

# **LESSONS LEARNED FROM SWEDISH FAMILY POLICIES**

**Jonas Himmelstrand**

[www.mireja.org](http://www.mireja.org)

**Presentation November 3, 2010  
at Forum Européen de Femmes in Brussels**

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Dear Reader,

This is a draft text of the lecture given for the Forum Européen de Femmes in Brussels on November 3, 2010. This is not the actual text presented – it is rather the text written from memory after the presentation using the actual slides.

As this presentation was given with a special target group in mind, who also had the opportunity at the presentation to ask questions, there will of course be questions raised by this written presentation which are not possible for me to answer in person.

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

At The Mireja Institute home page you will also find more written work in English by me. There will also be the possibility to pre-order the book.

Jonas Himmelstrand

**Links:**

The Mireja Institute: [www.mireja.org](http://www.mireja.org)

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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Due to time constraints this written presentation has been rushed to finish. Possible updated and corrected versions will be found at [www.mireja.org/articles.lasso](http://www.mireja.org/articles.lasso)

# LESSONS LEARNED FROM SWEDISH FAMILY POLICIES

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Sweden is considered to be the most socially successful nation of the world by many people. Its social and family policies are seen as ideal for a happy and healthy population. Many policies are indeed successful. However there are signs that not all policies are successful, especially concerning family policies.

This presentation is based on my Swedish book with the title “Att följa sitt hjärta – i jantelagens Sverige” published 2007. The book attempts to understand the challenges in growing human potential in Sweden, a country which in spite of great material and social circumstances falls short in certain key aspects.

I do not claim to prove anything, neither about Sweden nor about family policies – itself an enormous undertaking. However, I do contend to have a reasonably well supported hypothesis which should gather the interest of sociologists, economists, psychologists and neurobiologists for further studies.

There has been several requests for a translation of my book to English. The large format of the book makes it a grand undertaking. However, as parts of the book are strongly geared to Swedish culture, an English version could be shorter and more condensed. I am currently working on such a condensed translation and I hope to be able to publish this English version during 2011.



# Personal details

- \* **Self-employed management consultant since 1981**
- \* **Author of "Following your heart – in the social utopia of Sweden"**
- \* **Member of the Haro National Board, [www.haro.se](http://www.haro.se)**
- \* **Founder of the Mireja Institute, [www.mireja.org](http://www.mireja.org)**
- \* **President of Rohus, [www.rohus.nu](http://www.rohus.nu)**
- \* **Father of three children**



My basic work is as a self-employed management consultant. I have offered consultation and training courses in management, teambuilding, personal growth and training skills since 1981. As clients I have had most big corporations in Sweden as well as smaller businesses, and national and local public organisations such as schools, hospitals, day-care centers and various government institutions. I also publish the newsletter "Strategies to Learn & Grow" since 1992.

A combination of experiences from both my consultant work and from my family life led me to take on the Swedish political developments, especially in the family area, as a form of "consultant project". I wanted to understand why Sweden, acknowledged as the perfected social state, was having an increasing number of social problems of its own making. I also asked myself what happened to the childhood which I myself grew up in. After five years of study and writing this led to the publication of my Swedish book whose title in English would be: "Following you heart – in the social utopia of Sweden" in October 2007.

Once awakened in my interest in family policies I found a Swedish non-governmental organisation working with the issues, Haro ([www.haro.se](http://www.haro.se)), and I have part of their national board since 2007. Haro is working for freedom of choice, parenthood and gender equality with the key mission to make home parenting accepted

for financial support and a true possible choice for Swedish parents. Haro was founded in 1981 and is a religiously and politically unaffiliated organisation. Haro is part of the EU Familyplatform project ([www.familyplatform.eu](http://www.familyplatform.eu)).

Seeing the need for a Swedish think-tank focusing on family issues I founded The Mireja Institute in 2009 which has an English web site ([www.mireja.org](http://www.mireja.org)).

In early 2008 the Swedish Minister of Education, Jan Björklund, gave signals that he wanted to prohibit home education in Sweden, going against the strong growth of home education all over the world. Swedish home educators woke up from their innocence, not being organised in any form. I was part of the initiative to start an organisation, The Swedish Association for Home Education – Rohus, which was founded in May 2008. Since September 2009 I have been its president. Rohus is also an religiously and politically unaffiliated organisation ([www.rohus.nu](http://www.rohus.nu)).

