

The Children's House: -Center for Child Sexual Abuse

The Children's House started its operation in November 1998 and serves all of Iceland. It is founded on the American model for child sexual abuse services referred to as "Childrens Advocacy Center".

The Children's House is a child-friendly, interdisciplinary and multiagency centre whereby different professionals work under one roof in the investigation of child sexual abuse cases. It is a result of a partnership, among others between the State Police, the State Prosecution, the University Hospital and the Government Agency for Child Protection.

The basic concept of the Children's House is to prevent subjecting the child to repeated interviews by many agencies in different locations. Research has shown that when this happens, it can be very traumatic for the child and can result in "revictimization", i.e. it can have even more severe effects than the abuse itself. Also research has shown that repeated interviews are likely to distort the child accounts of events, in particular if there are many interviewers. Another important aspect of interviewing child victims is to reduce the level of anxiety of the child. Again research has shown that an anxious child is less likely to express itself than if it is comfortable. The Children's House is designed to maximize the child's comfort e.g. by toys, pictures and selection of colours.

In the Children's House, the child is interviewed in a special room by a trained investigative interviewer. 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, defence attorneys and the child's advocate. The interview is videotaped and can be used in court at the main proceedings. This arrangement makes it possible most often only to take one interview with the child.

After the interview the child may have the medical examination in the on site medical clinic. The findings are documented by paediatricians through the use of a colposcope, 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. Then an individual treatment plan is created and provided either at the facilities or, if the child lives outside of the capital area, as near to her/his home as possible.

The Children's House serves the whole country. On the 10th anniversary of the Children's House in November 2008 more than two thousand children had been referred to the centre for investigative interviews, medical examination or treatment.