

Eidevald, Christian & Henecke, Birgitta (2018). **Preventive and remedial action regarding suspicion of child sexual abuse by ECEC employees – as part of increasing child protection as well as reducing drop outs and increasing the proportion of men.**

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Abstract

The aim is to describe the development potential of a support material to prevent, detect and manage child sexual abuse (CSA) as part of making preschools a safe place for children as well as facilitating recruitment and counteracting dropouts among men. Physical contact between men and children within ECEC is obviously not viewed as natural. Some of men's actions thereby risk being misinterpreted as SCA (Eidevald, 2016). The discourse of suspicion questions their motives for working with children and forces them to position themselves in relation to the risk of being wrongly suspected of CSA (Brody 2015; Peeters, Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015). The data are extracted from interviews with 'key persons' who have created the support material as well as heads of preschools responsible for prevention and remedial action in case of suspicion. The analysis focuses on narratives of suspected CSAs (Riessman 2008). The study follows the Swedish Research Council's requirements. All personal information are removed. The interviewees have read and approved the transcriptions. The analysis shows that more knowledge is needed to understand what effects actions in the physical and discursive environment have in the preventive work. Talking about good care raises awareness levels, which reduces the risk of CSA as well as the risk of men being mistakenly suspected. Preventive work, which balances a child- and adult perspective, increases the opportunities for recruiting and reducing dropouts among men within ECEC, among other things, by enabling them to be professional in situations that include physical contact and intimacy.

Keywords

preschool, gender, CSA, male teacher, Sweden

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A case study on a preventive programme against child sexual abuse in preschools in the City of Malmö, Sweden

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INTRODUCTION

In 2014, a 21-year-old male employee at a preschool in south-eastern Sweden committed several child sexual abuse (CSA), which led to intensified work against CSA in preschool. It also led to an intensive media debate, where men as employees in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) were questioned.

In Sweden, about 3 percent of all employees in preschool are men. In the 1990s, the proportion of male employees decreased after cases of CSA committed by men received attention (Backman 2012). The case in 2014 led to media attention and a sharp increase in reports against male employees suspected of CSA. There was great concern over CSA, but also concern that men with valuable competence and many years of experience in ECEC would leave the profession.

One of the cities in Sweden that has worked to develop procedures for protecting children in pre-schools against CSA is Malmö, the third largest city in the country. By strengthening protection of children, the city wants to make sure that the work also will provide a better work environment for men and a stronger protection for male employees so that they are able to carry out all duties, even if they demand close physical contact. A programme for *preventive work and measures to be taken in the case of suspicion of sexual harassment against children by employees in the preschools* was put in use in Malmö in the summer of 2016. The programme is however neutral concerning the employee's gender.

During 2017, the programme has been analysed with the purpose of describing its strengths as well as possibilities for further development. One part of the programme deals with addressing (suspected) CSA and includes identifying situations where CSA could occur. It also includes having procedures to facilitate a return to work if investigations show that there is no support for CSA have been committed. The analysis shows that preventive work is central and that clear procedures create safety for both children and employees.

BACKGROUND

Preschool has historically been a "female workplace", and regarded as an unnatural workplace for men. Male employees in preschools sometimes describe concerns that physical contact with children will cause suspicion. A concern that causes some men to avoid physical contact in the profession (Piper et al., 2013; Öhman 2016). This avoidance is described not only as a personal dilemma, but also as something that has educational consequences, as certain activities in these professions require physical contact and proximity (Fletcher, 2013; Caldeborg et al., 2017). A Danish study describes how this concern results in consequences for men (Munk et al., 2013, p. 19). By avoiding important elements in performing these tasks in a professional manner and based on the needs of children, these men end up in situations where they cannot act as professionally as their female colleagues. This is probably the most important explanation as to why higher proportion of men leave the profession (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008).

One conclusion is that both children and male employees in preschools need to be protected. Children need to be protected from abuse. Male employees need to be protected from unfounded suspicions. David Brody (2015) shows that concerns among male employees are greatest early on in their career. This concern is described by Jan Peeters, Tim Rohrman and Kari Emilsen (2015) as part of something that could be described as "glass doors". There seems to be no barriers for men to work in preschool, but in practice there are "invisible structural barriers", in the shape of suspicion and concern. Rohrman and Brody (2015) express the need for more knowledge about these structural barriers for men working in preschools.

By discussing the term professionalism in preschool as something that both men and women can abide by in their pedagogical practice, ideas about diaper change, comfort and closeness as tasks that only women naturally do with children may be challenged. The breaking of such norms at the same time allows for a vision where both women and men can work with children.

AIM OF THE REPORT

The aim of the report is to analyze the programme that has been put in use in Malmö, its strengths and weaknesses, as well as to identify measures for the programme to function even better as a support for preventing, detecting and addressing (suspicions of) CSA against children in pre-schools in Malmö.

METHOD OF THE STUDY

The study is mainly based on interviews. *Key personnel* at the preschool administration in Malmö have been interviewed regarding the development of the programme, as well as challenges in that work. Four of the city's 55 preschool leaders have been interviewed about their experience of the programme's ability, potential and perceived shortcomings. The interviews' length were on average 60 minutes and were recorded and analysed with the focus on 1) describing the creation of the programme, to obtain a background of what it is supposed to accomplish and 2) identifying how the programme could be improved. Some of the interviewed preschool leaders have experience in using

the recommended procedures, based on the fact that male employees have been reported of CSA. The interviews have been compiled through a common storyline, a so-called narrative method (Riessman 2008).