Last, but certainly not least, I am the father of three children born -94, -98 and -04. They have taught my wife and I more lessons than any training or education ever could. This learning is, of course, a key experiential backdrop to everything I have written and spoken on family issues and policies.

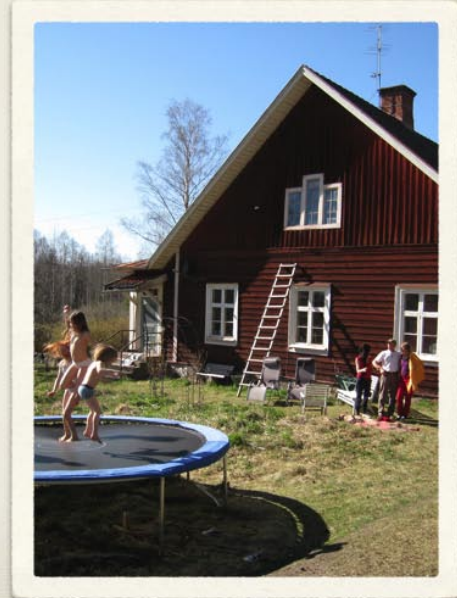
A few specific events triggered my interest in this subject. When my first child came into toddler age I realised that there where no children in the playground like when I was a child in the 1950-ties. Where are the children? I asked myself. Most all of them were in the day care center. My wife and I had an intuitive understanding that our children should be at home at least until three years of age.

Around the turn of the millennium, I taught a one-day seminar at a Swedish high school. It was many since I last had worked at a school. The headmaster had a great need to talk. She said the pupils were so much worse of psychologically than 20-30 years ago, and her teachers confirmed this. Then I heard more and more mother at business workshops share their painful feelings about leaving their one year old child in day care. Then came the shocking statistics on the skyrocketing Swedish sick leave in 2002. At around the same time I had also noticed that more and more participants at my courses on presentation skills were having difficulties being video taped and getting personal feedback. Not that anyone particularly likes it, but 10-20 years earlier it was definitely easier to teach these courses. Today many young adult participants seemed to have a severe lack of self-esteem.

My interest was triggered. I wanted to understand what I was seeing. In 2003 I started working on my book as a “national consultant project”.

# The great Swedish statistics

- \* **Lowest infant mortality**
- \* **Very high life expectancy**
- \* **Relatively high birth rate**
- \* **Low child poverty**
- \* **Comprehensive day care**
- \* **High education spending**
- \* **Equality – gender equality**
- \* **The best parental leave**



Let us first look at the well-known Swedish statistics which have made Swedish social policies so famous and in awe of other nations.

Sweden has the lowest infant mortality in the world. In Sweden we take care of pregnancy relatively well and pregnant mothers will easily find support in our public medical system. There are only three deaths among a thousand children before the age of five. No country has a lower number than this.

Swedish people enjoy a high life expectancy. A Swedish man lives on the average 79 years, and a Swedish women 83 years. Still, Japanese women live even longer with an 86 year life expectancy.

Sweden has a relatively high birth rate in the European context with 1.7 children per woman of child rearing age. But 1.7 is a quantity measure. Based on what I will share later it makes sense to also add a quality measure. Are we actually producing a next generation which has the psychological maturity, and the ability to handle stress, that life in a future knowledge society will require? I will let that be an open question for now.

Sweden has a low level of child poverty: 10%. It is maybe not as low as one may



expect, but it is still clearly lower than the European average of nearly 20%.

Sweden has a very comprehensive and highly subsidised day care system. Every child is guaranteed a place in day care within three months of application. The cost is subsidised by 90% through taxes. More than 92% of all Swedish 18 month to 5 years old children are registered in day care.

Sweden has a very high spending on education. It is among the highest expenditures per child, if not the highest, whether in day care or in school. But we do not have the best learning results in world.

Sweden has a strong culture of equality and gender equality. The Nordic countries have hardly ever had any class system, so there is a strong tradition of equality. Also gender equality has a very strong position in our public debate since about 30 years back and Sweden is very ambitious about it.

