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## "It's Like Piecing Together Small Pieces of a Puzzle". Difficulties in Reporting Abuse and Neglect of Disabled Children to the Social Services

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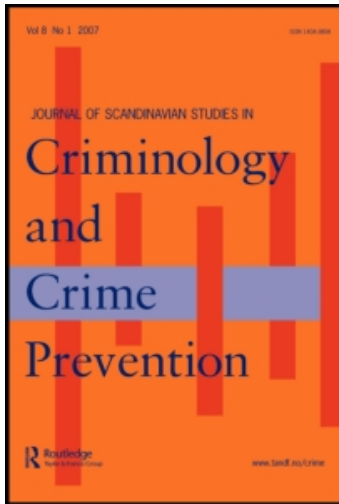
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### 'It's Like Piecing Together Small Pieces of a Puzzle'. Difficulties in Reporting Abuse and Neglect of Disabled Children to the Social Services

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# ‘It’s Like Piecing Together Small Pieces of a Puzzle’. Difficulties in Reporting Abuse and Neglect of Disabled Children to the Social Services

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## Abstract

According to Swedish law, the Child and Youth Habilitation Services are obliged to report abuse and neglect of disabled children to the Social Services. Only a small proportion of all children who are suspected of being victims of abuse or neglect are, however, reported to the Social Services. The aim of this study is to discuss why some cases of abuse and neglect of disabled children are considered difficult to report by the Child and Youth Habilitation Services. The qualitative data were collected

during individual and natural group interviews with 14 members of the staff of a regional division of this authority. The study shows that reporting was seen as a ‘last resort’ and was used only when all other remedies had been exhausted. The main obstacles to reporting were to be found in the perceived closeness between staff members and the disabled children’s families. Other obstacles to reporting were habilitation ideals, cultural ideas about the family, a lack of evidence of abuse and neglect, and

uncertainty about the children’s future after reporting. Factors that facilitated reporting were visible proof of abuse and neglect, and the disabled children’s ability to communicate. Furthermore, certain criminal acts against the children were seen as more reprehensible than others and thus easier to report.

**KEY WORDS:** Abuse and neglect, Child maltreatment, Children, Disability, Habilitation Services, Last resort, Qualitative, Report, Sexual abuse, Social Services

## Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss how the professionals at a regional division of the Child and Youth Habilitation Services reason when they report abuse and neglect of disabled children to the Social Services.<sup>1</sup> The Child and Youth Habilitation Services are a part of the health and medical care services in a Swedish county and provide support, treatment, training, and resources

for children with permanent disabilities that are congenital or were acquired at an early age. The habilitation units at the Child and Youth Habilitation Services are made up of numerous experts who make assessments based on the disabled children’s and the families’ needs and provide medical treatment, as well as educational, social, and psychological support.<sup>2</sup> The work of the Habilitation Services has

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<sup>1</sup> In Sweden, the Habilitation Services and Social Services are two separate organizations, and co-operation between these two organizations requires specific administrative processes.

<sup>2</sup> The intra-professional teams consist of occupational therapists, dieticians, recreation officers, social workers, speech therapists, psychologists, physiotherapists, and teachers. If necessary, the teams also consult paediatricians and nurses (see also Bohlin 2009:80).

developed from continuous ‘hands-on’ treatment to ‘hands-off’ consultation and various intensive training methods (Bohlin 2009). Today, habilitation work has mainly moved out of the consultation rooms at the Habilitation Services. In addition, the child’s parents, preschool teachers, and school teachers are expected to co-operate in habilitation work. The training provided by the Habilitation Services is not obligatory, and the parents can choose to discontinue the child’s habilitation training at any time.

According to the law,<sup>3</sup> the Child and Youth Habilitation Services are obliged to report abuse and neglect of disabled children to Social Services<sup>4</sup> (Social Services Act SFS 2001:453). Child abuse and neglect can be reported by letter, verbally, and anonymously to the Social Welfare Board in the municipality where the child is registered. Accordingly, the Social Services start an investigation, where the child’s immediate need for protection or support is analysed (National Board of Health and Welfare 2006). If the act of abuse and neglect includes violence or sexual abuse, the Social Services also report such abuse and neglect to the police. The suspected crime is then investigated by the police.

It can, however, be difficult to define when a situation or an act should be reported to the Social Services.<sup>5</sup> According to the Swedish National Board of Health

and Welfare, reporting is undertaken on behalf of only a small proportion of children who are suspected of being victims of abuse or neglect (National Board of Health and Welfare 2004:12). This also corresponds with international research, according to which many professionals employed by health and medical institutions under-report child victimization (Finkelhor 2008).

The main question of this article is why some cases are considered difficult to report by the staff members of the Child and Youth Habilitation Services, while other cases are seen in the opposite light. I will, however, start by discussing earlier studies that addressed both the neglect and abuse of disabled children and how to report such neglect and abuse.

