

Nordic children Children make a difference!

Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues

The inspiration booklet

Results of the 'Early intervention for families' project





norden

Nordens Välfärdscenter

Nordic children—Children make a difference!

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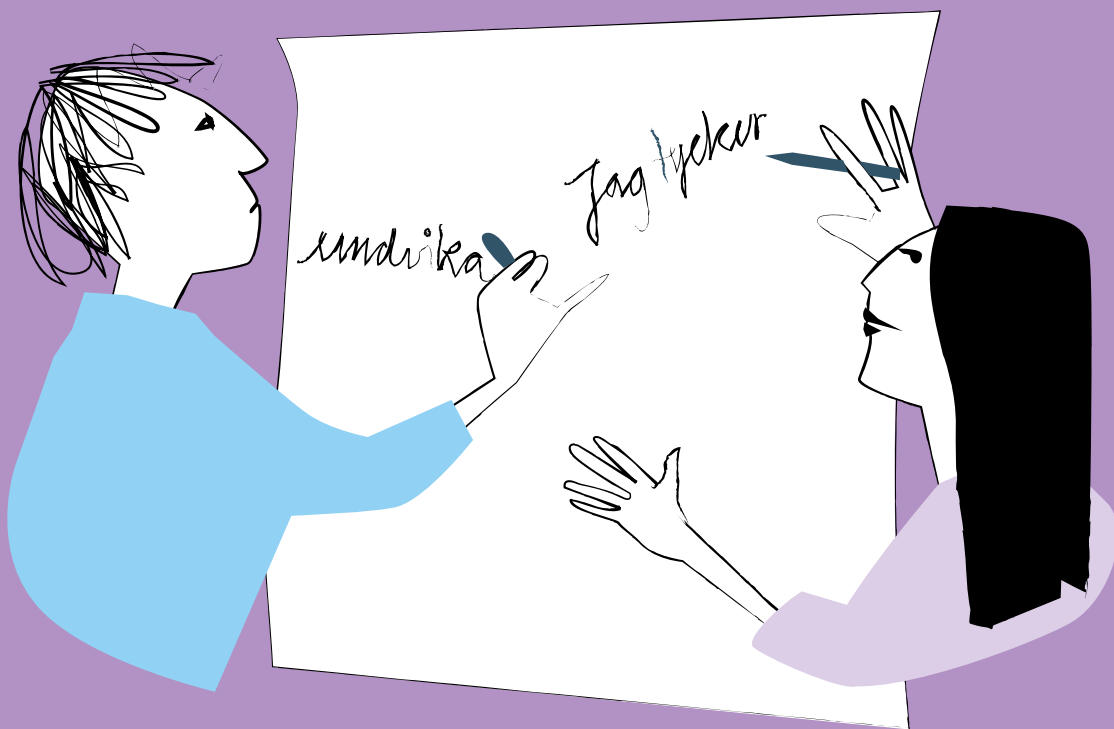
under the 'Publications' tab.

In digital format, the booklet is also available in
Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, Icelandic and English.



Miljömärkt trycksak, 341 142





Nordic children

You are holding in your hand part 3 of the report on the 'Early intervention for families' project.

The project is a part of the Nordic Council of Ministers' efforts in 2011 and 2012 in the area entitled "Early preventive interventions for families at risk of social marginalisation". As a consequence of this prioritisation, the Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues was commissioned to carry out this project. The aim is to disseminate research results and knowledge about good examples, and create Nordic networks.

The project has four focus areas: Current research on risk and protection factors, promising examples of early intervention in the Nordic region, simplified access to services and let the children's voices be heard!

Part 3 of the report, *Children make a difference!*, presents a method for highlighting the voices of children and young people in the societal debate and the decision-making. The booklet also contains a film that shows how the method is carried out in practice.

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It is PARADISE, writes one of the children who has participated in a meeting in Norway. To have a tough childhood with parents who have problems with abuse, mental illnesses or being ostracised in other ways by your buddies, at school, can make life seem really LONELY. Nobody else has it like I do, everyone else has it so easy...

Being allowed to be a part of a greater context and allowed to share one's thought with others can mean a great deal. So much that one of the children describes it as PARADISE. With this inspiration booklet, we wish to go one step further and let the children speak with those who make the decisions.

Proposals from the children to the politicians.
A dialogue on equal terms. From object to subject.

Children who have grown up under tough conditions are in a way more experienced than other children. Many times, they have been forced to act as parents for their parents and siblings, and most of all handle things on their own behalf. Let children be children, in the words of one of the children.

In the inspiration booklet entitled "Children make a difference" you can read the proposals of children for early support for children and young people. We are also producing a manual for how in specific one can do it if one would like to have children participating in and affecting decisions in society. The Nordic countries have long been drivers in the work of making the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child a reality. In Norway, they have gone the furthest, by adopting the Convention on the Rights of the Child into law. Children are our future, and we should be using all available means to have children participate in society.

The Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues thanks all the children who have participated in the meetings in Norway, Denmark and Finland. We hope that their wise and well-founded proposals and viewpoints will be able to inspire politicians and decision-makers.

The Nordic welfare model builds on us taking joint responsibility for welfare in our society. In the future this will also include these children feeling themselves to be participants and desiring to contribute to its development.



Introduction

In the project entitled "Children's Voices" we have invited children from Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark to three meetings. What they have had in common was that they have all been "customers" of the social services in their respective countries. Some have lived in foster homes or in institutions, some have remained living with their mother or father and received good assistance and support, and others have remained living at home despite them being of the opinion afterwards that they ought to have been removed.

The objective of the meetings was to ask them for ideas and proposals for how one can as early as possible and in the best manner possible help children who are living in vulnerable families. What can we who work with, or plan, the conditions under which children are brought up learn from their hard-earned experiences? How can we learn from their examples of good care under the auspices of society—or the lack of such—in order to ensure that all children who grow up in the Nordic countries experience a childhood that is marked by security, care and participation?

Both the results from the comparisons as well as the methods we have used will be presented in this booklet. Hopefully, this will provide inspiration for people who wish to work with involving children in affairs that concern them.

A number of organisations have participated in the work with Children's Voices:

- The 4 Seasons, Denmark
- BRIS, Sweden
- Pesäpuu, Finland
- Adults for Children, Norway

Methods for participants



The central conception in this way of working is that young people are experts in their own situations and are able to share experiences from the meeting with, for example, the social services. Those who work with children can make use of this experience-based knowledge in order to create a better endeavour. A broader decision-making basis contributes to well-founded decisions and it can be easier to perform impact analyses of contemplated decisions that affect children.

What is fundamental is to be questioning, curious and listen seriously. The opinions and assessments of the adults are set aside. We pose open questions that make it possible to share one's own experiences and knowledge about the theme concerned. The most important task of the adults is to create security and confidence in the given framework, i.e. such that it is possible to communicate what one has in one's heart.

The non-profit organisation *Adults for Children* has been responsible for preparing the meetings that we have held with children from some of the Nordic countries. When *Adults for Children* invites young people to participatory processes, the goal most often is to survey their experiences and evaluate the services they have received. Another purpose can be to hear the needs and desires of their actual living situations, for example when they have a parent with abuse problems or mental illnesses.