In the international debate Sweden claims to have the best parental leave in the world. Swedish parental leave is 13 months at 80% of the salary up to a certain level, with an additional 90 days at a fixed lower level. This makes many people believe that Sweden is the best country for families. What most people outside of Sweden don't see, however, is that after these 16 months the door closes. Finland has a general home care allowance. Other countries have lower taxes or tax benefits making home care financially possible. During the last two years Sweden has had an allowance which is not national and only discretionary for every municipality. The allowance is small by Swedish standards, about 300 euro per month. Only one third of all Swedish municipalities currently offer this home care allowance. This voluntary allowance is not fully supported by Parliament. Even within the current centre-right coalition its position is weak. Other than this there are no tax benefits of any kind for parents not wanting to use the highly subsidised public day care system.

The Swedish taxation system is designed for the dual earner household. This is the expressed policy of our government and is supported by both sides of the political spectrum. Our current government calls it the "work policy" which signifies that everybody should be engaged in a full-time paid employment after parental leave. Most parties also argue that parental leave should ideally be split in half between the mother and the father, and some parties want to make such an equal split a legal requirement.

Now let us take a look at the basic ingredients in the Swedish family model.

# Basic Swedish family model

- \* **0% of all 0-1 year olds are in day care**
- \* **86% of all 1-5 year olds are in day care**
- \* **95% of all 2-5 year olds are in day care**
- \* **Day care cost € 15000 per child/year**
- \* **Low cost to parents – 90% tax subsidised**
- \* **No national home care allowance, or tax benefits**
- \* **Dual-earner household strongly encouraged**

The birth of the modern Swedish family policies can be dated to 1971. This was the year when family taxation was abolished in favour of individual taxation. Given the very high marginal taxation in Sweden at the time this reform meant that it became more profitable for women to work, and with time it became a necessity for women to work in order to support a family. The dual earner household was born. There was opposition to this policy at the time, but not strong enough.

A home care allowance was kept for a number of years until the day care system was fully in place. In these early years day care mothers or child minders played an important part in the day care system. Today, however, less than 5% of the children in day care go to child minders. Day care centers are completely dominating.

The statistics in the slide above are from October 15, 2009. There were only seven (7) children in all of Sweden under 12 months of age in day care. This shows the power of the Swedish parental leave scheme. However, it quickly changes. Looking at all 1–5 year old's, 86% of them are in day care. At two years of age day care is almost completely dominating, 95% of all 2–5 year old children are in day care.

There has been a steady increase. The figure for the year 2000 was 76% of all 1–5 year old's in day care.



The average cost of day care is more than 15 000 euro per child and year according to the government research institute. About 90% of this cost is subsidised through taxes. Also there is a maximum cost for every family, no matter how many children they have in day care the cost has a top fixed level for the family.

As there is no form of national home care allowance or tax reduction for the care of children this gives some unexpected results. A single earner family with two children will pay *more tax in absolute amounts* than a dual earner family with two children, when taking the day care subsidy into account.

The centre-right government introduced the possibility for the individual municipalities to introduce a local home care allowance of a maximum of 300 euro per month per child up to three years of age after the parental leave had been used. To date one third of Swedish municipalities have introduced this allowance. The future of this allowance is uncertain as it is only actively supported by a few parties.

Most Swedish parents, however, do not have access to this home care allowance. They are faced with the fact that there is a political majority which openly promotes the dual earner model and actively discourages home care of children. Government institutions are strong in promoting day care as always being the best for the child, and employed work always being the best for the parent. It is difficult for a non-Swede to understand how strong this cultural pressure is.

This leads us into more ingredients in the Swedish family model.

## More ingredients

- \* **Very strong cultural support for day care.**
- \* **Home carers somewhat socially marginalised.**
- \* **Strict compulsory school system – no family travel – no home schooling allowed.**
- \* **Family not a legal entity.**
- \* **Strong individualisation.**
- \* **Early exclusive mother care not supported.**
- \* **Even possible individualisation of parental leave.**

There is a very strong cultural support for day care. A mother going for a medical check-up with her six month old baby will typically be asked how she feels about sending the child to day care in another six months or so. She will be strongly encouraged to do so and assured that this is the very best for her child, even if she may have unsettled feelings about it. Then at the next check-up around 12 months of age, she will typically be asked if she has registered her child in day care yet, and if not to please make sure to do so. When the baby is around 18 months the nurses will express concern if the child is not in day care. The mother will typically be told by the medical authorities that the child needs to be in day care and that the mother herself needs to work.