#### *Violence against children with disabilities*

It is difficult to define the extent of abuse or other types of crime against disabled persons (Malmberg and Färm 2007:10), and the results of studies in this area are inconsistent. Two Swedish studies may exemplify this uncertainty. According to Swedish researcher Barbro Lewin, a study of crimes against adults with learning disabilities reveals that the incidence of such crimes is considerably lower for persons with learning disabilities than for the population as a whole (Lewin 2002). At the same time, a report from Statistics Sweden shows that the vulnerability to violence among disabled persons is relatively high in comparison with the total Swedish population (Statistics Sweden 2003:328).

Studies of whether disabled children run a higher risk of becoming victims of maltreatment than do children without disabilities also present quite heterogeneous

<sup>3</sup> In 2001, crime victims became through legal changes a new target group for the Social Services under the Swedish Social Services Act (SFS 2001:453) (Ljungwald and Elias 2010).

<sup>4</sup> As represented by the municipal Social Welfare Board.

<sup>5</sup> In the Government Bill (2002/03:53), several situations where a child is at risk of being maltreated are described. Situations which can lead to reporting are situations that comprise physical violence, mental violence, sexual abuse, abusive behaviour, physical neglect, lack of care, and mental neglect.

results.<sup>6</sup> The majority of international studies show that disabled children run a higher risk than do other children of becoming victims of maltreatment (National Council for Crime Prevention 2007:29–30). Disabled children run a slightly higher risk than other children of being subjected to physical abuse in their homes and to bullying at school (National Council for Crime Prevention 2007:29–30). In a study by Save the Children Sweden (2007), disabled children and children with chronic diseases are shown as being more at risk of becoming victims of maltreatment than are other children. A recent study by Cederborg and Gumpert (2010) states that children with intellectual disabilities are more likely than typically developed children to be maltreated or become victims of crime. However, the National Council for Crime Prevention (2007:27) argues that it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about whether disabled children run a greater risk of becoming victims of maltreatment than do other children.

The extent of violence against children with disabilities is thus difficult to define. The perpetrators, however, are easier to narrow down (National Council for Crime Prevention 2007:28). In many cases of abuse against disabled children, the perpetrator is acquainted with the victim and, in most cases, is the victim's mother or father (National Council for Crime Prevention 2007:28). Research also shows that violent

acts against disabled persons, both adults and children, occur most often in the victim's home or in sheltered housing (Government Bill 2002/03:53).

### Research settings and methods

This article is based on in-depth interviews with 14 professionals who work at the Child and Youth Habilitation Services and have reported maltreatment of disabled children aged between 0 and 18 years of age to the Social Services. The interviews were carried out both individually and in groups at eight different habilitation units within the Child and Youth Habilitation Services.<sup>7</sup> These semi-structured interviews were tape-recorded and collected by the author in spring 2009.

The first contact with the informants, i.e. the staff members, was by letter, forwarded by the Head of the Child and Youth Habilitation Services. In the letter, members of staff who had reported maltreatment of children to the Social Services were invited to contact the author for an interview. A total of 16 members of staff answered, of whom 14 express their views in this article.<sup>8</sup> The staff members whom I have interviewed work as psychologists, social workers, speech therapists, nurses, paediatricians, and divisional heads.

Interviewing can be conducted in a variety of styles. The interview method has sometimes been described as a continuum between the individual, or

<sup>6</sup> The picture is also blurred by the varying meaning of the term child maltreatment. In many international studies, the term maltreatment comprises neglect, abuse and sexual abuse (National Council for Crime Prevention 2007), whereas Swedish research puts the terms assault, maltreatment, and violence on an equal footing (Malmberg and Färm 2007; National Council for Crime Prevention 2007; Save the Children Sweden 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Of the eight interviews used in this article, five interviews were conducted individually and three in groups. Of the three group interviews, the first was conducted with four informants, the second with two informants, and the third with three informants.

<sup>8</sup> Due to technical problems, the remaining two persons had to be re-interviewed at a later date. Their experiences of reporting child abuse and neglect are therefore not analysed in this article.

person-to-person, interview on the one hand, and the focus group interview on the other (Rothe et al. 2009). My interviews consist of five person-to-person interviews and three natural group interviews (Hyde et al. 2005). As I have neither put the groups together nor chosen the number of participants in the groups, my group interviews resemble unstructured focus group interviews.

The advantages and disadvantages of individual interviews and group interviews as research methods have been thoroughly discussed in earlier studies (see e.g. Morgan 1996; Wibeck 2000; Ryen 2004; Hyde et al. 2005; Karlsson and Pettersson 2006; Repstad 2007; Rothe et al. 2009). Therefore, this study will only briefly reflect on some of the characteristics of the three group interviews.

A natural group can be described as a group where persons previously known to one another are brought together for the purposes of generating data about a topic (Hyde et al. 2005). The strength of the natural group is thus that it allows the researcher to 'experience albeit in an artificial setting, the jokes, insults, innuendoes, responses, sensitivities and dynamics of the group, as group members interact with one another, which may offer new insights into the substantive topic under investigation' (Hyde et al. 2005:2589).

The interviewees in the three natural group interviews were selected in three different ways. During the first of the three group interviews, the informants were all participants of the same habilitation team, and had *jointly* reported a case of maltreatment to the Social Services. The second group interview consisted of two habilitation team members, both with different professions, who had *jointly*

reported a case of maltreatment. The third group consisted of three colleagues with the same profession who all had *individually* reported maltreatment of a child to the Social Services.