PLANNING FOR PARTICIPANTS

Invitation and information

By far the most important thing at the start, when the children are being invited, is to have thoroughly thought through what one wants to know and the specific questions one can pose. The next step is to determine how to reach the target group. People who work with the children, their parents and interest groups are often good channels and—especially—the children themselves.

It is important that the invitation is clear about the meeting's content, purpose, course of events and how the results will be used.

In the project entitled "Children make a difference" we asked some children for help in formulating an invitation.

When one invites younger children, one needs to include information that is targeted directly at their parents/custodians. It is also important that the invitation states that they can have an adult go with them.

Regardless of the age group, it is important that the participants receive information about the right to remain anonymous.

The meeting

It is extremely beneficial if the meeting can be held at a neutral place that is experienced as being pleasant.

The size of a group can vary, among other things depending upon the theme. It must be easy to work in both large and small groups.

The length of a meeting can also range from only several hours to one or two days including overnight stays. In this

You can read the entire set of offerings at the Web site of the Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues: www.nordicwelfare.org/tidigainsatser

project the group met in the late afternoon, spent the evening getting to know each other and then spent the entire next day working, from 9 am to 4 pm.

The participatory processes were adapted to the age group, theme and "situation". The methods are to a large degree rooted in PLA methods, Participatory Learning through Action. An adult process leader is responsible for the process when the participants meet, on as level of a playing surface as possible, where everyone feels they belong, knows what task is to be solved and where all the participants have the opportunity to express themselves.

Some have the responsibility for documenting what is said, as verbatim as possible in order to avoid interpretations. The objective is simply to elicit what the children actually say and think, not the interpretations adults place on top of them.

The rest of the text describes the content of the meetings under the subproject entitled *Children make a difference*:

Welcome—and why are we here?

All meetings begin with the arrangers bidding everyone welcome, thanking the participants for having taken the time to be there, presenting the tasks and reasons for the invitations. They also talk about themselves and the organisations they work for.

Who are we who are participating here?

It is important to take some time to get to know each other as well as possible. Some form of a task is often used as a point of departure. The participants are asked to talk about themselves within the framework of the theme placing an emphasis on resources, hopes and qualities.

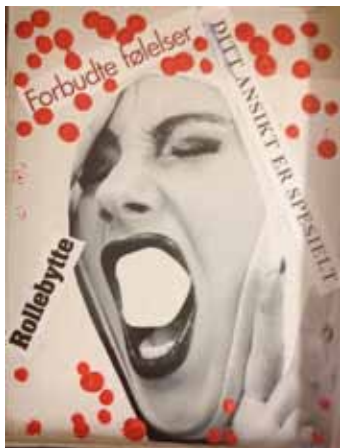
During the meeting, everyone receives a piece of paper with a hand drawn on it, with each finger having a theme or question. The participants sit in pairs and interview each other with the following as points of departure:

- Three strong sides of me
- What gives me energy and inclination?
- Who is an important person?
- How do I want others to describe me
- Something I hope will occur within 5 years

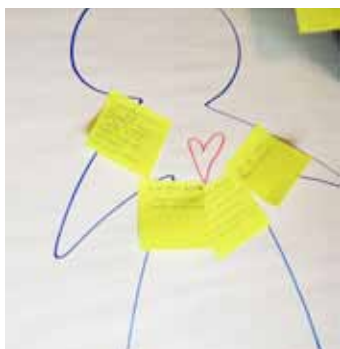


The Hand: During the meeting, everyone receives a piece of paper with a hand drawn on it, with each finger having a theme or question

When both have talked about themselves to each other, then the participants sit together in a circle. They all present the person that they have just interviewed. In a large group with limited time, it can be sufficient for just two of the fingers to be presented. The participants are also offered the opportunity to explain why they have chosen to participate.



The Shoebox: The first task, which often causes everyone to lose their inhibitions in terms of both creativity as well as communications, is "The Shoebox". The goal is to initiate good conversations and to survey the experiences.



The Feel Good Guy: One can for example write down how an employee of the social services, psychiatric services or the school has to be in order for the young person to be willing to accept assistance.

Starting the thoughts flowing and good dialogues

During the course of the meeting, various tasks are used to extract experiences, thoughts, ideas and proposals. The first task, which often causes everyone to lose their inhibitions in terms of both creativity as well as communications, is "The Shoebox". The goal is to initiate good conversations and to survey the experiences.

Empty shoeboxes, paint, paintbrushes, glue, scissors and various "doo-dads and decorations" are needed for this task.

The participants are divided up into groups of 3-5 persons and tasked with decorating a shoebox on both the inside and outside. The outside will symbolise how others perceive you or how one desires to be perceived by others.

The inside will also be decorated such that it symbolises feelings and thoughts, sides of one's self that one never shows to anybody, or that are difficult to show to others. Empty shoeboxes, paint, paintbrushes, glue, scissors and other decorations are used in this task.

Everyone in the group works together on a shoebox.

Afterwards, an "exhibition" is arranged where participants view each other's artwork and listen to the joint presentations of each group. Both the adult process leader as well as the other participants can ask questions and reflect over the replies. Follow-up questions can for example be: Are there cases when one should want to talk with someone about what is found under the lid? And who might that be? How should it be done? What is important to think about as an adult in order for a child, who wants to do so, to be able to lift the lid? Have you had any experiences with such a person? How did it go? How was the person, or what did the person do, so that you felt you could trust them?

The presentations elicit important information that adults can use directly in their work with young people. The person who is documenting this has a huge responsibility to note what is said.

Tangible advice and ideas

The next step can be to ask for tangible advice within some of the themes the children have selected. Such could for example involve what is important for creating such good relations that a child is able to ask for help.

Adults for Children often used the task called *The Feel Good Guy*. If the group is large, the participants are divided up into smaller groups of 4-6 persons.

Each group receives a flipchart with the outline of a person. Everyone in the group receives post-it notes and a pen. The task can for example be to write down how an employee of the social services, psychiatric services or the school should be in order for the young person to be willing to accept help.

Everyone performs the task, on an individual basis to begin with so as to avoid influences from others. The process leader emphasises that no answer is wrong.

When everyone has finished writing, the participants present their notes to each other and place them on *The Feel Good Guy*. The more important something is, the closer to the heart it is placed.

When the group is ready, the notes are sorted and the participants deliberate on what are the three most important cases.

The person keeping the documentation also has the important task of capturing as many direct quotations as possible that describe in part why the participants believe that something is important and in part what can be done to achieve what is desired.

Surveying problems and finding proposals for solutions

We often make plans and decisions that affect young people based upon our own views of what the problems and solutions are. The goal of working together with the participants is to begin from a different perspective. We ask the children to describe problems and difficulties, but also what they think could be good solutions or meaningful assistance.

Sometimes *Adults for Children* uses the task named *The River of Life*. The task has two parts. The goal is to identify impediments or problems connected to the theme that is being worked on. In the meeting, the question is posed: What are the greatest challenges or problems in your life when your parents are not able to take care of you as they should?

The other part of the task is focused on the proposals of the participants for solutions. Metal foil, pens and two colours of post-it notes are needed for this task.