THE PROGRAMME'S BACKGROUND, CONTENT AND FUNCTION

In 2014, the city of Malmö received indications that a male employee at one of the city's preschools may have committed CSA. This was followed by a wave of accusations against men. Malmö's explicit intention to recruit more men to their preschools was under heavy media coverage and was subjected to profound critique. The ECE department was not prepared for this pressure and intensified the work to counter accusations and regain trust from the public by dealing with the emergency situations while at the same time developing the city's preventive work.

Despite the critique, the department decided to continue to work for more male employees within ECEC. It was a necessary step to handle a situation where the growing city demanded more preschools at the same time as there constantly were difficulties to find the required staff. The department decided to actively address media with the message that it was going to continue to work for competences that included both women and men in preschool. One result was that journalists not only brought attention to the accusations but enlightened the need for the departments work for more men in preschool in a more understanding and supportive manner.

When the department later reviewed their communication with media and the public after the first reports of CSA, they found that they had been influenced by allegations as if they were real and taken a position indicating that abuse *had* occurred. This led the department to realize that there was a need for strategies for action and communication that can reassure that the situation is being dealt with in a serious and systematic manner. The department found that procedures in the case of alleged CSA need to be "strict" in specifying which decisions should be made and which measures should be taken and by whom.

From having previously expressed opposition to linking the work for more men in ECEC with preventive work against CSA, the department found that explicit wishes came to make this connection, not at least from male employees in the preschools. One of the most important requests had to do with clarity in responsibility, at the various levels, and how to act when a suspicion or report is directed towards an employee.

The programme that was developed was designed digitally to allow it to be constantly updated and readily available for all employees in the organisation. It is located on the City of Malmö's website and provides procedures starting with preventions followed by a "signal" that could indicate CSA by an employee in preschool. It consists of:

1. Preventive work
2. Measures to be taken in case of suspicions
3. Follow-up

The programme also includes a *matrix* for different phases in the first crucial days after a signal about possible CSA by an employee. The matrix contains procedures for documentation and further reporting in the organisation and if, when and how other authorities as the police and social authorities should be contacted. It contains

responsibility and procedures to be taken by the preschool leader, its managers, the human resources department and so on, based on necessary steps and how different investigations must be conducted.

In their work the department has found that investigations of CSA need to be done in such a way that allegations against employees are not exacerbated by the investigation. For example, an investigation could give rise to speculation, or create tensions between employees giving testimony or writing down documentation, and those employees in focus for an investigation. The programme is intended to allow colleagues to be able to remain colleagues without undue pressure in an already hard-pressed situation, as well as after a return of an employee that earlier has been suspected without grounds.

STRENGTHS AND POTENTIAL FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The introduction of the programme has according to the interviews brought about a professional readiness and a de-dramatization of several situations, as well as making it possible for a calm return to work for employees when it has been established that the suspicions were unfounded.

The preventive work included in the programme has meant creating clearer routines about nap-time, toilet visits, dressing and diaper changes, creating clearer routines for substitutes and trainees, which is expected to lead to preventing risks for CSA as well as more quickly detecting signs of possible CSA. These procedures are at the same time designed to provide good conditions for male employees to enjoy and feel safe in working with children.

The preventative work, which in the interviews is highlighted as important, has led to an awareness that adults need to be sensitive to the children's boundaries, even in play. However, several of the efforts made to prevent risks for CSA have been criticised by the interviewed preschool leaders because they are considered to have an "adult perspective". Putting in glass doors and windows in toilets and changing tables, which has been a common measure, does not always consider the children's need for integrity.

A challenge that emerges from this work is the question of what constitutes a "signal" about CSA. A signal could according to the interviewed be that a child said something about a sexual act to another child, who then in turn tells it to his or her parents at home, who in turn tells it to the preschool leader. Should such information be regarded as signals or not is the question, particularly when it is often unclear what occurred in the first place as the information has been filtered repeatedly.

When a signal has been identified, it is however described by the interviewed as strength to have clear procedures describing all steps in how it shall be reported and passed on in the organisation and if necessary to other authorities. They also describe that the return to work, in cases where an employee has been temporarily removed, has been significantly easier and it has along the way been clear which support exists for both the specific employee and for the management.

CONCLUSIONS

Earlier studies and all the interviewed point out that the most important, and hardest, thing to develop is preventive work involving sexual abuse and it has to be strengthened. This study points to the need for the preventive work to be wide ranged

and based on 1) mapping of risk environments, 2) increasing knowledge among children and adults about CSA, as well as 3) discussions about male employees as an exposed group and how they can be strengthened in their profession.

The study also shows that more research is required both about CSA and for example what is to be considered as signals, in the pursuit to make preschool a safe place for children. More research is further needed about what it is like to be a part of a minority as a male employee in preschool, and what could be done to create a meaningful and attractive workplace for both female and male educators. In summary the case study shows the need to:

- Increase **awareness among children and employees** about CSA
- Develop **better procedures for risk analysis** for children, with a focus on when they are at risk of sexual abuse and how the preschool can prevent these risks
- Acknowledge the importance of **respecting children's integrity** in this work
- Develop work on how **women and men**, without the risk of being reported or suspected, shall be able to provide **safe and professional care** for children and how **norms around female and male** influence the possibilities for the pedagogical assignment in preschool.

In all these areas further research is crucial.

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