did. I simply felt watched.

A couple of teenage girls were able to compare the environment at the barnahus with the police station, where they had previously been interrogated. The environment at the barnahus was in their opinion much better and safer.

They did not have uniforms and things, it was just a matter of sitting there talking to someone and it felt good talking about it and things.

The impression of the interviews was that children in general easily comprehended what a police interrogation was and how they were expected to act there. However, the statements by an 8-year-old boy indicate that it may be difficult to explain the significance of a forensic interview to younger children.

There were things that I almost did not understand. They will say things that they think children understand and such that children can understand their questions.

The people who work at the barnahus were described, independent of the duration of the contact, throughout as “very kind” and “nice”.

5.2 Parents’ Experiences

Generally, the children and parents had similar views and perceptions of the environment and the reception. The barnahus offer a good environment in terms of the acute caretaking that takes place in connection with a report to the police. The parents who themselves had been to the barnahus also appreciated the positive and kind reception by the staff. The fact that several authorities co-operate within the same premises was positively valued.

Is the caretaking better and more adapted to children in the barnahus compared to the previous situation? The parents who were able to compare with previous experiences partly answered this question. They described how much better it had been for the children to be able to come to barnahus as opposed to their previous experiences of forensic interviews in the police station and of medical examinations in the hospital.
I think it is great that it is not located at the police station, because police officers are scary to children, I definitely think so. It will not be so dramatic. /.../ Kind treatment when you enter the door and that is important. And that there are no uniformed people, because I think that makes it somewhat more severe.

The mother of the 8-year-old boy cited above was also interviewed. She said that it was difficult for both of her children to understand the purpose of the forensic interview. The children probably understood the reason for the police interrogation in the barnahus, i.e. that dad had done something bad, but they did not quite understand what the police wanted to get at. She felt that the police must build a relationship with the children and meet with them more than once.

My 6-year-old daughter was just scared I think, she did not dare say anything. I think one has to meet with the children a couple of times, do something fun, build a relationship and then conduct an interrogation. /.../ I think they were scared and they did not say much about how they experienced their situation. I got to read the interviews afterwards; on the whole they did not say anything. They found it awkward. I felt they asked the children rather difficult questions. For example whether daddy usually is bad and such. There were very many difficult questions.

The boy disliked the video camera very much and when the issue of seeing a psychologist from the mental health services at the barnahus came up he did not want to go. He thought that this conversation also would be filmed. These meetings were therefore moved to the premises of mental health services. Many parents were dissatisfied with the information they had received. With regard to the children the objective is to reduce the number of contacts with professionals to a minimum, but this objective does not apply to the adults. As a parent one has a great need for help with regard to taking in and understanding what is happening and may be happening, in the chaotic situations that arise when suspicions about assault and abuse are brought to the fore.

Naturally there will be very many instances. There is the welfare officer, the schoolteacher, the family law office, lawyers, the district court, the social services, the barnahus and ...

Above all it was the alleged perpetrators who felt shut out from important information and in many instances the barnahus as well. Therefore they found it particularly difficult to understand the purpose of the different types of investigations, the different roles of the professionals and the target groups and tasks of the barnahus. Suspected parents may be of the opinion that the purpose of all authorities is to “nail” and judge them.

Those families and children that were given access to support and crisis treatment were generally very sympathetic to this. The efforts put the child in focus, which the parents were sympathetic to and had understanding for. At the same time they had a great need to be seen as separate individuals with their own needs. However they felt unsure of whether the purpose of mental health services and child rehabilitation is to support the parents and not just the child.
5.3 Two Case Studies

The case stories described below about two 15-year-old girls, Hanna and Ester, illustrate varying experiences of the contacts with barnahus and different professional actors. Hanna and her mother (interviewed together) described the course of events subsequent to Hanna having reported her parents for abuse. The case raises issues about children and parents’ rights to information, as well as cooperation between different competencies surrounding a child with a neuropsychiatric disorder, to the fore. The narrative indicates that sometimes there is reason to speak of authorities’ abuse of children and families. Hanna was referred to a barnahus, which at the time did not offer any family support. The authorities’ interventions did not lead to anything positive but instead caused the family great suffering. Ester’s story gives an insight into a process where society’s resources have benefited a family in a positive manner in a situation where the girl reported her father for abuse. Ester had access to a barnahus that had access to therapists who offered assistance to both children and parents.