Swedish media is filled with information from journalists, politicians and other opinion-makers about the advantages of day care and how it is a necessity for the child and a requirement to achieve gender equality. There are few dissenting views from less than a handful of opinion-makers. The only political party standing up for home care is the Christian Democrats, the smallest party in Parliament with a little more than 5% of the votes after the 2010 election.

Home carers are socially marginalised and have to stand criticism both from media, neighbours or even people on the streets who in various ways show their

disapproval that the children are not in day care. Swedish social authorities more and more consider that home care shows lack of responsibility on the side of the parents. There are even politicians, especially at the local level, who openly say they consider home care of children 1–6 years old to be irresponsible if this means that the family has a lower income. There are even those who give the message that day care is a child's right which one can question if the parents have the right to interfere with.

The Swedish school law has recently been completely re-written by the centre-right government. The new law which will be in effect from July 2011 sharpens up school attendance considerably and gives day care the status of an education institution comparable to school. The new attendance law means that getting free from school to go on a long travel with the family will be close to impossible, even if school books are brought and school work is done. In the same way the possibilities of home education or home schooling will be severely restricted. These restrictions are according to some sources in clear conflict with the UN rights of education and maybe even with the European Convention of Human Rights.

The family is not a legal entity in Sweden. All legislation is individualised. The lack of legislative support for families in Sweden make holding together a family more difficult. Two respected Swedish historicans refer to the Swedish system as a form of "state-individualism", where the basic relationship of every citizens is to the state, rather than through family. This analysis is presented in their book, "Är svensken människa?" (Eng. "Is the Swede a human being?"). The results of the lack of recognition of family is that home care is financially difficult and divorce is relatively easy – and very common.

There is no cultural support for early exclusive mother care. There is rather a strong movement wanting to individualise parental leave claiming this would be an advantage for gender equality. This would mean that the mother gets 8 months non-transferrable leave and the father 8 months non-transferrable leave. If the father, or the mother, through work or studies would be unable to use their respective leave, then parental leave in effect would be limited to eight months.

Fathers and mothers are considered exchangeable even during the first year of life. Claiming even modest differences between mothers and fathers during the first year of life is by many opinion-makers seen as an attack on gender equality. There are only a few voices who dare to say that perhaps mothers and fathers have different roles to the child especially during the first one and two years of life.



# Quality of Swedish day care

- \* **Day care group sizes for under 3s are never below 10 children, often 14 and sometimes 17 children.**
- \* **Day care group sizes for the 3-5 year olds can be upwards 25-30 children.**
- \* **Average day care child-staff ratio all ages is 5:1, but 7:1 and even 10:1 exist.**
- \* **No regulation of group sizes or child-staff ratios.**
- \* **A traditional focus on play is now more and more being diverged to learning.**

Swedish day care has the reputation of being the best in the world. This may indeed have been true during the 1980-ties when there were regulations about group sizes. Groups of smaller children were not allowed to be bigger than 10 children, and groups of bigger children not bigger than 15 children.

Since the Swedish financial crisis in the early 1990-ties the group sizes have grown considerably. Small children under three years of age are often in groups of 14 and sometimes up to 17 children. For older children group sizes can be upwards 25 and even 30 children. The average child-to-staff ratio in Swedish day care is 5:1 but there are individual day care centers with 7:1 or even 10:1.

A Swedish day care group typically has three staff, of which one may be part-time. When one of the staff is on sick-leave, which is common among day-care staff and pre-school teachers, there is often no replacement, for financial reasons. There are even situations where there could be only one staff for 17 small children below three years of age.

There are no regulations on group sizes or child-to-staff ratios today in Swedish day cares. This differs from for example England where the child-to-staff ratios are regulated. Also in the US there are recommendations on group sizes and child-

to-staff ratios. Recommendations which a few states actually follow, but which Sweden does not comply with. Thus there are a few states in the US with higher quality day care than Sweden.

The quality of Swedish day care has by law to be of “good quality”, but it is up to every municipality to decide what “good quality” means. In actual fact local economics play a greater role in determining group sizes and child-to-staff ratios.