### Obstacles to reporting

I will now move on to discussing my informants' experiences of why reporting neglect and abuse of disabled children is so difficult. In my analysis, the staff members of the Child and Youth Habilitation Services see reporting as a 'last resort', a concept that has been discussed by Robert M Emerson in his study *On Last Resorts* (1981). Some extreme sanctions are, according to Emerson (1981), held to be appropriate only as a last resort.

In this study, I discuss such an extreme sanction: reporting as the last alternative in an attempt to stop maltreatment of disabled children. Reporting to the Social Services is thus experienced as a last resort, and as the very last option, when the Child and Youth Habilitation Services staff have come to the end of their resources. While first-resort decisions are typically presented as what should or ought to be done, last-resort decisions are typically framed in an idiom of necessity (Emerson 1981:4–6). In addition, last-resort decisions include the claim that the action planned is the only available alternative. According to Emerson, last resorts are legitimated by showing that the entire range of normal remedies for cases of this sort has been exhausted, thus leaving this last, most extreme measure as the last alternative (Emerson 1981:9). In the quotation below, a Child and Youth Habilitation Services staff member describes her colleagues' aversion to reporting a case before all the 'normal' remedies are exhausted. The colleagues

want to employ yet another set of normal remedies, and only when these fail can they discuss reporting the case to the Social Services.

I had one case [of abuse] when I started working in [another town]. I wasn't yet too involved with the family. Being a bit of an outsider I asked 'Don't you think it is time to discuss [reporting] the case within the team?' [But the rest of the team said] 'We want to try *this*', and they went home to the family and ... I understand them. They tried to bring the parents to their senses in every possible way—hey, I understand them.

The focus of this paper turns next to the reasons as to *why* reporting is seen as a last resort by the staff. I will start by examining the obstacles to reporting. Firstly, how the perceived closeness between the staff and families at the Habilitation Services affects the reporting propensity. Thereafter, by discussing habilitation ideology and the Habilitation Services staff members' ideas about 'family' as obstacles for reporting. Finally, by discussing how the staff's considerations of the child's future have a negative effect on the reporting propensity.

#### *Being 'too close'*

As discussed above, the staff members of the Child and Youth Habilitation Services think of reporting to the Social Services as quite the very last alternative in trying to stop child maltreatment.

The cases of child abuse and neglect, which the informants discuss, are cases where the perpetrator is the child's parent or step-parent. The staff of the Child and Youth Habilitation Services tend to sympathize with the child's parents, which makes reporting more difficult. Research

into how parents perceive their disabled children has described the parents' feelings as 'sorrow' (Fyhr 2002) or 'stress and frustration' (National Council for Crime Prevention 2007: 42). The parents are often also described as 'exhausted' or 'in crisis' (Eriksson 2001 in National Council for Crime Prevention 2007; Bohlin 2009). Sometimes parents even fantasize about killing their disabled child (Fyhr 2002). These feelings are seen in the literature as something acceptable and 'normal' for a parent of a disabled child to experience (e.g. Fyhr 2002). This is a perspective that is shared by the habilitation staff. The habilitation staff express sympathy for those parents who experience stress and sorrow.

This empathy with the parents makes the habilitation staff feel that they are close to them, which may obstruct reporting of abuse or neglect. While discussing cases that are difficult to report, the informants describe the parents in a sympathetic and understanding way. Some parents are described as 'not being able to see the needs of the child as they are concerned with their own needs'. One parent is described as 'a parent who isn't quite adequate' and another one, who poured ice-cold water over his child, is described as 'uninformed'.

The complex relation between the parents and the habilitation staff is also described as follows: 'They [the parents] do as well as they can. We [the staff] are so involved, we are *too close*'. Another informant explains it:

Everyone who works here doesn't want to report, some [of the colleagues] are too involved with the families and have such a close relationship with the



families and the children. They find it difficult to report. It [reporting] isn't always that easy. There are several [cases] that I turned over in my mind, whether I should report or not, at least they are on the verge of being reported. But the rest of the team says: 'No, that family is rather so-so, oh, one cannot help feeling sorry for the mother'. But one mustn't see it like that, one has to do what is best for the child.

The difficulty with being too close is also described in the following terms: 'some staff members are too tied to the families and have difficulties in seeing them [the families] clearly'. As another informant puts it: 'One is too involved and doesn't see it [the abuse or neglect], one doesn't want to, one puts on one's blinkers.'

#### *Habilitation ideals*

Another obstacle to reporting seems to be the family-oriented approach at the Child and Youth Habilitation Services. One reason to this is that habilitation work always includes the child's family network.<sup>9</sup> This is, e.g., seen in habilitation training, which includes training the parents, and habilitation methods where the parent's contribution to the treatment is crucial. In order to make habilitation work flexible and, ultimately, successful for the child, problem-free co-operation between the habilitation unit and the family is thus of the utmost importance. The habilitation staff's desire for non-problematic co-operation with the parents

makes the reporting of abuse or neglect more difficult (see also National Board of Health and Welfare 2004). Using Swedish sociologist Malin Åkerström's (2006:70) argument, the Habilitation Services staff have to balance their closeness to the family members as partners or *co-habilitators*<sup>10</sup> and the necessity of 'setting limits' for those family partners.

