

# **Breaking the barriers? Changes in support for children and families in Iceland: Social capitals, challenges and opportunities**

## **Handout**

Introduction:

My focus is on breaking barriers for the inclusion of each and every child.

- Background: The Icelandic society and statistics about children's well being.
- Some findings from my research on parents experiences of support due to disability in the family.
- Is there such a thing as a good professional?
- Reflection and lessons learnt.

## **Questions for this paper:**

What are the lessons learnt from Iceland that might speak to a broader international audience?

- What are the parents experiences of changes in formal and informal support? (Bjarnason, D.S. in process)
- What kind of service system (s) appear most effective in the eyes of parents and why?
- What is a good professional from the parents perspective – and has that changed over time?
- Implications for changing children's services.

## **Background**

Iceland with its 317.376 population is a highly modern, Nordic type, democratic welfare society. It has one of the highest standards of living in the world at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The society has for centuries been very homogeneous, face to face, and egalitarian. Its value system embraced the ideas of individualism and equality, and particularly in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the focus has moved on to equality of opportunities in a neoliberal sense.

### *The Economy*

The economy was for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century been based on fishing and subjected to internal and external fluctuations. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century with Iceland's association with the EU via EEA (1994) opened access to global financial markets. A huge hydroelectric power plant was built in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century to provide electricity to drive an Alcoa – aluminum plant. The result was an unparalleled economic boom in our history, but in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the economy has become over-dependent on global financial markets. This and the scale of the currency has made the economy sensitive to global economic fluctuations.

### *Inclusion, and Children's Rights*

Iceland is committed by signing international declarations (Salamanca 1994, The UN Treaty on the Rights of the Child 1989 and more) to societal and educational inclusion and to human rights including the rights and protection of children. This is reflected in the legislation - and (considerably, but not fully) in practice.

Since the 1970's Iceland has gained social and educational legislations aiming for the inclusion of all citizens, largely free education for all, health service for all and human rights and protection for children. The legislation covering children's rights and protection, education and most other relevant services has been improved since Iceland signed the UN convention on the rights of the child in 1990 and the office of an Ombudsman for Children was established by law in 1995. Both the legal frames and the societal awareness on the rights and the well-being of children 0-18 years of age have improved significantly in the last two decades. Special schools have largely been closed (0,4% of compulsory education students are in special schools) and replaced by the education of all children from preschool through the 10 year public compulsory education and some special classes at compulsory schools and the four year upper-secondary comprehensive schools and colleges.

### **Statistics: A few "facts" about Icelandic Children.**

Iceland is generally considered a relatively peaceful environment (Gunnlaugsson 2004)

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*(References used here are based on information from the OECD –Innocenti Card 7, The Statistical Yearbook of Iceland and the Public Health Institute of Iceland, research papers..)*

OECD's An Overview of Child Well-being in rich countries: A comprehensive assessment of the lives and well being of children and adolescents in the economically advanced nations is an instrument based on a six dimensional evaluation scale. The assessment tool is obviously not very reliable, but gives some indication of the quality of life conditions for an average group of children in each of the countries compared to similar averages for other nations under assessment.

### **Health and safety**

– Infant mortality 2,4 per 100.000 - the lowest in the world. Compared to other countries in the western world is Iceland high on health and preventive health services. But deaths from accidents and injuries per 100.000 under 19 years of age we rank 5th lowest after Sweden, the UK, Netherlands and Italy. (Iceland has higher accident rate of children in the homes than in our neighboring Nordic countries (Kristjánsson, B. 2001) possibly due to lack of supervision. Close to 90% of women are active in the workplace and young mothers work more hours than older mothers (Statistical Yearbook 2008). Preventive medicine is in good shape compared to that in most other North European countries, nutrition is of good quality, but Icelandic children are gaining weight (Public Health Institute of Iceland –homepage 2008)

### **Educational well-being**

-95% of all children aged 2-6 are in preschool and 40% of children 0-2 (Ministry of Education and Culture, home page). A 10 year compulsory school for all children is mainly inclusive (0,8 -0,9 % of each age cohort are in segregated settings special schools or special classes. Teachers emphasize children's well being (Marinósson edt. 2007) but the system is probably not as effective in providing each and every learner with high quality education in basic subjects (sciences, reading, math) if we are to belief PISA – 2006 Iceland was placed around the mean of the performance indicators for learners in the OECD countries.

But a higher percentage of Icelandic children above 15 years of age attend upper-secondary education in Iceland than e.g. in Britain, or 83% 15-19 years old (here Iceland ranks 8th on the OECD list).

### **Family and peer relationships.**

The work ethos no or very low unemployment affects home life. Many children and youth 16 years – 24 are gainfully employed in part time jobs (aprox 70% of children 15+) along attending schools and both parents work/ fathers longer hours or 47 hours per week on the average. Children aged 15+ eat regular meals with their parents more often than any other children except for the Italians, but Icelandic parents are reported to talk less with their children than most other parents in the OECD (aprox. 50% reported talking to their parents on a regular basis). Peer groups and teenage culture. Teenagers can be described as the busy generation (Bjarnason 2004).

15+ are reported to eat relatively healthy food, but consume more cola drinks than children in other Nordic countries. Like children in Northern Europe, Icelandic children are getting heavier and fatter. Smoking appears to be on the decline in compulsory schools 11%, but a higher % in upper secondary schools 20-25% smoke every day. Alcohol consumption appears more acceptable to children 15+ but other substance abuse on a regular basis is low 3-5%.(Lýðheilsustöð)

### **Subjective well-being**

70 % of school children (8th -10th year) feel good or very good about themselves in school and only 3% boys and 2% girls report that they feel bad or very bad. Innocenti Card 7 reports that just under 10% of Icelandic children report that they 15+ feel lonely, awkward or out of place.

### **Other**

Teenage pregnancy is lower in Iceland which is situated between the lowest pregnancy rates among teenagers in the Western world.

According to a research in process by dr. G. Kristinsdóttir Icelandic children and youth see less violence in their homes than British children, and 99 of Icelandic children 15+ expressed zero tolerance of men hitting women under any circumstances.