The pedagogics of Swedish day care in the early years were famous by the focus on play, rather than on curriculum, based on a developmental view rather than on an educational view. A definite change came in 1998 when the responsibility of Swedish day care was shifted from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education. From this point all day care was renamed pre-school. (For purpose of clarity I stick with the term day care in this paper.) Swedish day care was then given a curriculum focusing on learning. The word attachment is not used even once in the entire national curriculum for day care.

An respected Swedish psychiatrist, Magnus Kihlbom, has pointed out the curriculum for day care does not acknowledge the great difference in development between a one-year-old and a three-year-old. A three-year-old has more in common with an adult than with a one-year-old. This is typical for the entire Swedish day care system, not to acknowledge the special needs of small children below three years of age.

Three Swedish experts, among them Magnus Kihlbom mentioned above, recently wrote a book discussing these statistics, “Förskola för de allra minsta – på gott och ont” (Eng. “Day care for the smallest children – for good and for bad”). Their conclusion is that Swedish day care is no longer of the quality required for a healthy development in all children. They say that many children are at risk because our day care is no longer of sufficient quality. It should be added that these three experts all hold a positive general view on day care.

Swedish day care today costs about 15 000 euro per child and year. If improved to match the quality that the Swedish experts recommend, which is similar to US recommendations, then the cost for children under three would probably rise to 20 000–25 000 euro per child and year. At that price tag it is questionable if day care is worth it when the parents are willing to do the care. At that price a very generous home care allowance could be paid, and the child would in most cases, according to many studies, get an even better quality care.

# Envisioned outcomes

- \* **Greater gender equality.**
- \* **Better child social development.**
- \* **Better child academic development.**
- \* **Getting children better prepared for school.**
- \* **Greater adult life satisfaction through more employed work and less family work.**
- \* **The "work policy" – every adult should be in employed work.**

The basic outline of the Swedish family policies of today was written in a political programme by the Swedish Socialdemocratic Women's Organisation in a document published 1978 named "Familjen i framtiden – en socialistisk familjepolitik" (Eng. "The Family of the Future – A Socialist Family Policy"). At the time the Socialdemocratic Party totally dominated the Swedish political scene having ruled Sweden with few exceptions since 1932.

The envisioned outcomes stated in the programme has since pretty much dominated Swedish family policies regardless of which side of the Swedish political spectrum has been in power.

Greater gender equality can be said to be the first objective of the family policies inspired by the programme. This has been successful to the extent that more women are in employed work in Sweden than in most western European countries, if not the most. However, the Swedish labour market is highly segregated and most Swedish women work in low paid jobs in the public sector such as day care, school and medical care. Sweden has much fewer women on high management positions than many other countries, for example the US. Although the gender equality in the Swedish parliament and government is high, Sweden has not yet had a woman prime minister, or even a minister of finance.



The programme states that day care is necessary for a child's development. It argues that the nuclear family is unable to give children what they need in social development. Society has to give children what they lost in the agrarian society. It is also stated that adults need to be in employed work in order to grow and be happy.

The philosophy of the programme comes from Alva Myrdal, the famous Swedish author who wrote several books together with her even more famous husband, Gunnar Myrdal. Alva Myrdal formulated her ideas about family and day care already in 1935 and they are still highly alive in Sweden, in spite of the fact that attachment psychology, neurobiology and evidence based research on day care show that it is clearly not an ideal solution for every child.

It is hard to avoid sensing strong anti-family sentiments in the programme. Expressed opinions include that families are not trustworthy, that they may teach children other values than politically decided in parliament. Even well-to-do families cannot possibly give children what they need for their development, says the programme. Besides, home care impedes the parents personal growth. Explaining the roots of these sentiments require an historical analysis for which there is not room here. However, such an analysis has been done in the book mentioned earlier, "Är svensken människa?"

Finally both sides of the political spectrum in Sweden agree on the "work policy" which means that all adults should be in employed work. This is also expressed in the programme. In this respect home care is not considered work. Of course, the work policy requires that day care is available to all parents.