#### *Ideas about 'family'*

The interviews indicate that the Child and Youth Habilitation Services staff are occasionally afraid of identifying violence against the disabled children. According to Hannele Forsberg, a Finnish family sociologist, children often are seen as 'pure' and 'innocent', which makes it difficult to take in children's narratives about the violence to which they have been subjected (Forsberg 2005). Other studies have also described reporting violence as repugnant (Hindberg 2007). It is therefore easier to close one's eyes instead of reporting. This may thus be a reason for the Child and Youth Habilitation Services staff's difficulties with reporting. As one of the staff members says:

But violence—I don't know if we even *dare* to identify it. I can't tell you that physical injuries are easier to report, I don't know if we even *see* them.

In addition, the myth of the happy family and the norm of respecting the families' private lives obstruct identification of the abuse problem as well as efforts to tackle it (Hindberg 2007). There is a firm cultural belief, according to which parents love their children, want what is best for them,

<sup>9</sup> On its web page, the Child and Adolescent Habilitation Services department that I have studied writes: 'One of the corner-stones of the work of the Child and Adolescent Habilitation is that all treatment is given in consultation and in close co-operation with the child, the family, and other social resources' (my translation).

<sup>10</sup> In her study, Åkerström discusses the term 'co-rehabilitators' (2006:71).



and do not abuse them (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2001).

### *Lack of evidence*

Child abuse and neglect is a difficult and sensitive issue. In order not to accuse innocent people, the informants want to have *evidence* of the abuse or neglect before they report. The Habilitation Services staff dread reporting crimes on flimsy grounds, without clear evidence of the abuse. One informant puts it as follows:

If the dad [the perpetrator of the sexual abuse] would come back and hunt me down and say ‘You have reported me to the Social Services; on which grounds did you do it?’ And I’d just stand there and say ‘Well, I just had a strange feeling’. *That’s* the situation I’ve been afraid of.’<sup>11</sup>

The staff’s demands for *evidence* before reporting is, however, paradoxical, as it is stated that the individual does not have to have certain knowledge that the child is being badly treated before reporting (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2001). Persons working with children do not have to judge whether what they have seen or heard actually *is* evidence of child abuse. Persons working with children are encouraged by the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs (2001) to report all incidents to the Social Services. It is then up to Social Services to investigate the case and decide whether it should be referred to a higher level. The following is how a member of the staff sums it up.

But why don’t I [report]? What could possibly happen? ... What makes me so afraid [of reporting]? I have a colleague who is just as afraid as I am, and none of us puts our foot down. Why? Is it because we don’t have the *evidence*? We don’t have to have positive proof [of maltreatment], but the Social Services do.

### *Consequences*

Another common reason for not reporting is the uncertainty about the child’s future afterwards. As an informant puts it: ‘What if I’m wrong, and I’ve ruined an awful lot for the family in the future?’

Many of the informants express worries about how the child will cope if the child’s parents are reported to the Social Services. Will the parents stop the child receiving his or her habilitation treatment, or, if the parent is convicted of the abuse or neglect, who will take care of the child and see to its special needs?<sup>12</sup>

We don’t have a tradition of reporting [abuse or neglect]. ... I think we have to discuss the obligation to report, [that] we have an obligation to report. We have a tendency to be sympathetic and identify [with the parents], and try to *help*. ... I think that if someone did some research into this topic, there would be many who’d say, ‘We know that this child isn’t being taken care of in an appropriate way but if we report it, they [the family] won’t even come here [to the Child and Youth Habilitation Services Unit] for their treatment’.

<sup>11</sup> Fear of retaliation by the perpetrators also is common reason for children not to report sexual abuse (Finkelhor 2008:108).

<sup>12</sup> In a study by the Norwegian Bergljot Baklien (2009), teachers and preschool teachers also express worries about whether reporting child abuse and neglect would actually improve the maltreated child’s situation.

Some of the informants are critical of the Social Services' ability to see to the needs of the disabled child<sup>13</sup> and expresses this as: 'Who is going to care for the child? The Child and Youth Habilitation Services specialize in children with disabilities, but the Social Services do not. Who will take care of them?' During a focus group interview, three members of staff argue in the following manner:

*Informant 1:* I thought, it [reporting] isn't easy. One just can't decide one way or the other, like, I can't remember thinking of it as *that* serious, what we had seen, that we'd have to rush to the phone. It hasn't been like that, because we are concerned about having a good relationship with the family, and [are concerned about] knowing that they'll stay, that they won't be left hanging in the air all by themselves.

*Informant 2:* I think, I see in many discussions [with colleagues] that [they think] 'If I report these parents, they won't want to be involved with us, what a dreadful prospect'.

*Informant 3:* You can see that this is quite often the result; you don't know what happens next. We don't know [after reporting to the Social Services], what kind of support they'll get instead, or if they'll lose touch with us.