The participants are divided up into smaller groups of 4-6 persons. The task is initiated with an explanation of *The River of Life*, which can for example be illustrated with a sheet of foil on the floor. If life is going well, the water flows without impediments and it is simple to navigate on the river. No shallows or dams are in the way. However, if there are many shallows and submerged rocks of any type, things immediately become worse. The traveller must always be on guard and may, in the worst case, be unable to navigate on the river at all.

The task is to attempt to survey and identify the problems and impediments that we see in connection with the theme that we are working with. The goal is to find the cause of the problem, however change requires that the problem be defined.



The River of Life:

The participants present their notes to each other. They also place their notes down in "the river", i.e. on the sheet of foil, where they can symbolise stones or logs that make the river difficult to cross.

All the participants receive post-it notes to be able to note everything that creates problems or poses impediments to smooth sailing in connection with the theme of the meeting. The task is initially individual, i.e. without discussions with others. This avoids influences from others and produces better results than if the conversations had started immediately. Writing an unlimited number of notes is permitted, however only one problem is allowed per note—this is in order to allow them to be sorted.

When everything is ready, the participants present their notes to each other. They also place their notes down in "the river", i.e. on the sheet of foil, where they symbolise stones or logs that cause the river to become difficult to navigate.

The sorting that follows brings to light both what many people agree on as well as less common problematic situations that can have at least equally large negative consequences in life. Emphasise that it is not incorrect if the same or similar matters appear more than once. This contributes instead to making the majority's experiences and viewpoints clearer.

The next step will be to think about proposals for solutions. The participants will be tasked with considering the problem areas that have been identified and good ways of solving or addressing the problems. During a new round with post-it notes, this time of a different colour, the participants write down suggestions for solutions, one per note. The number of possible notes is still unlimited. The proposals must be as concrete as possible.

In connection with the subsequent presentation, the post-it notes with the proposed solutions are placed by the problem that is to be solved.

After the presentations, both the problems and all the proposed solutions are written down in order to be used as a basis in part for the next exercise and in part as information for people who work with children, politicians or others who are the target groups for the results.

Communicating one's message

The last part of a process has an emphasis on what the participants believe should be communicated, who ought to learn from what has emerged and preferably also how such can be done.

The task entitled "The Advertising Poster" is used in order for the participants to be able to define what they wish to present and to which specific target groups.

Large, stiff sheets in poster format, old weekly magazines, scissors, felt pens and glue sticks are needed for this task.

The participants are divided up into smaller groups of 3-5 persons each. The groups are tasked with making an

advertising poster that communicates some of the main messages that they have arrived at during the meeting. Each group will present its poster to the other participants. They discuss who will be influenced by their message and how this can be done.

In some cases one will know already at the beginning who the target group is, and at other times one will need to put more work into defining it. In the Early Intervention for Vulnerable Families project, we knew that the results from the three meetings were going to be presented in a report and in a film and that it would also be possible for some of the children to participate in a final conference.

It is not however always the case that the young people manage to extract everything they have in their hearts during such a meeting and sometimes one needs to think a little. The participants in the meetings thus received a task to take with them, that they are supposed to send to us afterwards. The task is entitled *Letter to the Minister*. Everyone receives the same introduction as a point of departure:



When things are not going well for children in their families, due to the parents not being able to take care of them as they ought to, it is important that ...

Some of the letters are presented later in this booklet.

Sometimes the task is performed during a meeting. Everyone receives paper and pens and the task of writing a text that they themselves are able to choose the recipient of—an administrator in the social services, a treatment provider at the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Clinics (BUP), the Prime Minister or the general public. Everyone receives a short introductory text as a point of departure and some important themes.

Those who think it is tough work to write can ask to have a private secretary and dictate instead. Those who wish to do so can work together with another person.

When the texts have been written, those who wish to do so can read them to everyone else.

As part of the conclusion at the end of the meeting, all the participants are asked to say something about what they have gained from the meeting.

The meeting is often ended with an exercise in which everyone must give a complement to and receive a complement from another person.

Follow-ups

A meeting can have awakened old and negative memories. The participants can be impatient to see how their contributions have been used to make improvements. It is important that the participants are followed up on both individually and as a group and that this has been planned for since before the first meeting.

An important part of the process is to be given to understand that what one has contributed will be used to help other children.



Voices of the children



What comes out is quite wise and good when one asks children about how they think one can help children as early as possible in life and in the best way possible. There are several themes that are repeated and which arise regardless of which of the Nordic countries one lives in or how long ago it was that one received help from the social services. We have gathered together what has emerged under some headings that have crystallised in the meetings with the participants. We have allowed the voices of the young people to speak for themselves and hope that they will contribute to us being still better at giving help and support to children who need it, as early as possible in their lives.

RELATIONSHIPS

Regardless of the specific theme we are talking about or the specific challenges we are attempting to solve it always boils down to that fact that all social work involves the relationship between the child and the individual who is to do the helping. If it is not built upon mutual trust and confidence, it is of no use if one takes important measures or conceives good results. There must be people who embody the care and the child must experience that it is a person who is standing on their side, someone who wishes to do good and who is looking after the child's resources, opportunities and hopes. This is equally important in the first initial contact as it is in the continued work

"I must hear first that I am good!"

"It is important that relationships last over time if one is to give good help, security persons who are there for a long time."

"Fight for me! There is nobody who has done this and I can't manage to do it myself."

"One has many departures in one's childhood. It is like a collection of broken hearts. Can one trust others? One always asks that question when one meets somebody who has been assigned to help you."

"When one meets children and is to give them help, one must arrange the meeting so that it is on the child's terms. Use a language that they understand, give them sufficient time, be conscientious and generous, probably meet at a good place and do something together. And then one must check that the child really thinks that it is a good way of doing things, so that one does not just believe that it is good."

EARLY HELP

Many of the children who have participated in the project experience having received help much too late, despite them knowing that others have been aware of their need for help. They emphasise that care centres/maternity care centres and child welfare centres, preschools and schools, but also leisure time arenas, are important to include in the work in order to see to it that children who are living in vulnerable situations are identified early. Their message to everyone who works in this field is that they have the responsibility for looking after the child, talking with them, reporting it if they see signals that are cause for concern and most of all—not giving up!

Everyone who works with children must be better at making contact with the social services if they see something that is not appropriate. Rather one time too many than one time too little. It is their responsibility to do something.

"I do not want to go to school. I was harassed and the school did not take any responsibility. My teacher did nothing. Things were bad at home and bad at school. School was a nightmare instead of being a safe place where I could learn something."

"Adults should not be scared to pose dumb or difficult questions if they are worried about a child. We understand that the intention is good. And then adults must be good at reading between the lines. It is not always that one tells, one is of course loyal towards one's parents. Adults must not give up, they must ask again and again, but in a way that seems good, that is not insulting, but such that one understands that they only want what is best for you."

"Do not come back 10 years later and say 'Yes, we could see of course that something was not as it was supposed to be.' "

When my parents need help in being parents

A number of the participants in the meetings have had thoughts and ideas on what can be done when parents do not manage to shoulder the responsibilities that they should.

"One must be able to ring somewhere and know that one will receive help at any time."

"There is a need for someone who will be a type of connecting link between the child and the professional, someone who the child experiences as 'theirs' in the contacts with the system."

"The municipality ought to give parents offerings of meetings or camps, so they can learn to master their situation. One must teach them to understand their children, how one becomes a better parent."