# The actual outcomes

- \* **Decrease in psychological health among youth.**
- \* **High rates of sick leave among women.**
- \* **Day care staff at the top of sick leave statistics.**
- \* **Worse quality in Swedish day care.**
- \* **Plummeting results in Swedish schools.**
- \* **Discipline problems in Swedish classrooms.**
- \* **Deteriorating parental abilities, even middle-class.**
- \* **Highly segregated labour market.**

During the last 30 years there has been a severe decline in the psychological health among Swedish youth. Mild psychological disorders such as re-occurring headaches, stomach aches, worries and anxiety have tripled from about 9% to 30% since the 1980-ties for girls, and slightly less for boys. Several studies by different government institutions confirm these statistics. However, no plausible official explanation has been given. During the years 1986-2002 the psychological health for 15 year olds in Sweden declined faster than in any of ten other comparable countries: Finland, Denmark, Norway, Hungary, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, Wales, Spain and Scotland.

Sweden has high rates of sick-leave, especially among women, and particularly among women over 50 years of age, statistics which are at the top in Europe. Psycho-social explanations dominate. Few women today actually work until 65 years of age. Many take early retirement of some form as soon as age 55. This is, of course, the first generation of women who have had to combine motherhood with full-time work, excepting for parental leave. These data are shown in a study published in the Swedish medical journal, *Läkartidningen*, in 2005. Day care staff have among the absolutely highest levels of long term sick leave.

As I have already pointed out the quality in Swedish day care has grown worse.

Day care has simply proven to become too expensive.

Educational outcomes in Swedish schools are plummeting. Twenty-five years ago Swedish children were among the best in the world in reading, writing and mathematics. Today, Swedish students just about make it to average, and in mathematics they are below average, in international comparison.

Swedish schools have severe discipline problems. According to our present Minister of Education, Jan Björklund, Swedish schools have among the highest truancy, the greatest classroom disorder, the most damage to property and the most offensive language of all comparable nations. Björklund has been criticised for exaggerating, but official reports confirm that these problems in Swedish schools are significant. Also, anyone who visits Swedish schools for professional reasons can bear witness to the situation.

The parental skills of Swedish parents are deteriorating. Britta Johansson was one of several researchers in a EU-sponsored study of Swedish schools and day care. 1 500 teachers and day care staff were interviewed. Britta Johansson wrote an article about the results in one of Sweden's national morning papers, Svenska Dagbladet. The interviewed educators voiced deep concern about the lack of parental skills in the parents of their pupils. The survey results showed that even healthy, intelligent and reasonable Swedish parents have difficulties in being parents today. According to Britta Johansson they lack knowledge about children's needs and they cannot set limits. She writes (my translation):

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

Britta Johansson also says that pre-school and school cannot fill the gaps caused by lack of parental time and trust in parents role in rearing their children.

Sweden has a highly segregated labour market, with men mostly working in the private sector with reasonable salaries, and women mostly working in the public sector at low salaries. Many women never made their own choice to work, rather they were more or less pushed into the labour market when the tax benefits for families with home mothers were abolished in 1971. Even forty years afterward, today's polls regularly show that a majority of Swedes would prefer the financial possibility for parents to be at home with their children for the first four years.



## Possible explanations

- \* **Lack of attachment in infants can create chronically low thresholds for stress throughout life.**
- \* **Early exposure to large groups of peers, creates peer-orientation which hinders child maturation.**
- \* **Peer-orientation leads to disinterest in learning, bullying, gangs, flat-lining of culture, promiscuity.**
- \* **The culturally endorsed early separation of infants causes stress in parents, and in worst case sick-leave.**
- \* **Large state intervention in family life, reduces parents sense of responsibility for their children.**

We know today from attachment psychology and neurobiology that early separation of infants from parents can, in some children, create chronically low thresholds for stress. This can lower the threshold for anxiety for the rest of the child's life. Early separation would be expected to lead to a less resilient future generation. Medical technology today can actually measure stress levels in the saliva easily and clearly, making stress research easy to perform, also in small children.

We also know today that early exposure to large groups of peers leads to peer-orientation, which has detrimental results on psychological maturation, learning, and the transference of culture between generations. Canadian psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld has in detail explored the causal connections in these phenomena. His work is reported in his book "Hold on to your kids – why parents need to matter more than peers". He shows that peer-orientation is the root of bullying, teen age gangs, promiscuity and the flat-lining of culture which are all visible to various extent in most western countries.

