

Child Physical Abuse

Reports and Interventions

Charlotta Lindell

Akademisk avhandling

som för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen vid medicinsk fakultet i Linköping

kommer att offentligen försvaras i Aulan, Hälsans hus, Universitetssjukhuset,

fredagen den 21 januari 2005 kl. 13.00

Fakultetsopponent: Professor Staffan Jansson

Karlstad universitet

Avdelningen för folkhälsovetenskap



FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES
LINKÖPING UNIVERSITY

Institutionen för molekylär och klinisk medicin,
Avdelningen för barn- och ungdomspsykiatri

Linköping 2005

Abstract

This thesis was begun in 1998 at a time when increased numbers of police reports regarding child physical abuse was presented. The increase had been overshadowed by the research on the sexual abuse of children and showed that child physical abuse in Sweden had only been scarcely investigated since the institution of the Swedish anti spanking law in 1979.

The aim of this thesis was to investigate child physical abuse from a judicial, social, child- and adolescent psychiatric and a user perspective where a parent or equivalent was the perpetrator. One police district was investigated between 1986 and 1996 and all reports regarding child physical abuse were included. The abused children (n=126) were also followed through social services' files and child and adolescent psychiatric service charts from birth to a 4-year follow up from the abuse incident studied. Finally, mothers of the physically abused children were interviewed.

The greatest increase in police reports during the years investigated, turned out to be concerned with violence between children. The incidence where a carer was the abuser proved to be comparable to the incidence in other Nordic countries, with the adjustment that first generation immigrants were found to abuse their children 8 times as often as native Swedish citizens and second generation immigrants. There were a wide variety of injuries inflicted on the children, where bruises were the most common. Only a few cases where injuries could be verified ended up in court. Social services contact was common among the abused children and their families prior to the abuse incident studied, as were previous reports on child abuse and neglect. Injuries from the abuse as well as familial and context characteristics had an impact on referred social services interventions. The two most important factors for a child still to be receiving social services interventions 4 years after the abuse incident were whether the mother was mentally ill and whether there had been reports on child abuse or neglect prior to the studied abuse incident. About half of the children had been receiving interventions from the mental health services at some point in time, but mainly due to other reasons than physical abuse. Mental health treatment for the physically abused children was rare even though many of the children had contact with the child and adolescent psychiatric services repeatedly before, at and after the abuse incident. The interviewed mothers conveyed a picture of satisfaction with the police's work but were mainly critical towards the social services. The mental health service was considered to be doing a good job, but needed to do even better.

The results indicate that despite an environment that supports public values, attitudes and laws confirming a standpoint against violence towards children, there is still a gap between intentions and reality in Sweden. The thesis provides one way of looking at child physical abuse, but puts forward the urgent need of further studies.