Dear Minister,

My problem was quite clearly that nobody helped my mother. I almost wish that she had received a bit more help, so that she could have been better faster and not just only after I became an adult. I can understand that one takes children from irresponsible parents in order to help the child have a better future, however one's parents are a large part of one's future, so if they could receive better help along the way to a "normal" life again, the future would be a bit better for both the child and the parents. The efforts to help the mother/parents to become responsible parents should quite clearly be given priority. To not have a mother or parents is such a large disadvantage that one will be missing something for the rest of one's life.

I hope you understand.

Sincerely, Flemming"

When I cannot live with my mother or father

Sometimes, there is so much that is not functioning in the home that a child can no longer live with their mother and father. A number of the children who have participated in the project have experienced precisely this. A number of them are of the opinion that they have been taken and made wards of the state much too late. When they finally have been taken away from their parents, many times it has been done in an offensive or unnecessarily negative way. The young participants in the project have managed to have many experiences in this area, which they hope employees of the social services can learn from, so that other children will in future avoid experiencing what they have experienced. They have good advice about what is important when a child must move. A number of the children would also like to contribute to the training of foster parents, in order to include a perspective that nobody other than they themselves can provide.

Becoming a ward of the state

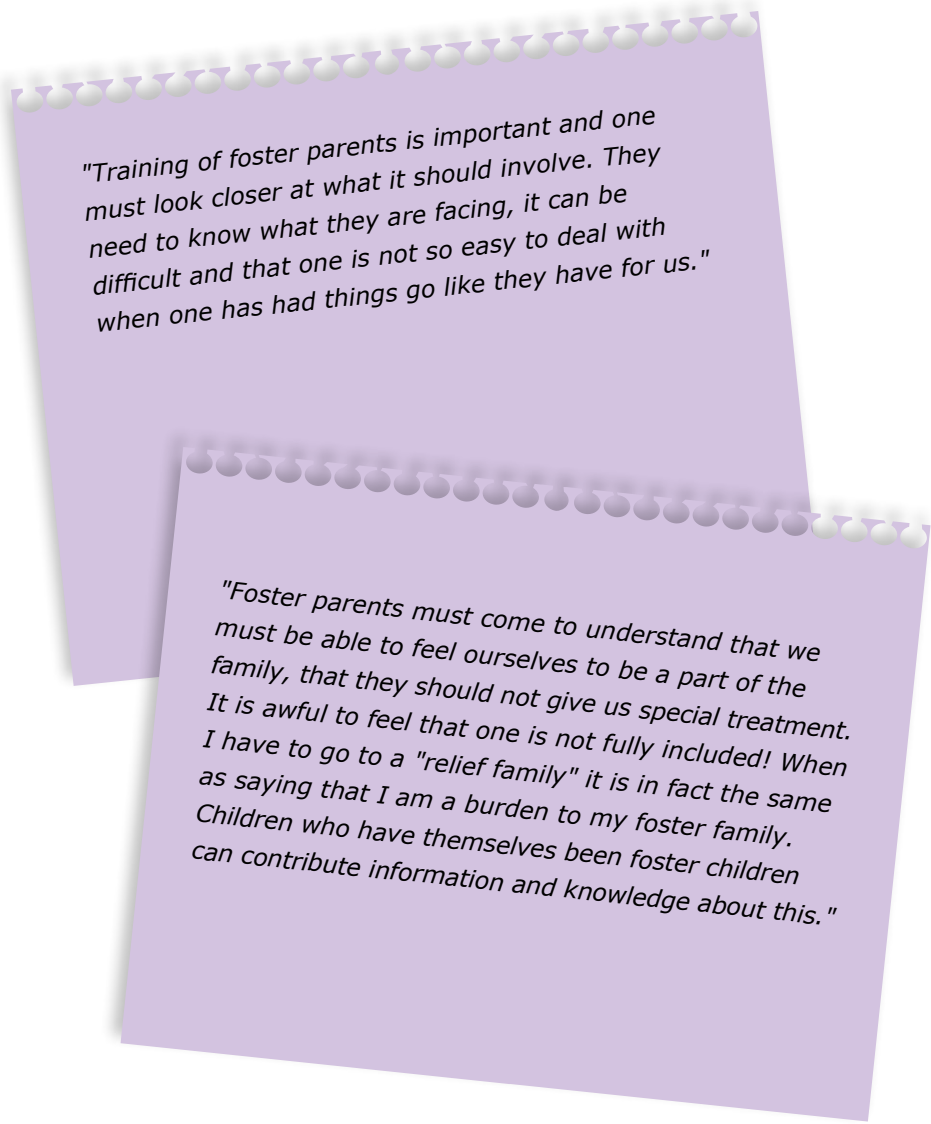
"One must spend substantial time to find a good alternative to living at home, no quick, temporary solutions. We desire to have a permanent living situation. All of us have in fact lived for a long time, perhaps our entire childhood, in poor environments, so we will not die if one spends a couple of weeks to find the right good solution."

"I must be allowed to mourn and bawl and scream and people must understand that it is difficult and comfort me then when I am completely heartbroken."

"I wish that I had been removed earlier. When one can see that this will never become a good family, one does not need to try a lot of things and then when things are really bad finally move the child. It is too late then."

Living in a foster home or an institution

Most of the children who have participated live or have lived in a foster home or institution. They have many thoughts about what is important to bear in mind in order for things to function well. They have thoughts about how one can make the transition from a biological family to a foster home as well as possible and they also provide advice on how one can best check that everything is functioning as it should.



"Training of foster parents is important and one must look closer at what it should involve. They need to know what they are facing, it can be difficult and that one is not so easy to deal with when one has had things go like they have for us."

"Foster parents must come to understand that we must be able to feel ourselves to be a part of the family, that they should not give us special treatment. It is awful to feel that one is not fully included! When I have to go to a "relief family" it is in fact the same as saying that I am a burden to my foster family. Children who have themselves been foster children can contribute information and knowledge about this."

Dear Minister,

I would very much have liked to have had love from my foster parents. Love in the form of hugs, kisses, consolation when I was distressed, without me having to ask for it. It was humiliating for me. I lived with a foster family that was very professional. It was like living in an institution, where there was everything one needs, your own room, bed, food, etc., clear boundaries. Everything was correct, but no love or closeness.

Despite the fact that I came from a family with abuse problems, I often experienced that beer was being drunk. Sometimes I thought that it was becoming too much. It felt insecure even though they could control it.

I would have liked it if they had asked how I had felt about it. For example, after school when one was going home. I was often asked how the day had gone, and I just answered: "It went well!" and then there was nothing more and I was on my own.

I would have liked it if they spent more time on meeting others and creating social networks.

It would have been good for me if they had not looked down on my mother or said dumb things about her. It felt that I was brainwashed into thinking that my mother and family were such jerks who could not take care of themselves that I almost ought to hate them. Even though it is good to talk in the family about where one comes from and why one has actually been placed there with them, etc., one can nevertheless certainly talk about it without being belittling, because it is still one's family.

Things are going well family me today. A fine husband who I have two fantastic children with, with lots of love and a secure home.

Love, show love with clear boundaries, that it is appropriate to feel loved and welcome in a foster family that takes the responsibility for working with very vulnerable children such as I was.

Sincerely, Maja.