How does peer-orientation happen? Consider a typical day in the life of a ten year old in a Stockholm suburb. The child is left by his parents just before 7.00 in the morning at the school for before-school-child-care. When school actually begins the child is already tired and hungry. After a long day in school there is after-

school-child-care while the child waits for the tired parents to return at perhaps 5.00 or 6.00 in the late afternoon. In the evening the child may be having another activity outside home, which most ambitious Swedish parents believe is good for their children. Where does the child find emotional security? One needs someone for comfort and closeness, especially in distressing situations, which are common in school. The parents are inaccessible for too long. In the best case scenario there will be a caring adult in school. But for most children it will be a peer or a gang which offers emotional support during school hours. This is the genesis of peer orientation. It fills the lack of meaningful relationships with mature trusted adults who have an interest in the development of the child. The problem with peer orientation is that peers, especially during the teens, do not have the maturity themselves to handle the difficult feelings about differences, conflicts, failure, rejection and deceit. The limited maturity of peer-orientation results in conformism, gangs, bullying, aggression, and sometimes violence. Also as youngsters attach themselves to peers, they emotionally detach themselves from the adult world, including their parents.

The culturally endorsed separation of infants in Sweden causes stress in parents, manifested in many parents as disease and sick-leave. According to a meta-study by Dean Ornish high-quality, close relationships are the strongest health factor, superior to and more important than all other health factors combined. In Sweden we don't have much time for close relationships in families. The high frequency of stress related disease can be seen as a consequence.

According to research by Sir Michael Marmot too little control over one's personal life situation is another risk factor to health. Through its family policies Sweden has given the State a controlling position in the bedroom of every Swedish family – a clear risk factor to health.

High levels of state intervention in family life reduce parents' sense of responsibility for their children. Swedish governmental agencies have been very successful in promoting the idea of day care as more than a convenience and as the best child care solution for everyone. Unfortunately, unintended drawbacks and consequences have not been anticipated. When parents lose their sense of responsibility, they do not develop in younger years the strong relationships with their children which are essential for them to provide guidance to them, especially through adolescence.

# 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 children.**
- \* **A recent study showed that seven out of ten 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 housewives, if they could.**

Paradoxically Swedes are quite clear about what they want. They want to have more time with their children. Dozens of studies during the last decades come to the same results.

For example in a survey in 2006 done by Sifo (a well-renowned Swedish institute for polling opinion) 64 % of all questioned Swedes responded "Yes" to the question: "In your opinion, do you think the state should make it financially possible to care for children in their home until four years of age?" 1 000 respondents were asked. Among parents with children up to two years of age 71% answered yes. Among the members of Sweden's biggest trade union LO 76% answered yes.

In a recent study by an internet journal on families with 118 000 members a web-based study was done by sending forms to 35 000 random members of which 9 000 mothers answered. 72% of all mothers aged 16–29 said they wanted to be home longer with their children. 65% of the 30–44 year old mothers, and 62% of the 45–59 year old mothers. The total for all ages was 67%.

Of the mothers who have one child almost half of them believe that more women would like to be housewives if the possibility was there. Of the mothers with three children six out of ten held the same belief.



# Why no change?

***Once in place,  
Swedish family policies  
have proven difficult to discuss  
through normal  
democratic processes.***

The three experts on day care referred to previously, also raise a sensitive subject about our democracy. They report that discussing this whole issue is very difficult in Sweden as it brings up feelings of guilt in parents. The Swedish people have had the day care solution largely forced upon them, both culturally and financially, after parental leave. They seldom made their own considered choice because of the lack of options. They saw no choice but to accept the situation and suppress their feelings, and they don't want to be reminded of this decision. Similarly, the media seldom discuss this topic. One might compare the Swedish situation to a dysfunctional family where everyone may know that daddy drinks to much, but no one admits it. They cover it up because talking about it is too uncomfortable. In Sweden most people know in their hearts that our family policies are seldom in our children's best interest, but no one talks about it. It is simply too painful.

I confess that it would be nearly impossible in Sweden to have a presentation like this one, except for certain specialised groups. These matters are not supposed to be talked about. It makes parents uncomfortable to awaken the thought that they may not have made the choice they wanted, so they get defensive. Staff at day care centres do not tell parents of the hardships their child may have suffered during the day because they do not want to disturb the parents feelings. Instead they say that the day was wonderful even it is was not, and even if the child had



to face some painful situations. There are many witnesses of this behaviour. The three experts write extensively about it. I have seen it myself. I get told completely different stories whether I go to day care in the role of a parent or in the role of a consultant.

