

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. 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. 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 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. The interview is videotaped and is used in court at the main proceedings if an indictment is made. This arrangement makes it possible 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 her/his home as possible.

Barnahus Iceland has been a role model for the establishment of around fifty such centres during the recent years in the Nordic Countries. It has received the Multidisciplinary Award by IPSCAN (the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect. The model is recommended as good practice in Council of Europe standards as well as by the Lanzarote Committee.