5.3.1 Hanna

Hanna sought assistance from the school nurse and the school counselor due to difficulties sleeping, a problem she says is common among children with the disability she has. She stated that she did not understand what the consequences could be of her seeking assistance. Her cry for help gave rise to strong suspicions that she had been abused at home, which brought about contacts with the barnahus. This in turn led to her being taken into immediate care in accordance with the Care of Young Persons Act, placed in an assessment center and later in a family on call. The problems were deemed so serious that her place of residence was not communicated to the parents. Hanna was not allowed to call or in any other way contact them. She never received any explanation of why the parents were not told about her place of residence and why the contact was cut off. When asked what she had found out about the barnahus beforehand she answered: “I found out that it was a place where children could stay, receive help and medical care and meet with the police and things.”

A year and a half ago Hanna had gotten a confirmation of having a neuropsychiatric disorder, which meant that she for quite some time had had an established contact with the rehabilitation of disabled children and mental health services. The mother described how she and her husband had attended numerous meetings at the school in order to inform school staff about the implications of the diagnosis and to discuss Hanna’s situation at school. The mother had a conception of a good cooperation with the school and she could not understand that no one from there got in touch with the parents when Hanna sought assistance. Even less were the parents able to understand why Hanna’s place of residence was kept secret and that they were not allowed to have any contact at all with her for 3–4 weeks. The staff at the barnahus did not at any stage contact the parents. Both parents were suspected of abuse, something that however never has been proven and for which reason the preliminary investigation was closed down.

Question for the mother: *Did no one contact you with reference to this?*
Nobody has asked for our experiences or opinions. Instead it is the police, social services and the regional public prosecution office that have gone ahead without involving my husband or myself or the rehabilitation who really know Hanna’s diagnosis.

The parents were informed in writing that Hanna had been taken into care, but at this point they were not contacted personally by a social worker who could have explained the implications. None of the involved authorities got in touch with experts within child rehabilitation or mental health services. The mother felt Hanna should have had a representative from that the parents were not given the opportunity to participate.

Question for Hanna: *How did it make you feel not being able to talk to mom and dad?*

It felt strange. It was tough at school, it was strained and it was difficult to explain to my friends. And they said “why don’t you go home to your parents?”. Because the social services won’t let me see them, I can’t call them even. “It’s just a matter of not giving a damn about what they say”. But I can’t, I mustn’t, I can’t go against what the authorities say, it’s not possible. So I did badly in school, badly in the classes, I got bad grades in school and things.

A report of suspected abuse against both parents was made in November 2006. The father was informed that the preliminary investigation in relation to him had been closed down in the beginning of December. The mother did not attend a police interrogation until early January and was informed that the preliminary investigation was closed down in the beginning of February—a delay she was critical of. At the time of the interview (March 2007) the social investigation was terminated. It did not get Hanna or her mother anywhere. Hanna did not receive any help. The mother described the difficulties involved in trying to get back to normal:

We have been feeling really bad psychologically because of this and Hanna has two younger siblings who did not know where she was and we could not answer them, as we did not know anything. We were living in some kind of glass bubble throughout this month, and then you are supposed to function again when everything returns. I feel there have been so many blows.

The conclusions that Hanna formulated at the end of the interview were as follows:

The only positive in that case is that mom and I have gotten a better connection that may be the only positive. In any case it is not something that has made me feel better, it has made me worse.