This means that we have created a family policy that is difficult, or not at all possible to discuss through normal democratic processes. This is in itself is a serious democratic problem. A democratic country should never implement policies that cannot be discussed through democratic means.

# The concluding hypothesis:

***The Swedish family policies  
are not emotionally sustainable  
– maybe not even democratically  
sustainable.***

**This hypothesis should be tested by careful multidisciplinary research  
before any attempts are made to copy the Swedish family policies.**

My concluding hypothesis is that Swedish family policies are not emotionally sustainable, and thus not sustainable in either health, psychological maturation or learning.

Quality of parenthood is very strongly a matter of intergenerational inheritance, and we are already seeing definite problems in the Swedish parental generation today. Many of them have never had a close relationship with their mother or father in the way that their grandparents had. Swedish State family policies may not even be democratically sustainable as there are definite difficulties in even discussing these policies.

The consequences of Swedish family policies should therefore be investigated through thorough, comprehensive, and comparative procedures conducted by research institutions outside Sweden before any other nations attempt to copy the Swedish family policies.

# Lessons learned from Swedish family policies

- \* **Research the Swedish model before adopting it.**
- \* **Early separation can cause strong effects later in life. Attachment needs have to be understood.**
- \* **All work done for the good of society needs to be acknowledged.**
- \* **Women sometimes make different choices than men. We have to accept their choices as valid.**
- \* **The family needs support as the key institution for close relationships.**

The first and most important lesson is, of course, that the Swedish family model with its questionable outcomes must be thoroughly researched before making any attempts to copy it. It must indeed be clarified if there is cause-effect relationship between the long daily separation of children and parents, and the negative outcomes in health, learning and maturation, for both children and parents.

Particularly the effects of early attachment and separation must be fully understood, as the effects could be large, but difficult to see as they mostly show up much later in life.

Accepting this hypothesis to be reasonable, it has many more implications:

It is clear from both the Swedish example, and examples from other countries, that home care is valuable societal work. Then it has to be honoured as such. Depending on political traditions this acknowledgement could take many different forms. In the Swedish political culture it needs to take the form of economic compensation through a home care allowance or a tax exemption.

Gender equality has to accept that women and men are not the same, even if the differences don't need to be overemphasised. The early life of a child, however,



presents the biggest difference between man and woman. It is very simple. A human lives its first nine months inside a woman's body. Not inside a man's body. The woman gives birth, not the man. The woman breast-feeds fully for six or even longer, and partly maybe for up to two or even three years. Breast feeding is good for the baby, both emotionally and in nourishment. There is no way the father can have the same connection to the child from the start. He simply has not got the sensory input that the mother has got from the fetus and the baby. Still, the father is of great importance as support to the mother. And if the mother can't do the caring for one reason or another, there is clearly no better stand-in than the willing father. As the baby grows into a toddler the father's time starts to come. In the course of an 18 year childhood, the father is at least as important as the mother, if not more. But during the first year or two there is a physiological difference that does require different roles. Gender equality has to make room for this difference and honour women for the work they do, a work they were designed to do. Otherwise gender equality will become history in the same way as other utopian theories lacking in connection with human physical and psychological reality.

Most institutions of close relationships disappeared during industrialisation. The nuclear family is all that is left. We must care for this only remaining institution of close relationships. If it goes, humanity as we know it will eventually go. Human life depend on human beings being able to communicate, to listen, to be assertive, to be flexible, to forgive, to love and to attach. A human being cannot do anything on her own, she is hopelessly dependent on others and is in absolute needs of the skills to build and keep relationships. These basics of these skills are all learned early in life through intimate attached relationships, such as in a family. There is no better learning environment than a healthy family. If we care for family, then family will in turn grow and manifest social inventions to help build a better future. These inventions will not be made in parliaments, they will be created in the attached relationships in families, feeling safe enough to look out into the world and make contact with another family and see how they can support one another.

Families are strong and quite a few of them survive in most any environment. If family is not appreciated in your country, then you need to work on creating reasonable conditions for those families left who want to be closely attached families. In time they will inspire others through their growth. There are many of us who work on this in Sweden, and it can be done in other countries too. Best of luck!

Jonas Himmelstrand in November 2010

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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 before starting 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 more than 25 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 is in the works for publication during late 2011.