

Child Protection in Iceland and the role of the Government Agency for Child Protection

According to the Icelandic Child Protection Act, the main objective of child protection is to ensure that children (defined as individuals under the age of 18) are raised in satisfactory conditions. This is to be accomplished by strengthening the nurturing role of the family and by applying remedies to protect individual children when appropriate. The guiding principle of all child protection work should be to follow a course of action which can be expected to prove to result in the „best interests of the child“.

The Ministry of Social Affairs is the ultimate authority in matters of child protection. On behalf of the Ministry, the Government Agency for Child Protection is in charge of day-to-day administration of child protection services. The basic unit for child protection in Iceland is the Child Protection Committee which is responsible for child protection services at the local level. In Iceland there exists a mandatory reporting system in which the public and professionals alike are obliged to notify the local Child Protection Committee if child's welfare is in any way compromised.

Child Protection Services on the Local Level

According to the law, each local authority is required to maintain a Child Protection Committee (CPA) composed of five members. However, the Child Protection Act encourages cooperation between local authorities and joint election of CPA, especially in smaller communities. In December 2013 there are 74 local authorities in Iceland and the number of CPAs is 27. All of the CPAs have professional staffs that are mandated to provide the services and carry out the functions that the Child Protection Act stipulates on a day to day basis.

The CPAs primary functions are to be supportive to the family in accordance with the main objectives of the Child Protection Act. Thus, the Act stipulates comprehensive supportive provisions and measures that children and families are entitled to in order to further the aim of the Act. In cases where it is necessary to remove the child from the home for longer than two months the case is brought to the District Courts with avenues of appeal to the Supreme Court.

In an overwhelming majority of cases, cooperation between the CPA and parents is established for the benefit of the child. There are, however, cases that are not easily resolved. An average of 10- 15 cases annually result in coercive termination of parental rights. Decisions made by CPA that are of a coercive nature can be referred to the Child Protection Appeals Board or the relevant District Court depending on the nature and seriousness of the decisions.

CPA deals with more than 8000 referrals each year. At the risk of oversimplification, these cases can be classified into two groups. On one hand are cases of child abuse and neglect by parents who typically suffer from psychiatric and emotional problems and/or substance abuse. On the other hand are cases where the child her/himself, normally an adolescent, is threatening his/her own well being with self-destructive behaviour, such as alcohol and drug abuse and delinquency.

The Government Agency for Child Protection

The primary role of the Government Agency for Child Protection is to co-ordinate and to enhance child protection work at the local level and nationally. This includes the following:

- a) to provide counselling and support to Child Protection Committees at the local level with regard to family welfare and the management of child protection cases,
- b) to monitor the work of Child Protection Committees, e.g. by collecting and analysing annual reports of the local CPA and by other means to be determined,
- c) to provide specialised services that the Child Protection Committees may need to ensure that children's needs are accommodated
- d) to supervise and monitor institutions and homes operated or supported by the government for children and youth, including a gate-keeping role with regard to out-of-home placement
- e) to assume the responsibility for recruiting and training prospective foster parents and provide counselling with regard to placement in foster care
- f) To support research and development work in the area of child protection, g) provide education, training and instruction concerning child protection in general and work procedures in particular

The Government Agency for Child Protection is responsible for the operation of specialized services in child protection:

The Children's House in Iceland – „Barnahus“

Barnahus is a child friendly, interdisciplinary and multiagency centre whereby different professionals work under one roof in the investigation of suspected child sexual abuse cases.

The basic concept behind 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 may result in "re-victimization", or the amplification harmful consequences that can be more severe than the abuse itself.

In the Children's House the child is interviewed in a special room by a trained investigative interviewer. The interview is observed in another 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 in most cases only to conduct only one interview with the child.

After the interview the child can be provided with medical examination in the on-site medical clinic. The findings are documented by paediatricians through the use of a video-colposcope, state-of-the-art equipment that records the examination on videotape.

The Children's House also provides treatment services for child victims of sexual abuse and their families. A diagnosis is made of the child for therapeutic purposes. Then an individual treatment plan is created. From the year 2015 the service is also for child victims of physical abuse and domestic violence.

Treatment for children and youth with sexual behavior problems

Children develop sexually, just as they develop physically, emotionally and socially. This process begins at birth and continues through childhood. Even young children have sexual feelings and engage in sexual behavior. Sometimes, sexual behavior becomes a problem when it is persistent, aggressive, occurs in public or involves other children in harmful ways. From the year 2009 the Government Agency for Child Protection has provided treatment for children and youth with sexual behavior problems. There are three psychologists who are located in Reykjavík but work with children and youth all over Iceland.

Service at home for children and youth

Parent Management Training - Oregon model (PMTO™) is an evidence-based structured intervention to help parents and caregivers manage the behavior of their children. The PMTO method is designed to promote prosocial skills and cooperation and to prevent, reduce and reverse the development and maintenance of mild to moderate to severe conduct problems in children age 4 - 12. PMTO empowers parents as primary treatment agents to promote and sustain positive change in families. The base for PMTO in Iceland has been within the Government Agency for Child Protection from the year 2013. The Agency provides education for professionals who want to use PMTO with families in the community.

Multisystemic Therapy (MST) is an intensive family- and community-based treatment program that focuses on addressing all environmental systems that impact chronic and violent juvenile offenders - their homes and families, schools and teachers, neighbourhoods and friends. MST recognizes that each system plays a critical role in a youth's world and each system requires attention when effective change is needed to improve the quality of life for youth and their families. MST works with the toughest offenders ages 12 through 17 who have a very long history of arrests. There are two MST teams in Iceland, they are located in Reykjavík but work with families all over Iceland.

Treatment facilities for children and youth

The Government Agency for Child Protection is responsible for four institutions and treatment homes for children with behavioural and emotional problems, delinquency (acting out, criminality) and substance abuse. One of these facilities is the State Diagnostic Centre for Adolescents, which provides diagnosis and short term treatment for youth. On the basis of the diagnosis, a decision is made as to whether the youth can return to his/her family, post-care services to be provided or if the child needs continued out-of-home placement in another treatment facility. The State Diagnostic Centre for Adolescents is located in Reykjavík but works with youth and families from the whole country.

The remaining three facilities provide treatment for 6-9 months and are located in pleasant rural surroundings. Besides individual as well as group therapy, a major responsibility is providing education and/or vocational training. Other areas of emphasis are healthy leisure activities, participating in work or taking on other responsibilities.