Studies have shown that one of the reasons why adult disabled women do not report their having become victims of abuse and neglect is that they are uncertain whether there is any available resort for people with their disabilities (National Council for Crime Prevention 2007:45). This uncertainty can also be detected in the interviews in this study. If abuse is reported, the abused child may be removed from its family to another part of the county or to another county. As stated above, it is uncertain whether the child will receive proper habilitation treatment after this change of residence. Will it receive 'good' treatment where it ends up?

### Factors that facilitate reporting

In this section, the discussion turns to analysing the factors that facilitate reporting. These are visible proof such as bruises on the child's body and psychological factors such as when the child starts to act out. Subsequently, the discussion focuses on crimes that are seen as more reprehensible by the informants and are thus easier to report.

#### *Clarity and visibility*

The process, during which the staff of the Child and Youth Habilitation Services decide how to report abuse or neglect, is long and complicated. The abuse cases eventually referred to the Social Services by the Child and Youth Habilitation Services staff have been thoroughly reflected upon and therefore seem to have been finely filtered (Emerson 1991). When the staff of the Child and Youth Habilitation Services actually report abuse or neglect to the Social Services, the particular case of abuse or neglect is a

<sup>13</sup> The idea of the Habilitation Services staff as experts on disability has also been discussed by the Swedish researcher Ulla Bohlin (2009). Bohlin, who has studied the Habilitation Services as an organization, acknowledges the 'disability perspective' as an important element in the social construction of the Child and Youth Habilitation Services (2009:128). On the one hand, the Child and Youth Habilitation Services, according to the 'disability perspective' are obliged to defend the rights of disabled children to a greater extent than other organizations are. On the other hand, the 'disability perspective' enables the Habilitation Services staff to act as 'disability experts'.

serious one. One of the informants describes this as follows:

We meet the families very seldom here; it's a miracle that we see so much [of the abuse or neglect] that we can report it. I think, once we do, it's quite serious. It's so serious that it's visible also here [at the Child and Youth Habilitation Services].

Some cases are, however, easier than others to report. It appears that visible marks and visible, palpable signs of violence are easier to report than signs of neglect, which are described as 'blurry' and as 'soft data'.<sup>14</sup> Neglect is also presented in the literature as difficult to define, as the needs of the child and the parents' ability to care for it are not static (Hindberg 2007). Parents who are able to care for their child periodically can 'lose' this ability because of life crises, illness, or conflicts within the family. Furthermore, the problem with identifying neglect can be associated with the complexity of what 'normal' family behaviour is and what kind of demands there may be on a family (Voysey Paun 1975/2006).

The persons that have been interviewed for this study refer to it being easy to report visible signs of violence because of their *clarity*. When there are easily detected signs of violence, child abuse is considered easy to report. One member of the staff says:

If someone comes here and has bruises, it is much clearer and easier: this is a case we *have* to report.

In an action programme against child abuse and neglect that is followed by the Child and Youth Habilitation Services staff, bruises are listed as a common sign of abuse.<sup>15</sup> The action programme also contains a very detailed schedule which facilitates defining whether bruises are the result of an accident 'typical' for a child or the result of child abuse. This schedule originated in a brochure by the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs that lists the most typical injuries in child abuse. The brochure is aimed at health services professionals (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2001). As distinct injuries of child maltreatment, the brochure firstly mentions 'a chain of bruises from pinching or squeezing using the fingertips'.<sup>16</sup> Later on, the text states 'Bruises are among the most common injuries' (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2001). The action programme followed by the Habilitation Services staff also refers to a book by Barbro Hindberg (2007), a Swedish expert on child abuse and neglect, which is often used in Swedish studies of child abuse and neglect. Here, Hindberg (2007:63) defines bruises as *the most common sign*<sup>17</sup> that a child has been subjected to violence. The emphasis on bruises as a sign of child abuse in the action programme therefore confirms that bruises should be reported.

Cases that are considered visible in a psychological way are also reported more easily than other cases. One informant

<sup>14</sup> According to the sociologist David Finkelhor, who has studied childhood victimization (2008), violent crimes, against both adults and children, are more often reported to the police if the crimes include serious injuries.

<sup>15</sup> In order not to point out where the informants work, there are no bibliographical data about the action programme.

<sup>16</sup> The Swedish text is '*Till de tydliga skadorna hör pärlband av blåmärken efter fingertoppar vid kläm och nyp*'.

<sup>17</sup> Emphasis added.

describes a situation where a boy, who was being abused by his stepfather, acts out, which he does in a very visible and tangible way that leads to a report.

He had earlier trashed the classroom and so had remedial teaching at home. He told the teacher: ‘I’ll show you something’. He went out in the kitchen, showed her the kitchen drawer and said: ‘I’ll stab him [the violent stepfather] with that’. He had planned it that far. And if he didn’t succeed, he’d throw himself in front of a car .... He was very clearly asking for help. Very clearly.

Here, the boy’s acting out is a ‘text-book example’, as abused boys are *supposed* to act out, while abused girls are supposed to keep their feelings to themselves (Hindberg 2007). This probably facilitated the reporting of the case described above.