"It is important that inspections of both institutions and foster homes function properly. One must for example speak alone with the child, not together with the foster parents. One does not want to hurt their foster parents of course if one has something negative to say. One is probably also afraid of the consequences if one complains. The person who is supposed to check that everything is functioning must show the child that they are on the child's side. He or she must create a good relation to the child so that it is safe to report how things are going".

Dear Minister,

I have lived in a children's home for 7 years and only once did I experience an inspection. I think it is unacceptable that nobody comes out to check the different places. Another thing is that nobody spoke to me, in tangible terms, about why I didn't live with my mother. I have subsequently seen for myself why. I had not visited my mother at her home for a number of years, hence it was always her who had to come and visit me and my little sister.

Another completely different thing is the caseworkers. I hate my caseworker. I would like it if one could say: "I do not approve of her unfortunately, is it possible for me to have a new one?"

In addition, I believe that I have had something like 15 caseworkers. Can't you see that it would be better if a person only had one, then he or she could be there over a longer period of time?

Caseworkers take the children at their word. Not the foster family, educationalists or parents. In Copenhagen they have decided that children who are placed in homes may not travel abroad. I was lucky that my mother went with my sister and I on holiday. Not all children have the opportunity to see a different culture in a different country. I actually think it is important that children are allowed to go and travel. I would

like to give you some praise because you actually let me and my little sister travel to Norway several times each year to visit our big sister. In contrast, I know a case where the parents live in Africa, and they're not allowed to see them.

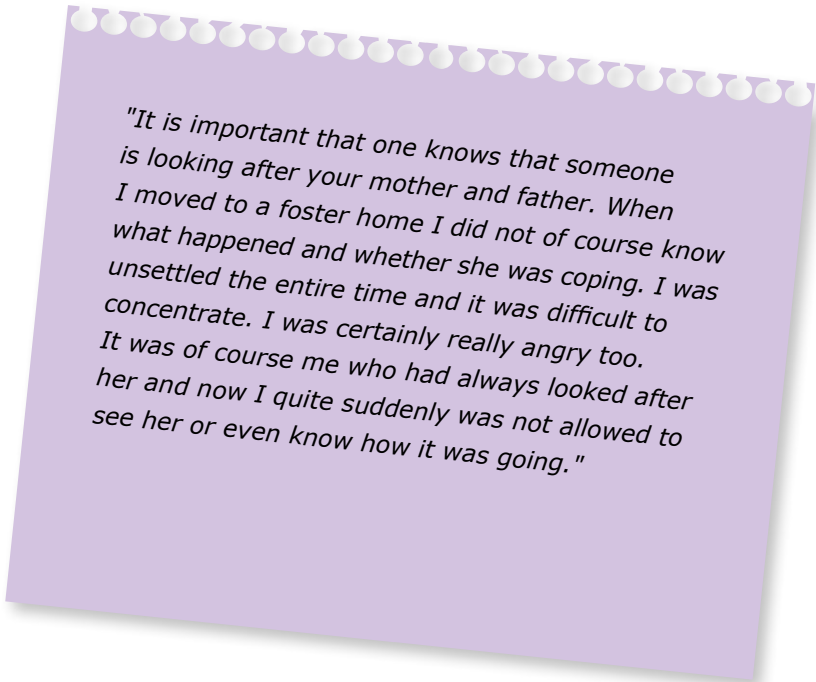
Things go well for most people, but how is a 14-year old supposed to manage on 75 kronor a week, which is supposed to cover a telephone, telephone bill, cigarettes (bad habit—should quit), fun with the girls and a lot of other things?

It is difficult! I think that you who are Ministers should check out how it is for children. It is not always the case that one will tell a psychologist how things are going. The 4 Seasons has young adults who have been through the same things as one has oneself and they thus are better to talk to.

Then there is of course that thing about one not being permitted to sleep over with boys before one is 15 years old (over the minimum age for sex). And if one is not at all having sex? I have both guys and girls as friends. I am often asked whether I would like to go to a Playstation evening/night. I would like to, but I'm not allowed to.

I hope you understand that it is not easy to not live at home, even if it is the best possibility.

Eva



"It is important that one knows that someone is looking after your mother and father. When I moved to a foster home I did not of course know what happened and whether she was coping. I was unsettled the entire time and it was difficult to concentrate. I was certainly really angry too. It was of course me who had always looked after her and now I quite suddenly was not allowed to see her or even know how it was going."

Information

The need for information is something that arises again and again in the meetings. This can concern general information about how one can receive help if one needs it. It could also be quite specific information that one needs, for example, in order to be able to understand and handle one's own life in a better way when a parent is an abuser.

"People who are supposed to help me must explain what they can help me with, not what they cannot do. I must know what they actually can help with. How else am I supposed to feel that there is hope for me?"

"I understood nothing before I received information from the nurse about my father's illness. When she explained, then I understood that it was not anything wring with me or that I was the cause of his behaviour, but rather that it was an illness. Then it became easier to live again!"

"To not be allowed to know is worse than the truth!"

Dear Minister,

I have lived with a foster family and at an institution for a good part of my life and in connection with this, some things happened that I think could have been different.

When as a 14-year old I had to switch foster families, I don't think I was adequately informed about what was going on. It is important that we foster children have some insight into such things that concern us, so we don't need to wonder about it.

When as a 17-year old I had to move to a group residence in Copenhagen, everything went well. Precisely up to when I was to move into a separate flat. Then I was left to myself, and had nobody from the municipality to talk to when I needed help.

It is important that we always have some insight into what concerns us and that we always feel that there is somebody who is prepared to help. Otherwise, I think that you have done a good job with respect to the selection of foster families.

Sincerely, Joel

Stigmatisation and taboos

Many children desire to have greater openness about and tolerance for children who need assistance from the social services. They have many thoughts about how this can be achieved. Preschools, schools and the leisure time sector are important arenas for such work.

"When I need a pair of new jeans, I have to spend a lot of time to find a shop that will take my coupons. And then it is really irritating when the cashier loudly advertises the whole matter to hear if any of her colleagues know how these coupons work!"

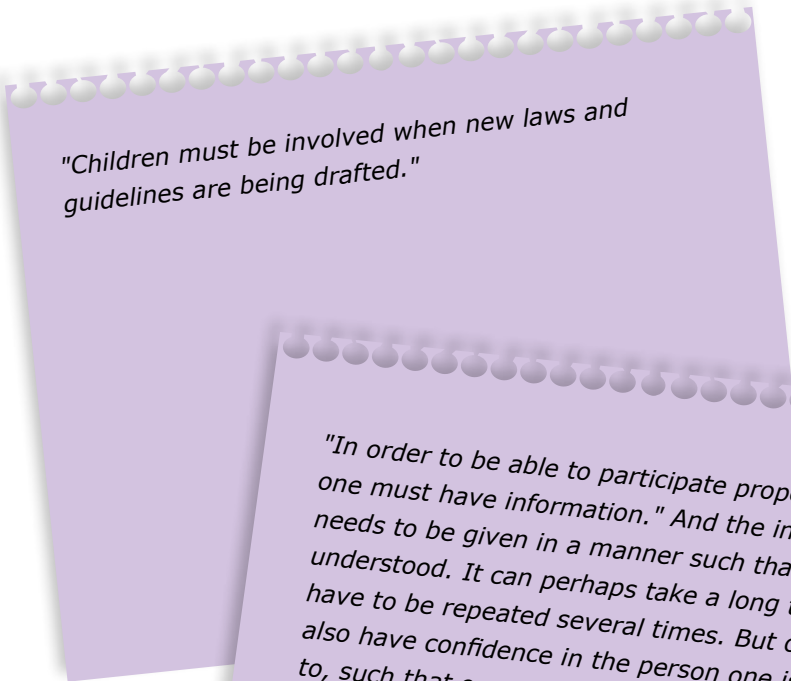
"One feels guilt, shame and uncertainty."