In combination with all the criticism, Hanna had some positive comments. It was “ok” in the on-call family and at the assessment center, she felt safe with one of the teachers, with whom she got a good connection as well as with the other girls who stayed there. Along with this assertion she provided the following comment: “I think that perhaps they wished me well, but they did it the wrong way.”

5.3.2 Ester

Ester and Hanna’s stories initially have some similarities, but the course of events and the outcome of the process for Ester and her family are considerably more
positive. Ester’s account of her father abusing her, lead to her being taken into immediate care in accordance with the Care of Young Persons Act. She was placed in an on-call family for four weeks and subsequently moved back home. The father was detained for three weeks but there was never any legal action. Ester eventually admitted to having provided a false account, that there were no grounds for the accusations against the father. Ester, her mom and dad all generally provided (in individual interviews) very positive accounts of the investigations that were conducted and the support they received.

In the interview Ester said that she, prior to the specific incident, had sought assistance from the school counselor and the social services since she was not feeling well due to a “family crisis”. However, she felt that no one listened to her. It seemed that they did not believe her and she felt very disappointed. When asked what she thinks they should have offered, she said: “well, family counseling or something, assistance in some way, there are so many ways to help. But they did not want to.” It was not until the third time that they actually listened. Ester described how things started to happen very quickly. The school counselor got in touch with the social services, who reported it to the police, which lead to her being taken into immediate care. Ester was pleased that they really listened to her but afterwards she felt it all went a little too quickly. At the same time she felt that there was something positive about getting away from home for a while. When asked whether it was helpful she answers:

I sort of don’t know, at least I got to have a good rest from the family, my own that is and they kind of let me be and spend time with my friends. They gave me the space I needed in order to be by myself.

Ester felt that her actions in the situation in question were the only option. She also answered the question in the affirmative of whether she received enough information to understand the consequences of her actions. But when she later on in the interview was asked what she had learnt and what she would like to say to a friend, she replied:

Well, it is not really great to come to another family and things. Perhaps some that argue with their parents want to move to another family but then I tell them that after you move there you will miss your parents a lot. From now on I will turn to my parents first if I have problems.

After only a few days in the on-call home Ester initiated a conversation contact with social workers at the barnahus, a contact that lasted 4–5 months. She was very pleased with this contact, they listened to her and she received support.

It felt good talking to someone once a week. One could kind of talk about if it had been a tough week and things. Because if one waits for two or three weeks to talk about how the week has been it does not really make you feel great. It is much better to deal with it right away.

In connection with these conversations Ester changed her account. She withdrew the allegations against the father and became more sympathetic towards her family. Ester stated that she had been assisted in getting to know herself and her feelings.
If I argue with my parents I think to myself that I have to work it out. When you are angry, you have to calm down, perhaps spend 10 min on your own. You can think that perhaps the relationship is not that bad, even though you argue and things.

Ester felt that once the social services had finally reacted; they had been a support to the entire family. It got better when the parents started listening to her instead of, like before, ignoring her. The barnahus referred the family to mental health services when the conversation contact was finished. Ester had a positive experience of this contact as well. It was good to talk the whole family together.

In the interview Esters father described that the three weeks in custody were very difficult; he was completely at a loss, especially since he felt that he and Ester were close.

At some point during the night the guard came and got me to be interrogated and the police said “that’s pretty tough”. And I said “what is going on? I haven’t done anything?”. “We’ve been to get your daughter during school hours. She claims that you have beaten her throughout the last three years, that you’ve punched her, beaten her and threatened her life.”

Esters mother also described this as a very difficult time. She was not able to sleep, she lost weight and she did not know what to do in order to prove that her husband was innocent. She felt powerless in the face of Ester’s lies. “It was horrible. She stood there frigid and told them and lied to them straight out. “

Both parents greatly appreciated the assistance Ester received through the barnahus. The mother participated in one conversation, but they agreed that it was best Ester had the conversations privately with the worker there. The conversations at the mental health services were also valuable. ”It was really, really good.” It was good to get assistance in parenting and in setting boundaries. The family was thus given an opportunity to move forward.