It has also been argued that communication difficulties play a central role in the physical abuse of children with disabilities (Knutson et al. 2004; Cederborg and Gumpert 2010). Children with hearing impairment, speech and language disorders, and developmental disabilities have difficulties in communicating that they are being subjected to abuse or neglect. According to the informants it also is easier to report violence when it is *communicated* by the child or a parent. As the children usually are very loyal to their parents and do not like the idea of informing on them, the professionals become very alert when children actually say that they have been hit by a parent.

*Interviewer:* I’m wondering about [the importance of] being able to tell someone yourself ...

*Informant:* If a child says ‘My dad hits me’, it has to be investigated, hasn’t it.

*Interviewer:* Exactly, yes.

*Informant:* There’s no doubt.

*Interviewer:* Even if you don’t see any concrete evidence?

*Informant:* If the child tells me that, it must be investigated, and then I’ll just tell the parents that we are bound to do like this, and then it’s investigated. ... Then the investigation shows what has happened. There isn’t any hesitation, so to speak.

If the narratives about the violent act related by a child and a parent differ to a great degree, the informants also become wary. In the case discussed below, the mother had witnessed the maltreatment of her son but wanted to protect the perpetrator, the boy’s stepfather. The case is categorized as an ‘easy case’ by the Child and Youth Habilitation Services staff as the mother’s and son’s stories do not match. In the action programme on how to report child abuse and neglect, followed by the Child and Youth Habilitation Services, it is pointed out that an important warning signal of child abuse and neglect is that the child’s and parent’s accounts of how the child received the injury do not correlate. This may explain the two staff members’ agreement below that the case that we are discussing was an easy one to report.

*Interviewer:* Was this an easy case, because the boy could communicate?

*Informant 1:* Yes.

*Informant 2:* Yes, and because the mother was as slippery as an eel, it was like trying to catch a piece of soap. It didn’t make sense. She was so defensive ... it wasn’t logical when you heard

their [the mother's and the boy's] stories. It didn't make sense.<sup>18</sup>

A case, such as this, where the abuse is somehow communicated, is rare, however, and as an informant says:

[It is easy] if you have seen the child, [or] if someone has told you, [or] the parents have told you, or the child has. But it has never happened to me. It [reporting] is rather a consequence of my general uneasiness; it's like piecing together small pieces of a puzzle.

Apparently, visible cases are more easily reported while they are also considered obvious cases by the Social Services. The Child and Youth Habilitation Services staff thus choose to report the cases, which the Social Services most likely refer to the police. One of the informants sums this up as follows:

There is a tendency that the easiest injuries to report are visible ones, as they are concrete and the Social Services are much more confident. That's a fact. The cases that fall into the category of neglect are difficult as they involve where to draw the line. And we sympathize with the parents. 'They do

as well as they can', we say. That's the most difficult part.

#### *Differences in clarity*

In the interview material, there are quite contradictory opinions about reporting sexual abuse. Some of the informants find that sexual abuse is easier to report than, e.g., child neglect. In the 1980s and 1990s, research into child abuse and neglect paid much attention to sexual abuse (Hindberg 2007). This emphasis on sexual abuse may also have influenced the Child and Youth Habilitation Services staff, who thus consider sexual abuse as something urgent and as something that one *has* to report. One of the interviewees states as follows:

There's no doubt [whether to report or not] if you suspect incest or child abuse. ... I have reported a presumed incest case. The child showed very obvious signs and might have been exposed [to sexual abuse], and that case I reported.

In the case recounted by the informant above, reporting was easy because the child showed *obvious* signs. Sometimes, when the signs are less discernible, sexual abuse is, on the other hand, considered as *difficult* to report. The informants may become unsure of themselves as the signs of sexual abuse can be diffuse. In the two following quotations, the informant even doubts whether the sexual abuse has occurred. In addition, the informant thinks there might be something wrong with her.

Reporting suspected sexual abuse, I think that's the most difficult, because you're so afraid of making it up, that it's a product of your own imagination, that you yourself are on the wrong track, [thinking]: 'Why am I thinking like this

<sup>18</sup>The point of circumstantial details is often formulated through an idiomatic expression (Drew and Holt 1988). In addition, idiomatic expressions often are used to summarize grievances (Åkerström 2006). Here, *two* idioms are used to summarize and elucidate the informant's detailed narrative about the great inconsequence in the mother's behaviour. The remarkable difference between the mother's and the boy's accounts of the situation is pointed out by describing the mother as 'slippery as an eel' (in Swedish: '*hal som en ål*'), and her 'slippery' behaviour is described as 'trying to catch a piece of soap' (in Swedish: '*det var som att fånga en tvål*'). Moreover, by repeating the sentence 'It didn't make sense', the informant emphasizes the inconsistency of the mother's behaviour (see also Karlsson and Pettersson 2006:72).

...—is there something wrong with *me?*'

As the presumed victim has a learning disability, the informant doubts that the girl's behaviour is caused by sexual abuse; instead it might be caused by the girl's learning disability.<sup>19</sup> The informant says as follows.