"I am of course a lot more than just a child with poor parents!"

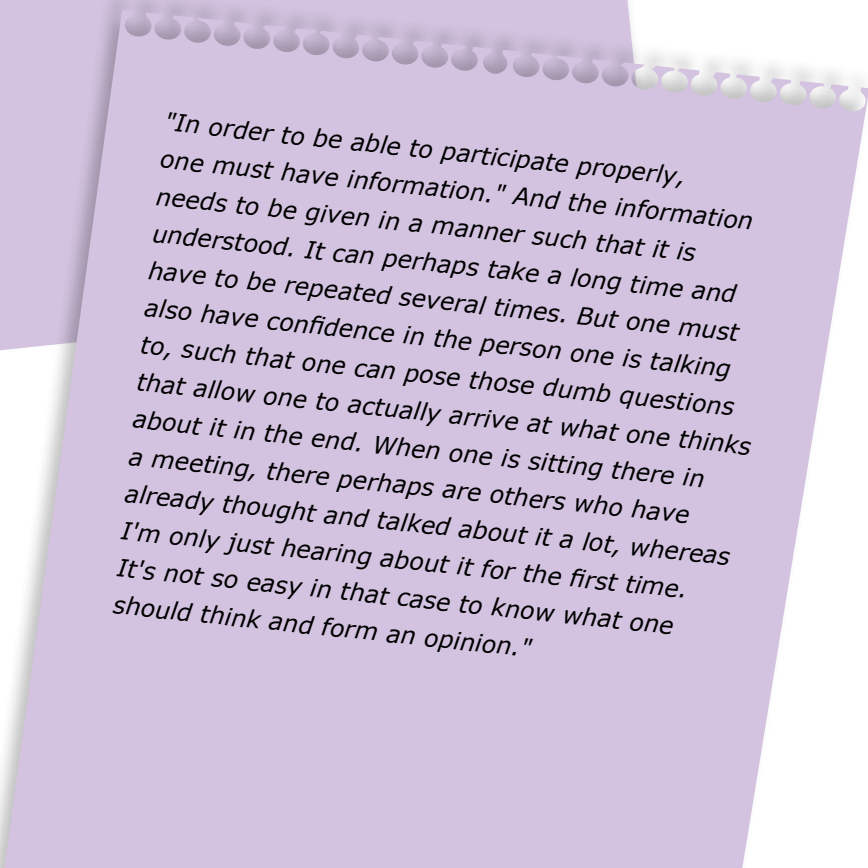
Participating and contributing

In the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child, paragraph 12, it is established that a child has the right to give their opinion and to be heard in matters and things that concern them. This right is also something that our young participants are occupied with. The Nordic legislation that concerns social services for children differs a bit of course between the different Nordic countries, but what they all do have in common is that it the legislation says something about the child's right to information, the right to express an opinion and to be heard.

The young participants in the project have expressed their thoughts on why this is so important and how it can contribute to a positive trend in their lives. They have also given us some good examples of how one can implement these rights in practice.



"Children must be involved when new laws and guidelines are being drafted."



"In order to be able to participate properly, one must have information." And the information needs to be given in a manner such that it is understood. It can perhaps take a long time and have to be repeated several times. But one must also have confidence in the person one is talking to, such that one can pose those dumb questions that allow one to actually arrive at what one thinks about it in the end. When one is sitting there in a meeting, there perhaps are others who have already thought and talked about it a lot, whereas I'm only just hearing about it for the first time. It's not so easy in that case to know what one should think and form an opinion."

"To be able to use one's experiences for something positive through processes such as this is good. It is important to be allowed to participate and to make a difference, so that things go better for other children."

"It is way past time for children to be able to participate and the way things are done must change. When one lives in an institution, there is a great amount of woefulness and judgement. If something has happened or one needs to do something, then it is the adults who discuss and plan, without us. We are just given information at the end and have no opportunity to have any influence. And that makes it easy for conflicts to arise. If we had been allowed to participate from the start, it certainly would have been different and probably functioned better."



Meeting others in the same situation

One important theme of the meetings has been the things that have been helpful in their lives, despite great challenges and risks. All the children from all three meetings have unambiguously listed in this regard meeting others in the same situation, in organised forms. Some of the participants have had experience with this and have shared their experiences.

"Being able to participate in groups with children who are in the same situation is a type of springboard to making progress. One gets positive older role models and dares to believe that things are going well. It gives hope!"

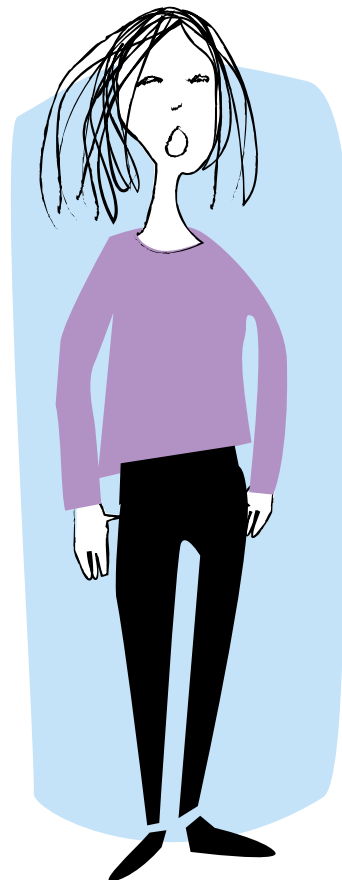
"One has many friends, but there are certain matters that they don't understand and that one probably will never reveal or talk about." I am afraid that they will think badly of me or view me through different eyes if they were allowed to know. With the others in the network, I never feel like that. There, I can show all sides of me and it is easy to ask them for support when one needs it. Just the fact that someone can write or say on Facebook that "I understand how things are for you" can be the little things that save one from dark thoughts.

"Meeting others in a group is a type of therapy that does not do any harm at all, in fact it does good!"