6 Discussion

6.1 Application of a Child Perspective and a Child—centered Approach

Each child and each parent have their own special relationship with the barnahus and the different professional actors, depending on the reason for and duration of the contacts. There is thus no such thing as a typical “barnahus-child” or a typical “barnahus-family”.

The societal child perspective is reflected in the children’s stories about how they have been treated and how they have experienced the contacts with different professional actors. It is also reflected in what can be gathered about the application of working methods, the environment and organization of the activity and the framework and scope that thereby have been created in terms of children’s opportunity be heard, tell what they have experienced and thus receive assistance and support. The adults’ child perspective is furthermore manifested in the interviews with parents who spoke partly from their own experiences and partly
about how they had perceived and understood the children’s experiences. Generally, both children and parents were very sympathetic towards the barnahus. They offer a safe and child-friendly environment and it is helpful that the forensic interviews can be conducted on a location other than at the police station.

The reports to the police and the visit at the barnahus had in several instances been preceded by the children themselves telling an adult that they have been subjected to assault and abuse. They had taken the initiative, had the courage to tell and here act as informants and actors (Dahlstrand 2004). But in these situations the children still primarily appears to be victims and objects of the adults’ protection and care. The children have to tolerate being the objects of different kinds of investigations and measures. But at the same time that means that they could be relieved of responsibility and have their right to protection in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child fulfilled.

Information is a theme that was central to both the children and parent interviews. There were positive examples of how the staffs at the barnahus or other authority figures have provided good and clear information about the course of events subsequent to the report to the police and interrogations, as well as information about the reasons why a preliminary investigation was closed down. But there were also examples of how the staff has failed to provide information in a way that was understandable to children and parents.

In most cases it seemed that children easily understood what a police interrogation is and how they were expected to act there. However, statements from a couple of interviews indicate that it may be difficult to explain the purpose of a police interrogation to a younger child. It became clear that the video camera had given rise to nervousness and discomfort, a situation that has been recognized in previous research (Cederborg 2000). Cederborg (2000) nevertheless argues that video recording is preferable even if the child feels ill at ease. The documentation is important in terms of the continued handling. The interrogative situation is, at any rate, a completely unique and trying situation, which it is, nevertheless, important to manage in a way as lenient as possible for the child. The treatment by the barnahus staff received positive judgments throughout the study.

6.2 Complications and Tensions

Analysis of the case studies provides insight into different kinds of complications and tensions associated with applying of a child perspective in combination with a family perspective (Reynaert et al. 2009).

Hanna’s story demonstrates that she did not receive information in a way that enabled her to understand why for example she was not allowed to be in touch with her parents while taken into care. The parents also felt excluded, shocked and uncertain because of the incident as such, but to a large extent also due to a lack of information. The case also generates questions about the role of the school in connection with a report. Who is responsible for informing children and parents about an impending or effectuated police interrogation and about the role and tasks of the barnahus? How come mental health services or child rehabilitation was not consulted at an early stage considering Hanna’s neuropsychiatric functional disorder? How do different professional actors collaborate in the immediate phase...
and in other phases of this and other similar investigations? How come the police interrogations were so delayed?

The social services resorted to an extreme measure by keeping Hanna’s place of residence a secret after her being taken into care. From one perspective it can be interpreted as the social services really taking Hanna’s story very seriously. Seen from a different perspective there is reason to question if this measure was taken from the view of the best interest of the child. The intervention had severe consequences for the family and Hanna herself described how it did not lead to her getting the help she needed. Even if we here only had access to the mother’s and daughter’s subjective accounts, the incidence brings to the fore issues that relate to children’s right to protection against society’s abuse. Measures taken by society, with an intention of being for the welfare of the child, can end up being misdirected.