I sat with her at the doctor's office and I got this horrible feeling that there is sexual abuse going on. I had nothing concrete, absolutely nothing but the subtle signals in the room, which made me feel like that. But according to the law, one has to report suspected abuse. My head kept on humming: 'Re-port sus-pec-ted a-buse, bam-bam'. ... I had nothing concrete, and I thought like, 'God, is this just my imagination running away with me?' One doesn't trust oneself, [instead one thinks] 'Oh, cool down, won't you!' And the girl has a learning disability, which makes the whole thing a bit strange.

In the two quotations above, the informant's own uncertainty makes reporting more difficult. Uncertainty has also been considered in other Scandinavian studies as an important reason why maltreatment of children is not reported. Swedish Hindberg (2007) regards the individual's own uncertainty as the primary reason for not reporting abuse or neglect to the Social Services. Norwegian sociologist Cecilie Basberg Neumann, who studies

nurses' difficulties in reporting child maltreatment, also presents the nurses' *doubts* as the main emotional and mental line of enquiry in her study (2009). The individual's own uncertainty and lack of self-confidence play a great role in whether or not to report an incident, especially in cases of sexual abuse.

### Symptoms of complexity

As we have seen above, the Child and Youth Habilitation Services staff members tend to *reason* in various ways about why they should or should not report abuse and neglect of children to the Social Services. This 'on one hand, on the other' reasoning can also be seen as a symptom of the complexity of reporting. This paper will now elucidate a specific symptom of this complexity, the staff's wish for someone else to report the abuse and neglect. Although the staff members think they are too close to the children and their families, reporting is considered difficult because they do not see the children on a daily basis. They therefore think it would be easier if the maltreated child's teacher or preschool teacher reported the incident.

### *Hoping for others to report*

In an American study of the abuse of deaf children (Sullivan and Knutson 1998), Patricia M Sullivan and John F Knutson argue that schools are the only places in which deaf children are seen on a daily basis. For deaf children, the teachers at school are often the child's most effective communication partner outside the home. The teachers are thus able to recognize maltreatment of the deaf child and to report it to the authorities (Sullivan and Knutson 1998:313).

<sup>19</sup> According to a study by Cooke and Standen (2002), if a child acts out in an over-sexualized way, this may be seen as being associated with a learning disability, and not as a result of sexual abuse. Furthermore, bruising in a disabled child can be seen as a result of the child's own clumsiness instead of being a result of violence.



Though the majority of the staff members at the Child and Youth Habilitation Services think that reporting is obstructed by their closeness to the children's families and parents, the informants also state that reporting is sometimes difficult because the staff do not meet the children on a *daily basis*. As one of the informants discusses above, it is sometimes easier to wait for someone else, a teacher at the child's school or nursery, to report the abuse. Here, the same member of the habilitation staff discusses this with a colleague:

*Informant 1:* We meet them so sporadically ... I hope that someone else would see [the abuse], the school or the day care nursery, who would see and who would have something more concrete to go on.

*Informant 2:* It's often like that. But isn't it a bit chicken to think like that? Because I feel a bit chicken myself. Because I think 'I hope the school notices it [the abuse and neglect]'.

The Child and Youth Habilitation Services, which I have studied, are a part of the national health care services. According to a British study (Cooke and Standen 2002), there are differences between those who express concern about abuse or neglect on behalf of disabled children and those who do so on behalf of non-disabled children. For the non-disabled children, those most likely to express concern about abuse were health workers (24%), while in the case of the disabled children, only 11% of those doing so belonged to this category. For the disabled children, the persons most likely to indicate concern about abuse were the children's parents (26%) and teachers (26%). As

argued by the authors of this study (Cooke and Standen 2002), apart from the child's parents, a teacher may well be the person who spends most time with the child. As a result, it may be easier for a teacher to report maltreatment.

### Discussion and conclusion

This paper has discussed why some cases of abuse and neglect of disabled children are considered difficult to report by staff at the Child and Youth Habilitation Services. In this study, it is the closeness between the disabled children, their parents, and the staff members at the Child and Youth Habilitation Services that is seen as the major obstacle to reporting child maltreatment to the Social Services. Although the Child and Youth Habilitation Services staff have an obligation to report abuse and neglect of disabled children to the Social Services, the staff members see reporting as a *last resort* (Emerson 1981) that is used only when all 'normal' remedies for child maltreatment have been exhausted. Before turning to reporting, the staff members at the Child and Youth Habilitation Services try other remedies that they apprehend as less punitive, such as house calls or discussions with the child's parents. By using such remedies, they hope to maintain their closeness to the disabled child's family.

The closeness between the children, their parents, and the staff, which obstructs reporting, is also manifested in other ways. Firstly, instead of mechanically reporting all cases of child abuse and neglect, the staff thoroughly reflect on whether the signs of child abuse and neglect that they have seen are 'enough' to be reported. According to the staff members, clear-cut cases with obvious signs of maltreatment

such as bruises are easier to report than cases where the signs are 'blurry'. The clean-cut cases *must* be reported, decision-making with respect to reporting is not in the hands of the staff member, and the staff can report these cases without putting any blame on the parents. It is possible to report without judging the individual parent, which also enables continuing closeness to the parent and the family.