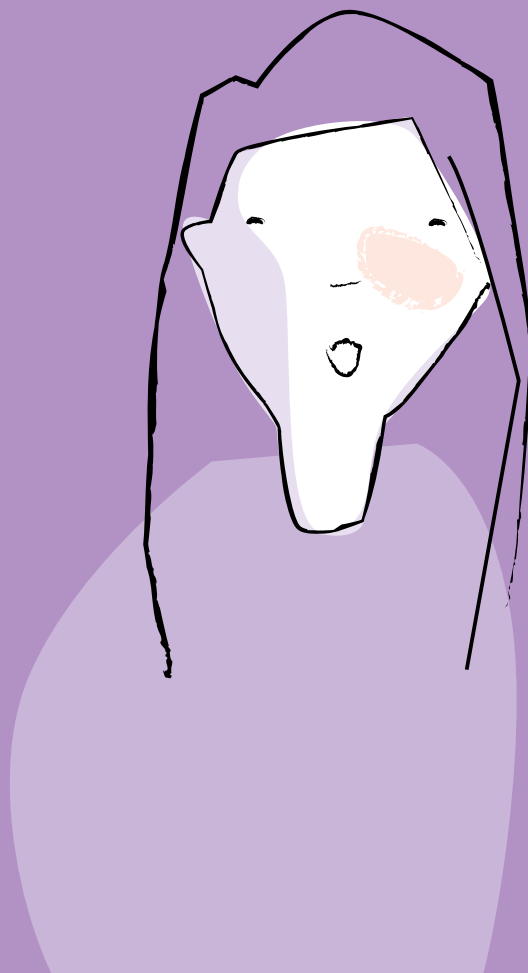
THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS

There are many different ways of working when one wishes to invite children to participate. Regardless of the form, the most important thing of all is how what emerges is received and administrated. If all of us who work with and for children are not interested in or open to receiving what emerges and carrying out the consequences of such in our daily lives, then nothing will change.

If we ask questions, we will receive answers. It is our task and our responsibility both to ask and to learn from the answer, so as to become still better at giving children who need it good help and care, as early as possible in life.



Other examples



Adults for Children has a method for highlighting the voices of children that is one of several that are found in the Nordic countries. They show that important views emerge when the adults choose to listen. These are views that professionals can use in their relations with children who are encountering difficulties as well as that politicians and other decision-makers can use when they wish to achieve policy changes.

Even the other organisations that have participated in the work in our "Early intervention for families' project strive to highlight the voices of the children and use different methods to achieve the goal. In the following, we will present in brief how *The 4 Seasons* in Denmark, *Children's Rights in Society*, BRIS, in Sweden and *Pesäpuu* in Finland are working with participation by children.

THE 4 SEASONS, DENMARK

The mentors make a difference!

The endeavour named *The 4 Seasons* in Denmark has also developed a method for increasing the influence that children have on society. The Children's Ambassadors is a project that has grown out of the organisation's mentor training and the work of the mentors in moulding public opinion. The purpose is to engage children who have been placed and give them a voice in Danish society.

After having finished the mentor training programme, mentors have been asked by *The 4 Seasons* to contribute to highlighting family home care in the on-going debate and via meetings with family home parents, social workers and other professionals. The mentors have visited more than ten municipalities, initiated group meetings and participated in current events programs on TV.

Through their work, the mentors have also paved the way for children who have been attracted by the opportunity to report on their situations. The mentors are included today, together with other children from *The 4 Seasons*, in the Danish National Council for Children's expert panel on placements outside the home. Mentors and children from the organisation also participate in this project, which of course is ultimately being carried out at the behest of the governments of the Nordic countries.

With their experience and knowledge, the young people show what it is like to be a ward of the state, in part that they are a resource that can be counted on. They also wish to influence the public debate to a substantial extent as well as to strengthen the rights of children who have been placed and to give them a voice in society.

The 4 Seasons,

The activity and network house named *The 4 Seasons* is a place for children who are or have been placed outside the home. It started as a project under the Ministry of Social Affairs and the City of Copenhagen and is now included as part of the municipality's support offerings. Among other things, the organisation offers a place with common activities, advising, discussion groups, living in a separate home with an allocated contact person, support in connection with transitioning from a family home and institution.

1. Iceland's help line is for both children and adults

Mentor training

In October 2012, 14 young people between 18 and 26 years of age began their training as mentors under the auspices of The 4 Seasons. All the participants have previously been placed or had other contact with the social services authorities. The training contained social psychology, personal development and leadership training in climbing and kayaking. It is divided up into modules spanning five months. All the modules consist of both theory and practice. Included among the elements in the training are developmental psychology, group psychology, legislation, educational guidance, conflict resolution, interviewing techniques, opinion formation and communications.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN SOCIETY, BRIS, SWEDEN

Children's voices via help lines for children

Every day, hundreds of children contact the Nordic help lines for children—BRIS in Sweden, *Children's Welfare* in Denmark, The Red Cross's *Kors På Halsen* in Norway, The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare's *Children's Help Line* in Finland and the Red Cross's *Hjelparsimi 1717* in Iceland¹. The contacts no longer take place only by telephone, but to a large extent via different Web-based channels such as E-mail, chat and discussion forums.

Via these organisations, children and adolescents in need—anononymously, at no charge and using secure formats—can contact an adult who listens and takes them seriously, gives good support, advice and can link the child to help offered by society. The people who receive the calls are for the most part volunteers who are recruited in accordance with professional criteria, trained and supervised by the help lines. All contacts are documented, at least with respect to gender, age and what the contact concerned, and in all mail-type texts and chat logs the child's own genuine statements about their own situation are found.

BRIS

BRIS, Children's Rights in Society, is a religious and politically non-affiliated membership organisation that has over 40 years of experience in meeting with and interviewing children. Today, BRIS meets with children via BRIS 116 111, BRIS-mail and BRIS-chat. In addition, the children and young people support themselves, in moderated formats, at the Discussion Forum at BRIS.se. In the year 2011, BRIS had 25,900 support-related contacts with children and young people and nearly 40,000 posts were published in the Discussion Forum.

Children's voices

Through all these contacts with children and young people, the help lines are not only able to give the individual children

More about
Nordic help lines:

Sweden:
www.bris.se

Denmark:
www.bornsvilkar.dk

Norway:
www.korspahalsen.no

Finland:
www.mll.fi/nuortennetti

Iceland:
www.redcross.is

More info on
all the world's help lines
for children is available from CHI:
www.childhelplineinternational.org

support and help, but via the voices of the children on the help lines, they are also able to receive unique pictures of the lives, worries and vulnerabilities of children and young people in the Nordic countries today. Due to the support activities' secure format, adaptations for children and the confidence that the children have in the help lines, even the most vulnerable, frightened and deserted children dare to make contact. One can presume that help lines are one of the few entities that actually communicates with children and young people in the so-called hidden statistics, i.e. the children who do not contact or come into contact with society to receive help.

That the children themselves always take the initiative for these contacts also contributes to the authenticity of the reports being able to be presumed to be high. The children are not controlled here in the same manner by specific questions being posed, expectations or dependencies that often affect information from children in other contexts.

Unique grounds for working with children's rights

The children's voices, or pictures, that the help lines receive, collect and analyse give the organisation unique material to use in work with children's rights and to improve the conditions of life for children and young people, which comprises the other important part of their activities. The information is certainly able to be generalised without further qualifications—it does come solely from the children and young people who have contacted the help lines. Trends in what the contacts concern can however still indicate a direction in trends in society for children and young people, if one assumes that it is roughly the same proportion of the population that contacts the help lines from year to year, provided that the help line has not for example markedly changed its activities or marketing.

What is central in this information, the voices of these children, is the genuineness. What children themselves say about what it is like to be vulnerable or have trouble coping, or how society's help is lacking and whether it is unreachable or not functioning properly, is or ought to be invaluable knowledge for a welfare society decision-maker and the entities providing assistance.