Ester’s story gives insight into a dramatic course of events that, as far as we have been able to follow, ended well. This was due to the support by the authorities and the parents’ readiness to accept assistance and contribute to solutions to the daughter’s and the family’s problems. The lack of credibility of Ester’s accusations against her parents was a particularly complicating factor in this case. A situation that has put specific requirements on both the parents and the professionals in how they handled this with regard to Ester. The parents appreciated the efforts by the barnahus and the way the social services carried out the investigation. Ester herself described the significance of her quickly establishing a contact with the social worker at the barnahus, that she was able to have a conversation contact for a considerable time and that she was assisted in getting to know herself and her emotions. The contacts with mental health services were also helpful. It demonstrates the importance of professional support (Neerosh and Goddard 2006; Jones et al. 2007). An interpretation of her narrative is that she took the role of co-actor (Dahlstrand 2004) throughout the entire course of events.

Experiences from parents reflect the tense relations that may ensue when the authorities try to take different perspectives into consideration simultaneously—that of the child, the parents and the family. Statements in the interviews with the professional actors (Johansson 2008) confirm that this is a manifest dilemma in practice. In turn this brings to the fore the importance of resources for support and treatment for all family members inside or outside the barnahus. However, the findings indicate that it is particularly constructive if it can be offered within the barnahus. In a couple of interviews the effects of the investigatory processes on the siblings of those children that were primary subjects of the investigation transpired. They have been strongly affected and concerned by what has happened. From a family perspective it is therefore important to remember all family members. When one parent is suspected of a crime there are sometimes good reasons to keep him/her separate from the child and not provide all the information. Sometimes the suspicions are so strong that parents must be called to an interrogation without warning, in which case the primary objective is to protect the child. The question is how this can be combined with a respectful treatment of the suspect. In the interviews there were examples that indicate that it is possible to include them in a meaningful way with a positive outcome for the entire family. But there were also examples that demonstrated how the alleged perpetrators have felt completely deserted and disregarded. It is important to remember that initially it is a matter of suspicions.
6.3 Number of Contacts

An important objective of the barnahus is to reduce the number of contacts with the authorities. By having co-listeners present at the forensic interviews the children do not have to repeat the same account to several different people. The number of contacts is similarly reduced if the social worker at the barnahus conducts a part of the social investigation (instead of the social worker at the social welfare office) and at the same time provides treatment. But if the child first must meet with the police, a doctor (sometimes more than one) and a social worker at the barnahus and then a child psychiatrist at the mental health services, a social worker at the social welfare office, and others, the number of professional contacts can still be great, especially if officials frequently are changed. The existence of a barnahus is not a guarantee that the number of professional contacts for a child or a family will be lower than before. Neither is it a guarantee that children and parents receive comprehensible information, access to assistance or feel safe throughout the numerous and extensive investigations that are conducted as consequence of a report to the police of physical or sexual abuse. The same results are shown in an American evaluation (Jones et al. 2007). The result depends on how the activity is organized, target groups defined, their competency, working routines and collaboration between professionals.

7 Conclusions

This Swedish evaluation has generated concrete experiences and indicators of important circumstances that separately are of value to our understanding of clients’ perspectives. Smaller qualitative studies are thus of great value not the least to an experimental work that is to show the way for continuous development. As stated by Denzin (1989, p. 105):

The perspectives and experiences of those persons who are served by applied programs must be grasped, interpreted and understood if solid, effective, applied programs are to be put in place.

The foundation has been created to safeguard children’s rights and provide assistance to families in crisis but barnahus is still a new activity in the US as well as in Sweden that needs to develop further in order to achieve its objectives. Voices from children and parents have contributed to deepened understanding about the complexity in applying a child—centered approach and a child perspective within the domain of child protection. Furthermore we have learned that evaluations on those issues with children and parents as informants can be conducted even if the subject is sensitive and access to informants is time consuming and difficult. More studies like this are needed to be able to generalize results.

References