Secondly, in their relations with the parents, the staff partly assume the role of the other (Goffman 1959/2004), which creates an understanding of the parents' situation. The staff are aware of the fact that the child's disability makes the parent's life more stressful, and the parents are sometimes excused, as they 'do as well as they can'. Thirdly, a close relationship with the disabled child's parents is considered as enabling the child's habilitation training. According to habilitation ideals, the disabled child's parents are important in habilitation training, as Child and Youth Habilitation work always includes the disabled child's family network.

Not only the perceived closeness to the children and their families, but also the individual staff member's bonds with colleagues, makes reporting difficult. The Child and Youth Habilitation Services work in teams, where decision-making is a joint procedure (Lundgren and Molander 2008). In order to give 'good' habilitation treatment, it is important that the team members agree on the child's treatment and co-operate well. Habilitation work thus requires flexible team members who are able to agree on decisions. However, the striving for joint decision-making renders reporting child abuse and neglect more difficult, as the individual team member does not sometimes receive the support of

the team in his or her decision to report child maltreatment.<sup>20</sup>

According to Swedish researcher Ulla Bohlin (2009), studies show that in teamwork, internal team co-operation is sometimes promoted over co-operation with colleagues outside the team or even with clients or patients. Transposing Bohlin's (2009) argument to this study, it would sometimes be more important for the informants to be able to agree with their team members on not reporting than to see to the best interests of the child, who is a victim of suspected maltreatment.

Prevailing cultural beliefs about 'family' and 'children' can also influence opinions on what is best for the child and therefore influence decisions on whether to report child abuse and neglect. In a study by Swedish sociologist Maria Eriksson (2007:228), social workers presuppose that biological, heterosexual parenthood is natural and normal and that a child needs parents of both genders in order to undergo optimal development. This way of thinking leads to a situation where children who have experienced the father's violence against the mother should preferably also

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<sup>20</sup> The team's difficulties attached to reporting a case of child maltreatment to the Social Services are also seen during the natural group interviews. The controversies that can arise while discussing reporting maltreatment of a disabled child in the habilitation team were especially visible in the interview with the group consisting of a habilitation team. During this interview, the team once again went through the ambiguity they had experienced while trying to decide whether to report maltreatment or not. As the division head participated in the interview, the interview also threw light on the internal balance of power in the team and the team's striving for consensus in their decision-making, in order to be able to report maltreatment. One of the disadvantages of the group interviews has been said to be that dissenting points of view are 'silenced under the swell of group dynamics' (Green and Thorogood 2004). In the interview situation with this established team, this was still more intensified, as the group's point of view became predominant over that of each individual.

live with, or at least meet, the father. In Eriksson's study (2007), the Social Services, in other words, give priority to prevailing cultural beliefs about the child needing both a mother and a father over protecting the child from the violent father. This raises the question whether the Child and Youth Habilitation Services staff share the belief about the child needing both parents and in which way such a belief would thus influence the inclination to report child abuse and neglect. Children who are victims of child abuse and neglect are doubly victimized, if the idea of the child's need to live with both parents is given priority over its safety.

In addition, reporting child abuse and neglect seems to be influenced by how the staff members view the disabled children.<sup>21</sup> It is easier to detect maltreatment of children who act accordingly to cultural beliefs of how a maltreated boy or girl, respectively, *ought to* react. In the cases of child abuse and neglect discussed above, staff members found it easy to report a maltreated boy who acted out in a violent way. The sexual abuse of a girl with a learning disability, however, was seen as more difficult to report, as the girl acted out in an over-sexualized way. However, the most common signs of sexual abuse are over-sexualized behaviour, irritation, emotional outbursts, obstinacy, and aggressive acting out (National Council for Crime Prevention 2007). The girl's out-acting behaviour could therefore be expected from someone who has been a victim of sexual abuse. Yet, the girl's behaviour can be interpreted

as contradictory to the expected behaviour by a girl victim, who keeps her feelings to herself and does not act out, as boy victims are supposed to do (Hindberg 2007). The girl has thus acted against the gender stereotypes of a female victim, while her over-sexualized behaviour can be seen as 'adult-like' behaviour, which thus makes her less 'childlike'. This, consequently, makes her a less victim-like victim, as, according to Swedish sociologists Eriksson and Näsman (2008), the more childlike a child is, the more victim-like it becomes as a victim.

The legal obligation to report child abuse and neglect (SFS 2001:453) aims to protect children, but the question remains as to the degree to which the law in itself is virtually a guarantee for the protection for abused children. Persons who are subject to the legal obligation to report child abuse and neglect, here the staff at the Child and Youth Habilitation Services, can experience difficulties in reporting because of various obstacles. As shown in this paper, the staff perform a continuous and delicate balancing act by juggling the demands of the law and the public policy that obliges them to report, with the demands of social relations, cultural notions of the family and the child, and the habilitation ideas of which they are a part.

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<sup>21</sup> According to Humppi (2008:42), abuse of boys, disabled and others, is reported more often to the police than is that of girls.

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