This knowledge, for example from BRIS, is already in demand today as a consultative body, ranging from reports and professionals who meet with children and through the BRIS report and BRIS academy, etc.

However the potential is greater and BRIS and other help lines for children in the Nordic countries are always prepared and willing to mediate the voices of children to those in society who might need to hear them!

From the mails of two ten-year old girls to BRIS:

"I have never had a good relationship with my parents. When I was small there were fights regularly... I had to call the police myself the first time when I was six years old. My mother asked me to hide when they came so they wouldn't have to take me away, and I did it."

"The cause of all my mental indispositions began when I was small, really small. Actually, it had nothing to do with me, but there were some problems in the family, I was very small and afraid, it has stayed with me through the years."

(The texts are genuine but have been edited slightly to ensure anonymity.)

Results in practice

- BRIS has approx. 600 contacts per year with children who have been made wards of the state. Based upon their voices and needs, BRIS demanded in the year 2009 that all children taken into state custody have a dedicated social secretary who monitors the children's rights and sees to it that the child's needs are satisfied. In June of 2012 the government in Sweden submitted a proposed law requiring that every child taken into state custody have their own social secretary.
- Mental abuse and mental illness among children are examples of areas where BRIS has broadly enhanced the analysis of children's voices in special reporting and where BRIS makes various suggestions for political efforts intended to improve the life situations of these children. The political interest in the questions is large, however the measures that have been undertaken have had difficulties reaching their targets, including with respect to availability and equal care.

Children participating in development work

In 2008, the *Pesäpuu* project entitled "Children under care of society" was begun. The purpose of the project was to engage young people in developing society's services that were being offered in conjunction with care outside the home. The Survivors Group consists today of 12 young people aged between 16 and 25 years of age who are or have been cared for by the state.

In 2010, the group began preparing the handbook "We believe in you—you should also do so too". The book is targeted towards children and young people who are being cared for by the state. During the autumn of the same year, the first seminar for children and young people was arranged. The meeting had a great influence in the final formulation of the handbook. The handbook was published in October 2011 in connection with the national conference on children in the care of the state. The conference was arranged by the Central Union for Child Welfare.

The Survivors Group arranged, in cooperation with the Ombudsman for Children, the Institute for Health and Welfare, and the Central Union for Child Welfare, a tour of six Finnish cities. During the tour, which took place against the background of the new handbook, the Survivors Group met with 120 children and young people who had been placed.

In connection with the work with the book, they developed a methodology for interviewing children. The next step of the project was to create a national network in which children and young people who are wards of the state have the possibility to actively be included in the decision-making when it concerns issues involving the children's protection and children in the care of the state.

Here are the main points of the method entitled "We believe in you—you should also do so too" that is being used in connection with meetings with groups of children and which is intended to stimulate participation:

1. The mentors introduce themselves and explain the purpose of the meeting.
2. The working relationship for the group is described as well as the rules that apply concerning voluntary actions, confidentiality and the use of mobile telephones.
3. Getting to know each other. The participants tell, for example, on what their age is, how long they have been in the care of the state and about their interests in the protection of children by society.

4. Cards are handed out with texts concerning the protection of children, family homes and the rights of children, as well as the feelings and thoughts that young people often have while they are placed. After a pause to reflect, the cards are read aloud. Everyone has the opportunity to share their thoughts with others, to react to the card and make comments.
5. Snack
6. The participants are assisted in making a diagram showing who the young confide in. Each and every participant receives three balls that are released one by one in three of a total of six plastic tubes. The plastic tubes are labelled "Supervisory Authority", "Social Worker", "Family Home", "Biological Parents", "Friend/Relative" and "None". In the end, the plastic tubes form a bar chart. The young people are given the opportunity to motivate their choices.
7. Work in small groups. Now the themes that are being discussed will be discussed in depth based upon the cards in point 4. The leaders will also participate in the discussion. The groups will make note of the ideas that emerge and present them in a manner of their choice, through numbers, drama, theatre, on bulletin boards or a poster.
8. Conclusion. All the participants will describe the best day they have experienced and will fold a paper airplane. The plane will be thrown and the answer will be read by the person who gets the plane. The same exercise will be repeated with the questions "What message would you send to other young people?" and "What message would you send to the decision-makers?"

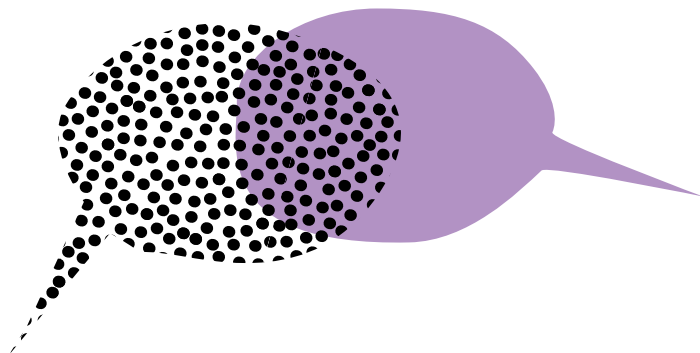
There is no doubt that the tour in the Finnish cities has yielded a results though its influences. In a press release from September 2012, the Finnish Children's Ombudsman Maria Kaisa Aula pointed out that the adults who work in child protection must include children and young people in their decision-making. She made reference in specific to the tour that was arranged by the Survivors Group.

Read the
press release at
[www.nordicwelfare.org/
tidigainsatser](http://www.nordicwelfare.org/tidigainsatser)

The *Pesäpuu* Association, Competency Centre for Child Protection, is a national Finnish child protection organisation that develops and contributes expert knowledge with respect to welfare services for children. Pesäpuu is a non-profit association that is operated with the support of Finland's Slot Machine Association. The objective is to develop high-quality and well-planned support for children. In the organisation's work, children are seen as an active party and not just as the recipients of support. It is important that the child has the possibility to express their desires and that the service suppliers takes them into consideration.

The goal of Pesäpuu's development work is to implement children's active participation and rights in the welfare sector. Pesäpuu develops tangible methods and tools for this: cards, games, workbooks and handbooks. The tools are aimed at people who work with children and families. Children, families, social workers and schools that work with Pesäpuu are also active participants in the development work. Pesäpuu maintains and develops the Pride training programme, which is intended for family homes.

The Pride programme was originally prepared by the Child Welfare League of America in the US. The program is aimed at families and consists in part of a preparatory programme preceding the decision to become a family home and in part a continuing training programme.



A big thank you to all the children who have participated in the meetings that have taken place in Denmark, Finland and Norway. Without them, it would have been impossible to write this booklet! We promise to do our best to disseminate the knowledge and make the voices of children more audible in the societal debate.

We would also like to say a special thank you to the participants in the reference and expert groups who have contributed in many ways to the content of this inspiration booklet:

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- Peter Irgens, BRIS, Sweden
- Ina Nergård, Adults for Children, Norway
- Terese Mersebak, The 4 Seasons, Denmark
- Stina Hansen, The 4 Seasons, Denmark



This DVD film has been produced by *Adults for Children* in Norway. It shows how the method that we describe in the inspiration booklet functions in practice. Production of the disk was commissioned by Nordens Välfärdscenter (Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues). Nordbuk, the Nordic Committee for Children and Young People, provided the financing. We wish to say a special thank you to them here!



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