

The Children's House in Iceland – "Barnahus"

Barnahus (which literally means Children's house) is a child-friendly, interdisciplinary and multiagency centre whereby different professionals work under one roof in investigating suspected child sexual abuse cases and providing appropriate support for child victims in line with the Children Advocacy Centre model. The activities are based on a partnership between the State Police, the State Prosecution, the University Hospital and the local child protection services as well as the Government Agency for Child Protection which is responsible for its operation.

The basic concept of Barnahus is to avoid subjecting the child to repeated interviews by many agencies in different locations, including the courtroom, if an indictment is made. Research has shown that when this happens, it can be very traumatic for the child. This "re-victimization" can even have more harmful effects on the child than the abuse itself. Furthermore research has shown that repeated interviews carried out by people that are not specifically trained in forensic interviewing are likely to distort the child accounts of events by suggestive questioning with detrimental effect on the criminal investigation. Another aim of the Children's house is to provide a child friendly environment for investigative interviews which reduces the level of anxiety of the child which in turn is crucial for successfully eliciting the child's disclosure.

The Barnahus model, somewhat different from the USA model of CAC, includes court statements given in Barnahus under the auspice of a court judge with the aim of save the child from repeating his/her statement and avoid confrontation with the suspected person in the courtroom. This requires that the human rights principle of the "due process" must be met, including the principle of "equality of arms". Therefore, the defence must be able to observe the interview and pose questions to the child via the interviewer as appropriate. This is video-recorded and is accepted as valid evidence in court proceedings, if the case is prosecuted, which has been established as just procedure by the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights.

The Children's House is located in a residential area and its interior is designed to maximize the child's comfort e.g. by toys, pictures and selection of colours. The child is interviewed in a special room by a trained investigative interviewer according to evidence based protocol. The interview is observed in a different room by a judge, who is formally in charge of the procedure, a social worker from the child protection authorities, the police, the prosecution, the defence attorney and the child's advocate. As referred to above the interview is videotaped for multiple purposes, including child protection and criminal investigation and as court testimony at the main proceedings if an indictment is made. This arrangement makes it possible in most cases to do with only one interview with the child as the child need not appear in court. After the interview the child may have the medical examination in the medical room of the house. The findings are documented by paediatricians through the use of a colposcope, a state-of-the-art equipment that records the examination on a video. The House also provides treatment services for child victims of sexual abuse and their families. The child is assessed for therapeutic purposes and an individual treatment plan is designed and executed either at the facilities or, if the child lives outside of the capital area, as near to the home environment as possible.

Barnahus Iceland has inspired the establishment of around fifty such centres during the recent years among the Nordic Countries. It received the *Multidisciplinary Award* by IPSCAN (the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect) in 2006. The model is recommended as good practice in many of Council of Europe standards including the *Guidelines of Child-friendly justice* and the *Recommendation of Child-friendly services* and has been promoted by the Lanzarote Committee, the monitoring body of the *Lanzarote Convention*.