

Preschool Children Lack Protection

Published: 27 June 2006, 05:53

http://www.svd.se/opinion/brannpunkt/artikel_331278.svd

Unsafe environment. Preschool children are injured more frequently. Staffing has been reduced to such an extent that there is not time to keep check of the children.

The Parents Uproar demand that preschool children be included in the Occupational Safety and Health Act, writes Madeleine Lidman.

Preschool children between the ages 1-6 years are not included in the laws that guarantee a safe environment during the time they spend at preschool.

Therefore, several different instances, notably the Office of the Children's Ombudsman, demanded that the government must ensure that preschool children are included in the Occupational Safety and Health Act, in the same way as schoolchildren.

Office of the Children's Ombudsman writes:

"Several studies have shown that there are shortcomings in the children's working environment in preschool and in school, and many accidents occur there. In addition to accidents, children are also subject to other health risks in their work environment, such as infections, allergies and other hypersensitiveness. Children also lack the capacity to assess risks in their environment themselves, something that further motivates protective legislation for them."

As early as 2002 a study made at the Norrland University Hospital showed that among preschool children (1–6 years) injuries such as fractures and concussions doubled from the second half of the 1980's until the 1999–2001 period.

One conceivable cause that is mentioned is that groups are larger, and there is less staff. In 2004, the government commissioned an inquiry which asked: "Should the Occupational Safety and Health Act include children in preschools and childcare?" In this report, the following is said about the effect of the downsizing:

"Research has shown that group size and staff density affects the quality of the preschool. One particular factor which is mentioned is that low staff density and large children's groups may have negative effect on children's language development, the co-operation between children and adults, the identity development and relations of girls and boys, and the daily environment, in the shape of stress, noise and conflicts."

The National Board of Health and Welfare also warn about the preschool situation in its 2005 Environmental Health Report. The largest problem is perceived to be noise, and that noise causes damage: impaired hearing, ringing in the ears, sleeping problems and reduced concentration.

Sound levels in nurseries and schools can be very high. Noise levels capable of causing hearing damage has been measured.

During the work with this inquiry, several problem areas have been identified in the preschool environment: too large children's groups, too little staff, dangerous noise levels, high accident risk, health risks, lack of safety and supervision, and a lack of possibilities in today's school legislation to use sanctions to address the problems.

Despite the fact that several authorities are in favour of including preschool children in the Occupational Safety and Health Act, such as the Office of the Children's Ombudsman, the Children's Delegation, the National Agency for Education, the National Board of Occupational Safety and Health and National Board of Health and Welfare, this was rejected by the government in May 2006.

It is especially noteworthy since preschool children also lack protection in the shape of a law such as Sweden's Lex Sarah (where care staff have a duty to report acts of cruelty and shortcomings in the care system).

Mental and physical ill-health is increasing among Sweden's children, and at the same time the Minister for Youth Affairs shouts "we have the best preschool in the world" (Vi Föräldrar magazine 2/06).

But Sweden lacks scientific studies about a possible connection between the increasing mental and physical ill-health, and the early daycare start with large children's groups and few staff members.

In his book "Tid för barn" (Time for Children), Per Kågeson writes that if a precautionary principle had been in place, such a study would have been made long ago.

Today's family policy is that all parents should work full time, and all children should be in daycare from when they are one year old. The government is counteracting alternatives such as family networks, private childminders and parent cooperatives (e.g. "the Nacka model" in a suburb of Stockholm where parents who stay at home are paid to look after their own children).

Swedish parents have had enough and therefore a Parents Uproar has been started. 135 of Sweden's 289 municipalities have joined, and over 50,000 people have signed up. The Parents Uproar demands that the children's best interest should have first priority. Family policy should have a wide range of alternatives for childcare – including parents who stay at home.

Preschool children and children in daycare should be covered by the Occupational Safety and Health Act, and have their own Lex Sarah law to protect them.

Madeleine Lidman